

**SPECIFIC TERMS OF REFERENCE**  
**Strengthening Accreditation of Research Institutions and Quality Assurance process at**  
**doctoral studies level in Azerbaijan**  
**FWC SIEA 2018- LOT 4: Human Development and safety net**  
**EuropeAid/13877/DH/SER/multi**

## 1. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

### Strategic Framework

#### *EU- Azerbaijan agenda*

The framework for EU-Azerbaijan relations is set by **the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA)** in force since 1999. In February 2017, negotiations were launched on a comprehensive new agreement between the EU and Azerbaijan, which is to replace the PCA. EU-Azerbaijan Partnership Priorities, which aim to focus cooperation on commonly identified shared objectives, have been endorsed by both sides on 28 September 2018. EU cooperation with Azerbaijan supports the country's reform agenda in particular in the areas of economic diversification, sustainable growth and social development, good governance and rule of law, and the country's connection to the EU through enhanced connectivity, mobility and people-to-people contacts. EU support is funded through the European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI) for the period 2014-2020.

The Commission adopted **the Single Support Framework for EU support to Azerbaijan for the period 2018-2020**, which sets the following priorities: Mobility and people-to-people contacts to make lifelong learning (LLL) opportunities better responsive and adapted to labour market trends and skills needs, and to enhance the mobility of citizens in a secure and well-managed environment.

The programme includes the action **“Education for Employment in Azerbaijan”** with the specific objective to develop the legal and institutional basis at all levels of education according to the requirements of an Outcomes-Based Qualification System (OBS) for LLL.

The main indicative activities under this action are:

- Developing legislative and normative documents according to OBS for LLL requirements including state education standards and classifications on vocational education and training (VET) and higher education (HE), the legal basis on validation of informal and non-formal learning, adult education etc.;
- Improvement of an institutional structure to support the establishment of an OBS for LLL (sharing best practice, conducting research, delivering training) and ensuring a link to the European Qualifications Framework (EQF);
- Improving the registration, monitoring and evaluation systems and providing capacity building for stakeholders to support a functioning OBS for LLL in VET and HE.

#### *National Strategy documents*

Development goals for Azerbaijan were defined in 2016 when the government launched **Strategic Roadmaps** for the development of the national economy and 11 key sectors. The Roadmaps outline the government strategy for the period 2016-2020, a long-term outlook up to 2025 and a long-term vision after 2025. They target key sectors such as agriculture,

industry, ICT and tourism, as well as cross-sectoral issues such as SME development and the modernisation of the education system. The government strategy outlined in the ‘**Azerbaijan 2020: Look to the future**’ foresees to integrate Azerbaijan’s education system into European and world systems along with the unification of education standards and the deepening of the Bologna Process.

**The National Strategy for the Development of Education** (2013) set out a long-term vision which includes competence-based education, access to lifelong learning, the modernisation of educational infrastructure, reforms in education system management based on public-private partnerships and the introduction of sustainable financing mechanisms. The accompanying Action Plan further determined concrete actions in the education sector including measures to improve quality assurance.

**The National Strategy for the Development of Science in the Republic of Azerbaijan for 2009-2015** covered the expanding role of science and technology in solving socio-economic problems, strengthening innovation processes and increasing information resources of the state.

### **Current situation in the sector**

#### ***National Qualifications Framework***

**The National Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning of the Republic of Azerbaijan (AzQF)** was adopted in July 2018. The AzQF is a tool for systematizing national qualifications developed for all citizens - learners, education providers and employers and serves to facilitate the comparability of national and international qualifications. The AzQF was conceptually developed in compliance with the criteria of the Qualifications Framework of the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA) and the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (EQF). The objectives of AzQF are to improve the relevance, quality and transparency of qualifications. It intends to serve as a tool for systematizing national qualifications and facilitating their comparability domestically and internationally. Furthermore, it aims to facilitate lifelong learning and the validation of non-formal and informal learning is also recognised as a key component of the AzQF.

The AzQF has eight levels, level 1 being the lowest and level 8 the highest. These levels define the relative complexity of the achieved learning outcomes. The level descriptors are defined by criteria expressed in statements of knowledge and understanding, skills, autonomy and responsibility. The level descriptors are used as benchmarks for classifying qualifications based on learning outcomes. Qualifications of higher education are placed at levels 6-8.

The AzQF level descriptors are compatible with the corresponding EQF level descriptors. Generic descriptors of the Bachelor’s and basic higher medical education qualifications (Level 6 AzQF) are compatible with the QF-EHEA first cycle descriptors, generic descriptors of the Master’s and postgraduate medical education (doctor-specialist) qualifications (Level 7 AzQF) are compatible with the QF-EHEA second cycle descriptors and generic descriptors of the Doctoral qualifications (Level 8 AzQF - Doctor of philosophy, Doctor of science diploma; further education) are compatible with the QF-EHEA third cycle descriptors.

#### ***Organisation of Higher Education and Research in Azerbaijan***

In opposite Azerbaijan applies a different approach to organise its higher education and research/science systems than the EU, most importantly with regards to how these fields are inter-linked. In Azerbaijan, universities are mainly responsible for education with only little research activities, whereas the bulk of research is conducted in institutes of the Azerbaijan National Academy of Sciences (ANAS) or branch institutes. Recent reforms in the area of

higher education however and especially the new Educational Law, aim to strengthen research capacities of universities to broaden the scientific base of the research system.

In spite of latest developments in unifying teaching and research, there are still serious divisions between these two fields especially in regulatory and management mechanisms, which will be further specified below.

### *Higher Education system in Azerbaijan*

**The Ministry of Education** (MoE) is the central executive body governing the education system of the country. It participates in the development and implementation of the state policy for education.

Azerbaijan started the reform of its higher education system by joining the Bologna Process in 2005, followed by the adoption of the new Law on Education of 8 September 2009. This law formally introduced the European Credit Transfer System, the three-cycle system of study and diploma supplement.

The Law sets out basic principles of public policy ensuring citizens' educational rights as established by the Constitution of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the general conditions for regulating the educational activities.

Higher education is divided into three levels: First level (Bachelor Studies), Second level (Master Studies), and the Third level (PhD Studies).

In Azerbaijan, higher education is provided at Higher Educational Institutions (HEI), which include universities/institutes/academies/conservatoires and/or research institutions<sup>1</sup>.

The first level of higher education involves Bachelor Studies which last for 4-5 years earning 240 to 300 ECTS (300-360 credits for medical education). All HEIs that obtained an appropriate licence may deliver educational activities at this first level of higher education. Qualifications of first cycle (Bachelor) programmes are classified at the 6<sup>th</sup> level in the AzQF.

The second level of higher education involves Master Studies and lasts for 1.5-2 years earning 90 to 120 ECTS.

All HEIs and research institutions under the ANAS that obtained the appropriate licence may deliver second level educational services. Qualifications obtained through the second cycle, Master's programme are placed classified at the 7<sup>th</sup> level in the AzQF.

The third level (PhD) of higher education in Azerbaijan is the only level at which ECTS is not yet implemented. A doctoral degree can be obtained from HEIs and all research institutions with an appropriate licence offering a PhD programme or organising individual tutoring of doctoral candidates.

Teaching of highly-qualified scientific and scientific-pedagogical staff in the Republic of Azerbaijan is delivered through doctoral studies, which are the highest education level. Doctoral studies can lead to the award of two types of degrees: Doctor of Philosophy or Doctor of Science.

*Note: Doctor's Degree is the highest degree in higher education, a type of advanced scientific and pedagogic training that provides conferment of the doctorate degree.*

Doctoral studies may be carried out on a full-time or part-time basis.

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<sup>1</sup> In the Law on Science of the Republic of Azerbaijan the term "scientific-research institute" was defined as an institute the main function of which is to carry out fundamental and applied scientific research and studies.

Higher education and research institutions offering doctoral studies also teach scientific and scientific-pedagogical staff through dissertation research.

Full-time education under the Doctor of Philosophy programme lasts three years, part-time education four years; PhD studies through dissertation research also take four years. Full-time education under the Doctor of Sciences programme lasts four years, part-time education five years and dissertation research also lasts five years. In exceptional cases, education periods for all types of education may be extended.

Qualifications of third cycle programmes are classified at 8<sup>th</sup> level in the AzQF.

### ***Science/Research in Azerbaijan: general information***

Science is one of the main fields of state policy that affects all aspects in Azerbaijan.

**The Azerbaijan National Academy of Sciences (ANAS)** is an executive government body to implement state policy in science and technology. The ANAS, which is the highest scientific institution of Azerbaijan, was founded in 1945 from the Azerbaijan Branch of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR. Its main aim is to develop fundamental research in the leading fields of natural, technological and social sciences.

The **Law on Science** dated 10 August 2016 defines basic principles of public policy in organising, managing and developing scientific activities in the Republic of Azerbaijan. It sets goals to improve scientific innovation, rights and objectives for the subjects of scientific activities, establishes the organisational and legal basis of science funding mechanisms, and promotes the use of scientific innovations.

Scientific research activities in Azerbaijan are mainly carried out by research institutions. Azerbaijan has 108 research institutions subordinated to 18 state bodies that undertake scientific research in diverse fields including social sciences, humanitarian sciences, medical-biological sciences, chemical sciences, earth sciences and technical sciences etc. About 80 of these institutions are part of the ANAS.

### ***Quality Assurance and accreditation***

#### ***Responsible bodies***

At the government level there are two state bodies engaged in quality assurance and accreditation of institutions and programmes: the Ministry of Education (MoE) and the Supreme Attestation Commission under the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan (SAC).

The “**Rules on Accreditation of Education Institutions**” approved by Decree of the Cabinet of Ministers of 14 December 2020 determines that the Education Quality Assurance Agency under the MoE is to implement and coordinate state policy in the area of external quality assurance and accreditation of institutions and programmes for all HEIs for all three levels of higher education as well as for all research institutions under the ANAS for the second level of higher education (Master’s) studies.

The “**Updated Rules on Accreditation of Research Institutions**” approved by Decree of the Cabinet of Ministers of 12 August 2020 delegates authority to carry out quality assurance and institutional accreditation of all research institutions for third level studies (PhD) to the SAC.

The table below summarises the institutional set-up and responsibilities of quality assurance and accreditation for the Azerbaijani education system.

	<b>EDUCATION</b>	<b>SCIENCE</b>
Main governing body	MoE	ANAS & SAC
Main legislative act	Law on Education	Law on Science
Main Providers	Schools, colleges, HEIs	Research Institutions
AzQF Qualifications	1-8 level	7-8 Level
External quality assurance (accreditation) body	Education Quality Assurance Agency under the MoE for AzQF level 1-7	SAC for AzQF level 8

This project focuses on the institutional accreditation of research institutions and quality assurance at the doctoral level of studies of research institutions carried out by the SAC.

### ***1.3 Challenges (Direct and Indirect) to be addressed***

#### ***Accreditation and external quality assurance of research institutions***

The system of accreditation and external quality assurance of research institutions at doctoral level studies is in the initial stage of development. Accreditation of research institutions is regulated by the recently approved Decree of the Cabinet of Ministers “Updated Rules on Accreditation of Research Institutions” (the Rule) dated 12 August 2020. According to the Decree, the aim of accreditation is to verify the compliance of research institutions (organisation and management of research activities, material and technical basis, physical infrastructure, staff capacity, research programmes, research efficiency and financial resources) with requirements of normative legal acts and provide legal guarantees for the status of the research institution. Compliance covers the organisation and management of research activities, the material and technical basis, the physical infrastructure, staff capacities, research programmes, research efficiency and financial resources. Accreditation of research institutions shall be carried out every five years and if successful lead to the issuing of a certificate confirming compliance with the requirements of accreditation.

External quality assurance methods of research institutions are not directly defined by law, but indirectly by the abovementioned decree. Governance and management of accreditation and external quality assurance systems has not yet been transposed into regular processes and workflows. The Decree provides general principles of accreditation of research institutions but does not define accreditation and attestation standards/requirements nor the criteria determining compliance with the adopted normative legal acts.

The lack of implementation mechanisms is a key challenge needing to be addressed by this project to render accreditation and external quality assurance processes fully operational within third cycle higher education in Azerbaijan. The fact that no research institution passed the accreditation process in Azerbaijan underlines this need for support.

Development and testing of this mechanism as well as accreditation and quality assurance standards/criteria is the main challenges of the current assignment.

To address this challenges a comprehensive assessment of the current state in terms of the legal and institutional framework of accreditation and of quality assurance processes of research institutions at doctoral studies level needs to be undertaken.

Legal acts to be reviewed during this project include:

- Law on Science of the Republic of Azerbaijan;
- The Rules of Accreditation of Research Institutions;
- Statute of the SAC;
- Charter of research institutions.

The SAC is to fulfil new duties on accreditation and certification of research institutions at doctoral studies level and additional functions have been assigned to it in this respect. Given the distinct nature of these newly assigned tasks, an assessment of the current organisational structure of the SAC is to be part of the abovementioned study accompanied by draft recommendations for reinforcing its institutional capacities.

### *Internal quality assurance*

Self-evaluation and internal quality assurance of research studies and work conditions should be defined through the Statute of each research institution. There currently is no clear picture on how many research institutions have quality assurance departments/teams as well as internal quality assurance documents and procedures in place.

There is no legal requirement for research institutions to submit an annual self-assessment report. Instead they submit only an annual report on executed activities to the governing body. To address this challenge rules on internal quality assurance processes at doctoral studies level and guidelines for implementing these rules need to be developed.

### *Capacity building*

The development of rules on accreditation of research institutions and internal and external quality assurance processes at doctoral studies level raises the need for capacity building of relevant staff of the SAC and other main stakeholders. A training needs assessment of the SAC and other main stakeholders in the area of accreditation and internal and external quality assurance at doctoral studies level is to be conducted, followed by the development of a training plan and the organisation of a number of capacity building events (training workshops and study tours). This training plan will help the relevant SAC and other main stakeholders to apply the new accreditation and internal and external quality assurance mechanisms and legislation correctly and consistently.

### *Digitalization*

At the present time, a submission of hard copies of the required documents is the only option for research institutions to apply for accreditation. Lack of a web platform makes it impossible to submit the documents electronically. A proposal should hence be developed to facilitate the digitalisation of the accreditation process of research institutions.

## **Beneficiary institution**

### *Supreme Attestation Commission*

The Supreme Attestation Commission under the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan (SAC) was established in 1992. The main roles and responsibilities of the SAC in terms of accreditation and quality assurance are indicated in its Statute. The SAC is a public executive

body implementing state policy in the field of certification of highly qualified scientific and scientific-pedagogical personnel. It assesses dissertations for doctor of philosophy and doctor of science degrees and awards the official state diploma on the basis of its validation of assessment results. Furthermore, the SAC provides accreditation and certification to research institutions at doctoral studies level and recognises scientific degrees and titles from foreign countries.

The SAC is also responsible, together with the Ministry of Education for external quality evaluation of the AzQF.

## **2. OBJECTIVE, PURPOSE & EXPECTED RESULTS**

### **➤ Global objective**

To increase the quality of scientific research process in Azerbaijan by improving accreditation of research institutions and quality assurance at the doctoral studies level.

### **➤ Specific objective(s)<sup>2</sup>**

To improve the capacities of the SAC to develop and introduce new mechanisms on accreditation of research institutions and internal and external quality assurance processes at doctoral studies level in accordance with advanced European experience.

### **➤ Requested services, including suggested methodology<sup>3</sup>**

**1<sup>st</sup> Result: Legal and institutional framework of accreditation of research institutions and of internal and external quality assurance processes at doctoral studies level is strengthened.**

**2<sup>nd</sup> Result: Human capacity of the SAC and main stakeholders in accreditation of research institutions and of internal and external quality assurance at doctoral studies level is reinforced.**

**3<sup>rd</sup> Result: Digitalisation of accreditation process of research institutions is facilitated.**

### **➤ Required outputs**

**1<sup>st</sup> Result: Legal and institutional framework of accreditation of research institutions and of internal and external quality assurance processes at doctoral studies level is strengthened.**

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<sup>2</sup> The global and specific objectives shall clarify that all EU funded actions must promote the cross-cutting objectives of the EC: environment and climate change, rights based approach, persons with disability, indigenous peoples and gender equality.

<sup>3</sup> Contractors should describe how the action will contribute to the all cross cutting issues mentioned above and notably to the gender equality and the empowerment of women. This will include the communication action messages, materials and management structures.

Output 1.1: A comprehensive assessment report of the current legal and institutional framework (including organisational structure of the SAC) of accreditation of research institutions and of internal and external quality assurance at doctoral studies level in Azerbaijan with recommendations on its improvement.

Output 1.2: Draft Rules on accreditation of research institutions and external quality assurance processes at doctoral studies level in Azerbaijan comparable to those in developed EU countries and guidelines to implement these new Rules.

Output 1.3: Draft Rules on internal quality assurance processes at doctoral studies level and guidelines to implement these new Rules.

Output 1.4: An updated accreditation mechanism/procedures tested in at least one institution and Rules and Guidelines updated based on lessons learnt.

**2<sup>nd</sup> Result: Human capacity of the SAC and main stakeholders in accreditation of research institutions and of internal and external quality assurance at doctoral studies level is reinforced.**

Output 2.1: Training needs assessment of the SAC and main stakeholders in the areas of accreditation of research institutions and of internal and external quality assurance at doctoral studies level.

Output 2.2: One 1-day training workshop for 30 officials of the SAC and main stakeholders to present good practices in accreditation of research institutions as well as internal and external quality assurance at doctoral studies level from three selected EU Member States (MS).

Output 2.3: Three 5-day training workshops for 30 officials of the SAC and main stakeholders each to strengthen the capacities in accreditation of research institutions as well as in internal and external quality assurance processes at doctoral studies level.

Output 2.4: Two 5-day study visits (for a maximum of 5 officials each) to obtain an overview of accreditation of research institutions as well as internal and external quality assurance processes at doctoral studies level in EU MS(s).

**3<sup>rd</sup> Result: Digitalisation of accreditation process of research institutions is facilitated.**

Output 3.1: A comprehensive proposal on digitalization of the accreditation process of research institutions on a web based platform.

**Language of the Specific Contract**

The language of the Specific contract and correspondence is English, however the main outputs will be translated into Azerbaijani language by the Contractor.

The Contractor shall ensure interpretation during the meetings, trainings/workshops and study visits.



**Management team member** presence is not required for briefing and/or debriefing (if agreed by the Contracting authority the briefing and debriefing could be organized by videoconference).

### **3. LOGISTICS AND TIMING**

Please refer to Part B of the Terms of Reference

### **4. REQUIREMENTS**

Please refer to Part B of the Terms of Reference

### **5. REPORTS**

Two hard copies and an electronic version of each report/s (both in DOC and PDF format) will be submitted to the EU Delegation.

For all other matters relating to reports/deliverables please refer to Part B of the Terms of Reference

### **6. MONITORING AND EVALUATION**

The project will be implemented in accordance with the standard European Commission rules and procedures. The monitoring of the project will be carried out by the EUD Project manager participating in meetings with the beneficiary and by means of regular reporting by the project team.

### **7. PRACTICAL INFORMATION**

The location of the assignment is Baku city, republic of Azerbaijan.

The normal place of posting of the specific assignment is Baku city.

In case the Covid-19 travel restrictions are still in place during the implementation of the Contract, alternative solutions shall be used to deliver the required outputs, i.e. online trainings/workshops, remote expert missions, etc. The alternative solutions i. e. online trainings/workshops should be reflected clearly in the financial offer.

Working days outside the partner country must be duly justified and are subject to prior written approval of the Contracting Authority.

Please address any request for clarification and other communication to the following address(es): [rza.zulfuqarzade@eeas.europa.eu](mailto:rza.zulfuqarzade@eeas.europa.eu)

*Relevant project information and all communication and visibility materials must be uploaded through the EU's project communication database 'EUDIGITool' for the approval of the EU Delegation. All visibility and communication material must be kept up to date throughout the life time of the project. The use of the 'EUDIGITool' approval system is a mandatory requirement.*



## **TERMS OF REFERENCE – PART B**

### **BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

#### **1. Benefitting Zone**

Azerbaijan

#### **2. Contracting authority**

The European Union, represented by the European Commission, B-1049 Brussels, Belgium.

#### **3. Contract language**

English

### **LOCATION AND DURATION**

#### **4. Location**

See part A of the Terms of Reference if a normal place of posting of the specific assignment is defined.

#### **5. Start date and period of implementation**

The indicative start date is 03/05/2021 and the period of implementation of the contract will be 549 days from this date (indicative end date: 03/11/2022).

### **REQUIREMENTS**

#### **6. Expertise**

No expertise is defined by the contracting authority for this assignment. The contractor is responsible for proposing the expertise necessary to implement the specific contract.

However, the contracting authority may, where appropriate, decide to indicate an absolute minimum input in terms of working days and/or qualifications for one or more experts. If such case, please refer to Part A of the present terms of reference for additional information .

#### **7. Incidental expenditure**

No incidental expenditure provided for in this contract.

#### **8. Lump sums**

No lump sums provided for in this contract.

#### **9. Expenditure verification**

No expenditure verification report is required.

## 10. Other details

No other details provided for in this contract.

## REPORTS AND DELIVERABLES

### 11. Reports and deliverables requirements

<b>Title</b>	<b>Content</b>	<b>Language</b>	<b>Submission timing or deadline</b>
Inception report		English	Within 1 Month(s) After the project start
Progress report		English	Every 1 Year(s)
Final report		English	Within 1 Month(s) After the project end