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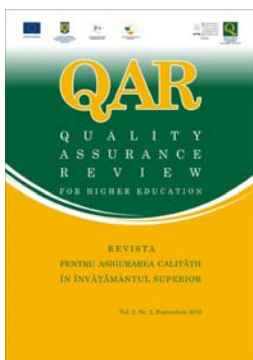


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Work with Experts: the Experience of AKKORK

Yuri Rubin, Alexander Kovalenko, Alexey Belokopytov, Erika Soboleva
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Work with Experts: the Experience of AKKORK

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Abstract: *The article determines the goals and objectives of the Agency concerning the recruitment, training and activity of control and assessment experts of education quality, provided by the higher education institutions. It describes the regulations of expert candidatures nomination for education audit procedures conduct, principles and criteria for the recruitment of experts, training and certification. The article also considers responsibilities and experts' activity regulations during planning and conduct of education audit. It describes the principles on which experts draw conclusions and prepare the report, make recommendations aimed at the improvement of HEI activity and draw final conclusions. It discusses the actions that the Agency carries out in order to ensure that the HEIs implement the experts' recommendations.*

Keywords: *quality assurance, review, experts, external quality assurance.*

1. Introduction

The problem of quality assurance¹ in higher education is crucial not only for Russia, but for whole world community. It is conditioned by the rapid pace of expansion of the higher education area as well as by the necessity of increasing its expenses both from the side of the State and of the business and the education services consumers. The intention of many countries of the world to establish a dynamic knowledge-based economy makes higher education institutions take seriously the quality of education programs and granting certifications as well as improve the quality assurance methods.

Quality assurance shall be based on fundamental principles, such as:

- the interest of students, professors and the interest of society as a whole in high quality of the higher education;
- recognition of the importance of HEI organizational autonomy, that shall be guided by clear understanding of the fact that independence means deep responsibility;
- compliance of the HEI external quality assessment procedures with the declared goals, it means that during the external quality assessment the interference into the HEI activity shall not surpass the dimensions necessary for quality goals achievement.

The methods that help provide high quality of education and standards can not be equal for all the HEIs both in Russia and other countries. That is why it is necessary to refuse a confined, directive and dogmatic approach to the quality problem solution that uses concrete strict requirements, and to prefer the approach based on general principles. Such an approach is especially actual in Russia, because social-economic conditions can substantially differ both during the passing from one region to another and within the frameworks of the same region.

Quality assurance approach based on general principles establish a firm basis for cooperation between different organizations of the higher education in Russia. General quality assurance standards evoke a wide response at the state level and from the majority of the HEIs in the country.

¹ The term «Quality assurance» can be understood as audit, accreditation or assessment.

The Agency for Higher Education Quality Assurance and Career Development (hereinafter referred to as the Agency) forms its activity in order to unite the HEI responsibility toward to the stakeholders and the intention to improve programs and standards.

The interests of the HEIs and the students' networks don't always coincide: the HEIs intend to achieve maximum independence level, where there is a minimum external control and the students think that the HEI has to be reviewed more often at the program or qualification levels.

The recruitment of experts is crucial for appropriate education audit procedures that is why the Agency considers the nomination of offered candidatures very carefully and uses strict criteria for the selection of experts. The experts' candidatures can be proposed by HEIs, education authorities, professional communities, or Agency Advisory Council members. Besides, specialists with relevant qualification and experience can put themselves forward as candidates.

Applicants are considered and approved by the Advisory Council and the leadership of the Agency. The approved candidates are trained to ensure that they have a clear knowledge and understanding of their aims and objectives, the requirements of the Agency and the rules of education review.

The nominees, who have successfully passed the training, receive Expert Certificates corroborated that they are experts of the Agency. The Agency specifies the scope of responsibilities for each expert, regularly analyzes the experts' performance according to the data obtained during the education review, periodically reconfirms the experts' authority and, if needed, uses its right to discharge them.

The Agency makes every effort to ensure heterogeneity of the review team from the point of view of education sphere, geography, gender, nationality and academic disciplines. All experts of the Agency normally conduct at least three reviews in the period of two years. If mutually agreed, the period of the activity may be prolonged.

The experts of the Agency adhere to the quality assurance policy of higher education, possess personal and professional qualities that provide confidence in them from the HEIs leadership.

The responsibilities of experts include:

- getting acquainted with the self-assessment documents and their analyzing including documents provided before the beginning of the review;
- adhering to the review schedule agreed between the Agency and the HEI;
- participating in visits to the HEI in order to gather, investigate, and verify evidence;
- making judgments and conclusions on the education and teaching standards and on the quality of provided programs;
- carrying out the activity on the report as per agreed deadlines.

Experts analyze and evaluate the self-assessment documents provided by the HEI, with particular emphasis on curricular content and its suitability for achieving the program outcomes. They review and evaluate the student's grading processes and determine whether they are suitable to assess program outcomes as stated in the program specifications.

Experts consider and evaluate overall student achievement; the contribution made to student achievement by the quality of teaching; range of study programs; the level of support for the students' work effectiveness from the HEI and level of education resources and their distribution (including human resources).

Experts participate in preparation of the report that is submitted to the Agency. Each expert prepares material for various sections of the report, with specific references to the sources of evidence provided.

The Agency intends to make each expert participate in reviews works in various teams and in different HEIs. While viewing the work of other experts and sharing their opinions with peers from different HEIs, the expert gets an opportunity for professional development and acquires experience that is important for his work both with the Agency and the HEI that the expert represents.

When carrying out independent education quality review, the Agency aims at determining the factual education capacity of the HEI and assuring investors and consumers that the HEI realizes the declared education level and quality. That is why the experts while assessing the HEI not only make sure that education level and quality are higher than the minimum secured by the state, but also examine possible ways for enhancing the quality of education standards and programs and provide to the HEI appropriate recommendations. In addition to that, the expert investigate the efficiency in the application of learning technologies, the organization of activity, the methods of the HEI management, and, as the need arises, recommend to the HEI leadership activity aimed at their enhancement. The experts reveal and analyze best practices concerning the HEI education and practical activities so that the Agency could summarize and use them for quality enhancement of the HEI activity.

The information gathered by the experts and the Agency during the preparation period and in the course of education audit is be confidential and is used only by the Agency and its sources are not divulged. The experts maintain confidentiality when submitting written evidence and when conducting reviews, preparing conclusions and making reports. The experts may request from the institution only the information needed to perform the audit and protect it.

2. Recruitment of AKKORK Experts

A job advertisement is placed on the Agency web site and possibly in the media. In parallel, a description of competition regulations is published where the requirements for successful applicants are indicated.

The nominees may be recommended by:

- the Agency Advisory Council members;
- the regional Agency representative offices;
- local state education authorities;
- rectors of higher education institutions;
- councils of rectors of the HEIs;
- employers' associations.

Besides, the specialists who possess the necessary skills and have appropriate experience can apply.

The applicants, who have confirmed their decision to participate in work of the Agency as experts, submit their personal information in accordance with the application form (see Appendix 1).

The selection of the applicants is carried out on a competitive basis by the Advisory Council or by the Commission that is established by the Agency, that by making a decision take into account the applicant's position, professional achievement, and the region of origin.

The selected candidates are approved by the Advisory Council and the Agency leadership.

The consultancy specialists that take part in education audit process in the cases when the experts declare the necessity of deeper program review conduct are selected in a similar manner.

The selected experts should possess the following characteristics:

- broad experience in education management and quality assurance at the institutional level in the system of higher education of the Russian Federation;
- personal traits and professional competences needed to perform qualitative assessment of HEI educational activity;
- ability to absorb and analyze substantial volume of various data related to independent assessment, make objective judgments, consider written and oral evidence in order to form judgments;
- skills of communication in writing and orally;
- current or recent (within 2 years) experience in teaching and learning support or examining students if the expert represents a certain academic field.

Selected consultancy specialists should possess the following characteristics:

- be individually known in the field of represented disciplines and hold a degree in the RF higher education or be equally known to the professional community members;
- current experience of teaching and learning support and examining students;
- experience of working with program specifications for represented discipline, good understanding of requirements set in study programs;
- ability to absorb and analyze substantial volume of various data and make objective judgments;
- ability to identify in a right way the task set by the experts correctly, plan the actions and arrive at reliable conclusions using various data including documentary and oral evidence.

3. Training of AKKORK Experts

The objective of training is to prepare the applicants to quality assessment and assurance following the program and criteria of the Agency and the recommendations of the international education quality assessment organizations. Besides, the training program ensures the Agency that the experts:

- understand the aims, tasks and objectives of education audit;
- understand their own aims and objectives, know the requirements set by the Agency and the rules of education audit;
- know how to collect and analyze data, draw up the visit schedule, frame and test hypotheses, make judgments and conclusions, prepare reports.

The training program for experts includes:

- familiarizing with normative documents on education quality assurance and quality assessment approved by the Agency;
- development of education quality assessment skills in the concrete training areas (specialties);
- provision of world trends information in the course of graduated personnel training;
- familiarizing with the advanced personnel teaching methodology and quality assurance methods;
- familiarizing with the modern management methods in the field of higher education.

Upon completion of the training program the applicants pass examinations by writing and defending a paper that analyzes the quality of provision in the field of their specialization where they act as professors or employers. If the applicant passes the examinations, he/she becomes an expert of the Agency and gets a certificate which entitles him/her to act in the education quality procedures review conducted by the Agency.

4. The Organization of AKKORK Experts' Activity

During their visit the experts:

- act in accordance with the regulations of the Agency that coordinate independent assessment of the higher education institutions activity in order to assure education quality and the process of its provision;
- guarantee that their judgments and conclusions are unbiased and independent by signing the Expert Independence Confirmation Form (Appendix 3),
- carry out their activity in favor of the HEI, try to raise the level of its competitiveness;
- can use the information gathered prior or during the education audit preparation and conduct, for the purposes not indicated in the agreement made between the Agency and the HEI by approbation of the HEI;
- are entitled to require the information needed for the purposes of education audit only;

- make judgments and prepare reports based on the information and data both provided by the HEI and gathered during the audit period.

The experts during their visit to the HEI:

- are provided with all the necessary documentation that reflects theoretical and methodological principles approved by the Agency related to the education audit in the HEIs conducted in order to assure education quality and the process of its provision;
- have access to the HEI internal education quality assurance review and other documents necessary for the work;
- are entitled to use all the Agency resources for achievement of the purposes of the agreement made between the Agency and the HEI;
- may engage consultancy specialists into the process if needed;
- conclude agreements with the Agency that regulate financial relationships between the experts and the Agency.

At the end of the visit the team of experts writes a report on the results of the carried out assessment. The expert's report contains the data which:

- show the extent to which the HEI internal quality assurance system is effective and the compliance level of the program standards and qualifications granting;
- identify intelligibility, completeness and reliability of the information about program and qualification granting quality standards published by the HEI for society;
- show the HEI best practices aimed at education quality improvement and maintenance;
- judge the factual state of education quality and level of the standards of separate disciplines and training areas;

Besides, the experts' report contains recommendations for education quality assurance and its provision.

The representative of the Agency (hereinafter referred to as the Representative) coordinates the education audit conduct of the HEI; he/she also consults the HEI on the issues related to the HEI preparation for the experts' visit. He/she also provides consultations to the experts in the course of their preparation the activity in the HEI and if it is necessary in the course of the audit. He/she bears responsibility for reliability and preliminary data, gathered by the experts, verifies that the information in the report is brief and presented in an accessible form.

The audit procedure begins about 4 month before the experts' visit (Appendix 2) after the specialists of the Agency have submitted the analytic report about how the HEI solves the questions of quality monitoring and standards compliance.

The representative of the Agency visits the HEI about 3 month before the experts' visit and meets the administration of the HEI and with the students. The goal of the meeting is to clarify the «review scales», to discuss the cooperation mechanisms of the Agency, experts and the HEI. The representative of the Agency also makes sure that the documents provided by the HEI are composed properly and meet the education audit requirements; to discuss the issues related to the HEI self-assessment and to the published information; to approve the disciplines selected for the audit and possible examination of separate aspects of the HEI activity as a whole. In addition to that he/she agrees with the HEI the preliminary list of members in the team of experts. The HEI approves the list of the subjects that have to be reviewed and the contingent of the students.

After determining the list of the subject fields the Agency identifies the preliminary list of members in the teams of experts and 10 weeks before education audit conduct agrees with the HEI the list of team members and number of disciplines that have to pass the review.

The HEI provides the initial package of documents for education audit not later then 8 weeks before the experts' visit. This package includes documents of the HEI internal assessment as well as other documents that the HEI wants to provide to the experts before the work begins.

No later than 4 weeks before the visit, the Agency approves the final composition of the team of experts and submits to the HEI the list of disciplines that have to pass the review, requiring the internal review documents on every discipline.

No later than 3 weeks before the experts' visit the HEI submits to the Agency documents of the internal discipline review.

The experts' work doesn't have to take more than 5 working days. The education audit program includes, besides the meetings with the staff and the students:

- the examination of the HEI approach to quality assurance;
- the examination of the connections between different procedures applied in the HEI and the HEI activity at the program and separate disciplines level, thereby they pay special attention to the effectiveness of the internal reviews of the program quality and the qualification granting standards;
- the consideration of the disciplines selected for the review and separate aspects of the HEI activity as a whole. That includes systematic discussions with the staff of the HEI as well as analysis of the examples on how the procedures of the students' knowledge assessment are carried out (during the discipline audit);
- identifying of intelligibility, confidence and the degree of information that is intended for general publishing and spreading among the students and other stakeholders;
- consideration of complaints on insufficient education quality and claims on students' education degree, special attention is paid to the education results and teaching methods and to the methods of the students' education possibilities expansion;
- conduct of the meetings with the leadership of the HEI at the last stages of the audit and if it is necessary with the teaching staff of the disciplines under review to discuss unsolved questions as well as questions arisen in the course of the audit.

On the penultimate day of the visit, the experts inform the HEI on the necessity of consultants' engagement. On the last day the experts, joined by the Representative of the Agency, analyze the gathered data and approve the list of disciplines that require the specialists' consultancy. The experts don't submit to the HEI any report in writing or orally.

The Agency in the course of two weeks from the moment of the work completion in the HEI submits to the HEI leadership the letter where are stated key conclusions of the experts and given the recommendations related to the preliminary variant of the report. If the experts come to the conclusion that it is necessary to consider some issues in more details, the Agency agrees with the HEI the visit days of the consultancy specialists. No later than 3 weeks after the visit of the experts, the consultancy specialists arrive at the HEI. After they complete the declared tasks, the Agency sends a letter to the HEI, in which the opinion of the consultancy specialists is described. The preliminary report will not be submitted to the leadership of the HEI until the team of experts gets acquainted with the conclusions of the consultancy specialists and takes them into account in its reports.

Following the results of the HEI education audit they prepare a report that in the course of 4 weeks is submitted to the HEI. In the course of 4 weeks after receiving the preliminary report, the HEI returns it to the Agency together with the list of comments and corrections if any drawbacks have been found in the data. Taking into account the corrections made by the HEI, the Agency prepares the final report and submits it to the HEI no later than 10 weeks from the moment the experts have completed their work.

The final judgment of the experts is guided by recommendations that the HEI should take into account.

If the HEI doesn't receive any recommendations aimed at the elimination of drawbacks, the process of educational audit is considered complete after the publishing of the report. In the course of the year the Agency sends to the HEI a letter with a request concerning the steps that the HEI has undertaken related to the publishing of the report.

If the HEI receives recommendations on the elimination of drawbacks the report is also published but the audit is considered incomplete. During the next three months following the publishing of the report, the HEI has to submit to the Agency the draft of the following steps, and afterwards the report on the implementation of indicated actions. The audit is considered to be complete if during the year the Agency acknowledges the implementation of the indicated measures to be satisfactory.

If at the end of the year the Agency has doubt that all the necessary measures on current drawbacks elimination have been fully taken, the Agency initiates additional visit to the HEI.

If significant drawbacks were identified, the report is published but in the course of three months following the publishing of the report the HEI submits to the Agency the draft of followed steps and then quarterly provides reports of the measures taken on the elimination of the drawbacks that were found. The next year the Agency makes a brief visit at the HEI in order to make sure that the necessary steps have been taken. The audit is considered to be incomplete until the Agency acknowledges the implementation of all indicated measures as satisfactory. If after the year the Agency has doubt that all the necessary steps for the elimination of drawbacks have been fully taken, the Agency can postpone the date of the following education audit of the HEI.

Every year, the representatives of the Agency make a brief visit to the HEI in order to get acquainted with the results achieved by the HEI from the moment of education audit, with the HEI plans of the following implementation of quality control system and standards compliance.

5. Regulation Mechanism of Conflicts of Interest, Disagreements by the Audit Conduct

In order to ensure consistency and objectiveness of the audit team decisions, it is necessary to develop a mechanism of solving conflicts of interest and disagreements within the audit team.

Possible conflicts may be categorized as personal, professional or ideological.

From the point of view of the Agency personal conflicts could arise when a part or all the members of the team of experts maintain personal relationships as well as if such relationships have been established between the members of the team and the governing employees of the Agency. Besides, the resource of the conflicts can be special relationships that bound a member of the team with any employee from the HEI under review. That is why the Agency avoids having graduates of the HEI under review as members of the team of experts.

From the point of view of the Agency professional conflicts could occur:

- if an auditor had been a failed applicant for a position in the HEI under review;
- if there are staff members in the HEI under review who were failed applicants for a position in the Agency;
- if an expert was an applicant or prospect for a senior position in the Agency;
- if an expert has worked in a HEI that is strongly competing with the HEI under review or in a competing agency.

From the point of view of the Agency ideological conflict could occur if an expert is lacking sympathy to the HEI activity policy or to internal approved regulations of the HEI. Besides, a conflict of interest could occur if the Agency staff or experts suggest to the HEI currently under review to eliminate the drawbacks of the quality control procedure or of documentation preparation that have been identified by the team of experts. To avoid such a conflict of interest, the parties shall follow the assessment procedure. The HEI under review is responsible for the submission of self-assessment and education programs documents to the HEI, and the team of experts is responsible for assessing the quality assurance system basing on the provided documents and gathered evidence in the HEI. When participating in these processes the Agency staff strictly complies with the job descriptions and the Agency basic documents.

In order to avoid possible conflicts, the team members are obliged to declare formally to the Agency any matters or circumstances that could influence their ability to serve effectively as members in the team of experts, they also sign a form which is a formal confirmation of their independence.

The experts who will be included in the team make a written declaration to the Agency about any matters that could pose a conflict of interest during their participation in the HEI assessment. The experts' declaration about conflict emergence possibility doesn't mean that his/her candidature will be automatically rejected. The Agency may approve the expert's candidature if it draws the conclusion that a conflict doesn't exist.

The HEI may not agree with the preliminary list of members in the team of experts members because of the possible emergence of conflicts of interests with one of the experts or because the compliance of the experts' qualification with the level of teaching of the program under review is doubtful. In this case the HEI under review submits its notes in writing to the Agency and discusses the case with the representative of the Agency. The final decision on members of the team of experts will be taken by the Agency.

If there is a conflict of interest or one is emerging during the review process, the expert reports it to the team Coordinator, who together with the Representative of the Agency will decide on the appropriate measures to be taken.

The Agency maintains a record of all the signed Expert Independence Confirmation forms. The Agency also registers all cases conflicts of interests and disagreements.

6. Conclusion

The methods of work with experts applied in the Agency are constantly reviewed. The Agency studies carefully the new materials concerning the expert's work which appears on the websites of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) and leading European agencies. The Agency also has strong procedures of internal quality assurance which it regularly implements to ensure its work quality.

Appendixes

APPENDIX 1

APPLICATION FORM of Experts Nomination of the Agency for Higher Education Quality Assurance and Career Development (AKKORK)

Contact Information	
Surname:	
Name:	
Region:	
Address:	
Place of Work:	
Position:	
Tenure:	
Academic Degree/Rank:	
Zip Code:	
Telephone:	
E-mail:	
Fax:	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Review Areas:	
<input type="checkbox"/> Stability of the HEI (leading expert)	
<input type="checkbox"/> Management and Organization	
<input type="checkbox"/> Learning Technologies	
<input type="checkbox"/> Professional Education Program Content	
<input type="checkbox"/> Testing	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Candidate's Qualification:	
<input type="checkbox"/> experience in the field of education management and quality assurance in the higher education system of the Russian Federation	
<input type="checkbox"/> personal traits needed to perform the institutional level assessment in various review fields of its activity	
<input type="checkbox"/> ability to absorb and analyze substantial volume of various data, make objective judgments, consider and examine written and oral evidence in order to form judgments	
<input type="checkbox"/> current or recent (within 2 years) experience of teaching and learning support or examining students if the expert represents a certain academic discipline	

APPENDIX 2

Timeline of Review Schedule

Prior to the Visit	
4 months	The Agency specialists make an analytic report on how the HEI solves the issues of quality monitoring and standards compliance. A copy of the report is submitted to the HEI.
3 months	The Representative of the Agency – meets with the representatives of the HEI and the students, – examines if the documents provided by the HEI meet the requirements of the Agency, – gives guidelines to the students on the rules of information provision to the Agency. The institution confirms the list of disciplines to be reviewed and the student contingent.
2,5 months	The Agency informs the HEI of: – the preliminary composition of the team of experts – the number of disciplines selected for review.
2 months	The HEI submits the self-assessment documents to the Agency. The students submit to the Agency their written evidence.
1 month	The Agency informs the HEI about approved list of experts' team and the discipline list to be reviewed, requiring self-assessment documents on every discipline.
3 weeks	The HEI submits to the Agency the self-assessment documents related to the disciplines.
During the Visit	
The review team visits the site	The experts' work will not take more than 5 working days. The experts following the audit program consider both the HEI activity as a whole and the separate disciplines, as well as meeting the students and teaching staff and in the end of the visit with the leadership of the HEI. On the penultimate day of the visit, two experts inform the HEI on necessity of engaging consultants. On the final day of the visit the experts, joined by the Representative of the Agency, analyze the gathered data and confirm the list of disciplines that needs the consultancy of the specialists. The experts don't submit to the HEI any report in writing or orally.
After the Visit	
2 weeks	The Agency sends a letter to the HEI, which – describes key judgments and recommendations of the experts made for the preliminary report; – agrees with the HEI management, if it is necessary, the date of the consultancy specialists visit.

2 – 3 weeks	If needed, the consultancy specialists and a representative of the Experts' Team or the Deputy Director visit the HEI.
4 weeks or 7 weeks, if the consultancy specialists contribution is needed	The Agency submits a preliminary report to the HEI.
8 weeks (or 11 weeks)	The HEI makes comments on the preliminary report.
10 weeks (or 13 weeks)	The final report is published.
FOLLOW-UP	
Depending on the review finding	Performance as per the experts' recommendations is analyzed.
The HEI Education Quality Monitoring	
Annually	The Representatives of the Agency make a brief visit to the HEI in order to examine: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – the achievements of the HEI after the review – the HEI action plans in regard to the enhancement of quality assurance control system and standards compliance.

APPENDIX 3

Expert Independence Confirmation

The form must be signed by each of the members of the Team of Experts and serves as a guarantee of the fact that the members of the Team of Experts are unbiased and independent when making their judgments. By signing the form, the expert states that he/she has no relations among the staff of the HEI under review, or personal interest or any profit and feels no pressure exerted from the HEI or is not part of the conflict with nor cooperates with the representatives of the HEI under review.

Expert Independence Confirmation

Do you have any relations among or feel any pressures exerted from or are you part of the conflict with or do you cooperate with the representatives of the HEI under review?

YES/NO

If so, please give your comment here.

I hereby confirm that I have no financial liabilities or other responsibility related to the HEI under review, nor any personal interest related to the review procedure. I hereby promise that I shall not take any gifts or other payments or bonuses from the representatives of the HEI under review and from other interested parties.

I agree with the AKKORK operational principles and guidelines related to the independent assessment of academic quality and the academic audit of programs or institutional audit. I hereby promise to adhere to guidelines and principles when participating in the work conducted by the Team of Experts. I hereby confirm that I shall be making my judgments and form my opinions independently and without bias.

Signed: Full Name:

Date:

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