



Final Report on ARQATA, Armenia Quality Assurance Technical Assistance

2011 – 2014

ANQA¹ and NVAO² have been engaged in a World Bank project for technical assistance as stipulated in a contract between CfEP PIU³ and NVAO (27 April 2011). This project goes under the name of ARQATA: Armenia quality assurance technical assistance. This report presents the final results of the project and all intermediary outcomes over a period of almost three years: June 2011 until April 2014.

1 Objectives

The project aimed at the further development of a quality assurance system and a quality culture in Armenian higher education. NVAO and a team of international experts would offer guidance and assistance to ANQA, universities and other relevant stakeholders.

The project distinguishes five elements or lines:

- 1 Development internal quality assurance (IQA) at universities
- 2 Development external quality assurance (EQA) at universities
- 3 Professionalization ANQA as a quality assurance agency
- 4 Enhancement quality assurance culture
- 5 Implementation quality assurance system

Obviously, the five lines are intertwined, and so are the activities planned to reach the goals set for each line.

In the initial phase, the implementation of the project met with some difficulties which resulted in a delay and consequently, some adjustments in the contract as laid down in Amendment 2 (10 January 2012). In order to make the relaunch of the project a success, and because some major developments had taken place since the submission of the project proposal (November 2010) and the inception report (July 2011), it was felt necessary to analyse the present situation again.

At the start both types of Tertiary Level Institutions (LTI) were included in the project: universities and institutions of Vocational Education and Training (VET). Universities offer academic programmes at level 6 and 7; VETs offer vocational programmes at level 4 and 5. At the relaunch of the project, the Minister of Education and Science decided to exclude the VET institutions from the project.

In March 2012 the Implementation Plan was agreed upon including a description of the activities defined as subprojects and a corresponding time line. Basically the plan shows a shift from developing a quality assurance policy towards implementing a quality assurance system. Amendment 3 to the contract (June 2012) basically contains the adjustments following the relaunch and the justification for the changes made. At still a later stage, Amendment 4 (20 February 2013) deals with changes in the NVAO team and Amendment 5 (May 2013) regulates the financial conditions.

¹ ANQA = National Center for Professional Education Quality Assurance Foundation

² NVAO = Nederlands-Vlaamse Accreditatieorganisatie

³ CfEP PIU = Center for Education Projects Project Implementation Unit

The Implementation Plan projects the following results:

- ANQA staff and quality assurance staff of eight universities are trained in quality assurance matters. They will have the competencies to further develop and implement a quality assurance system including a quality assurance handbook and training material for further use. They will participate throughout the course of the project in various training sessions and workshops on both internal and external quality assurance.
- Eight universities will participate in pilot procedures on internal quality assurance. ANQA staff will attend as observers to continue the process of professionalization.
- ANQA staff, quality assurance staff of two universities, experts and student panel members are trained and prepared for pilot assessment procedures on institutional and programme level.
- ANQA staff is trained in specific quality assurance matters related to a quality assurance agency. They will be competent in expert training, report writing, coordinating assessment procedures, developing quality assurance training material etc. ANQA will also prepare for a proof external review.
- ANQA's IT system will be reviewed resulting in an expert's advice.
- Two universities will participate in pilot procedures on external quality assurance involving writing a self-evaluation report and undergoing an external review. ANQA staff will coordinate the four pilots on institutional and programme assessment.
- ANQA will undergo a proof review based on the ENQA criteria involving writing a self-evaluation report and undergoing an external audit. ANQA staff will coordinate the four pilots on institutional and programme assessment.
- Two delegations of Armenian stakeholders will participate in study tours to Europe. Participants will get acquainted with the system of quality assurance in higher education in The Netherlands and Flanders (visit 1) or Switzerland (visit 2), and draw lessons from the various meetings and workshops for further use in Armenia.
- Stakeholders have a common understanding of quality assurance and a shared vision on the further development of a quality assurance system. These insights will be discussed during meetings, seminars and conferences. In the end the shared vision is validated at the national stakeholders' conference at the end of the project.

2 Results

The results of the project are described in detail in the numerous reports available on the ARQATA website. Annex II of the full report gives a full overview of all results per line and per activity as stipulated in the contract. The major overall achievements are listed below.

ANQA and HEI staff is trained in quality assurance

In 2012 and 2013 about 80 people participated in some 30 workshops, seminars and training sessions. Participants were presented good practice, they explored new quality assurance tools and worked on own material. They discussed and developed procedures for different types of assessments and practiced their report writing skills. The training was offered by NVAO staff members and international quality assurance experts.

Students are trained in quality assurance

Some 20 students participated in an extra training session offered by NVAO staff. The focus was on (1) their role in both internal and external quality assurance in HEIs, and (2) their role as member of a panel in an institutional and programme accreditation procedure. ANQA staff members attended this training as observers to continue the process of professionalization.

Experts are trained in performing reviews

During a two-day training 20 participants were offered tools for designing and implementing an external reviewer training programme. The workshop was offered by an international expert on 'Train the Trainer'.

ANQA information system is reviewed

The review of the information system ANQA focussed on the tools to support the assessment and decision making process, and to meet the need for a digital communication platform. NVAO's advice on the ANQA software package resulted in five major recommendations.

ANQA staff is trained in organising reviews and writing panel reports

ANQA junior coordinators organised 4 pilot procedures on institutional and programme level with the assistance of both NVAO and ANQA senior staff to continue the process of ANQA professionalization. One specific and rather demanding task was the writing of the panel report. NVAO staff and chairs offered online feedback on the draft reports.

Quality assurance handbooks are being developed

Many activities with HEIs and ANQA resulted in various tools for implementing quality assurance. HEIs and ANQA worked with concepts and formats making them fit for purpose. At a later stage, they were guided in the process of designing a quality assurance handbook and actually writing it. In doing so, both HEIs and ANQA have been preoccupied with developing their own handbook for both internal and external quality assurance. Also a QA Toolkit is made available with samples of tools from different sources.

Training material is available

Most training sessions and workshops in which HEIs and ANQA participated provided input for the further development of custom-made training material. In the QA Toolkit a separate session deals with training and training material. Also suggestions for further training are made.

HEIs are prepared for pilots

HEIs were offered technical assistance in organising an external assessment procedure, and in writing their self-evaluation reports (SER) on the institutional and the programme level. At a later stage, NVAO gave feedback on draft SERs in three stages: December 2012, February and March 2013. This guidance and assistance to HEIs was basically offered online with the exception of the first feedback session; this was done during the NVAO December visit to Yerevan. ANQA staff followed the process both online and during the NVAO visit to continue the process of ANQA professionalization.

HEIs participated in pilots

Two HEIs and four programmes were reviewed by panels chaired by NVAO experts. Each panel studied the SER, scrutinized the evidence on site and held various interviews with the university's representatives. These assessment procedures enabled the panel to come to well-founded conclusions about the extent to which the ANQA criteria were met. In addition, the panels also elaborated on more specific issues related to implementing change following Bologna. At all times, the focus was on quality enhancement rather than on quality control.

ANQA is prepared for the review

The NVAO workshop in December 2012 was the first step in preparing ANQA for the proof review. The European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) were discussed in relation to the ANQA Accreditation Manual. In addition, numerous points of attention were identified such as the composition of the Accreditation Committee (independence, international composition) and the decision making process. Also the general outline and the content of the SER were explored. At a later stage, the review panel and NVAO offered guidance and assistance in the actual organisation of the review. In May 2013, the review panel gave online feedback on ANQA's draft self-evaluation report.

ANQA underwent a proof external review

ANQA opted for a type A of external review: a review with the sole purpose to test compliance with the ENQA membership criteria, as agreed upon in the Terms of Reference (May 2013). In September 2013, a team of four experienced ENQA experts scrutinized ANQA's self-evaluation report and additional documents, and interviewed some 80 people in more than 20 sessions. The panel focused on commendations and recommendations for improvement. The main outcomes were presented during a feedback session on the final day of the visit. NVAO was present at all sessions in the capacity as observer.

Quality culture is enhanced through international visits

Representatives of ANQA, universities, the ministry of Education and students were part of two delegations of six spending each a week in the European Higher Educational Area: The Netherlands and Belgium/Flanders in September 2012, and Switzerland in October-November 2012. The visits were organized by NVAO in close collaboration with its colleagues in Armenia, Flanders, the Netherlands and Switzerland.

Assessment frameworks and procedures are being revised

The pilots in June 2013 and the proof external review of ANQA in September 2013 offered the opportunity to make a critical appraisal of the Armenian quality assurance frameworks and procedures as laid down in the ANQA Accreditation Manual. In the document 'Evaluation of Assessment Procedures 2013' (November 2013) NVAO presents a compilation of these observations and recommendations. Prior to these activities, ANQA and NVAO discussed the assessment frameworks and procedures at various occasions. Also universities and (international) panel members have been involved in the discussions, and they too reflected on potential improvements. Some of these reflections were also shared at the national stakeholders' conference in December 2013, and they are input for further elaboration with the stakeholders.

The newly developed quality assurance model is being implemented

Early 2014, a beginning was made with the follow-up procedures both by HEIs and ANQA (internal quality assurance) and with the formal decision-making process by ANQA (external quality assurance). As such, the implementation of a comprehensive quality assurance system is well on its way. Furthermore, at the December 2013 stakeholders' conference in Yerevan most participants identified the quality assurance situation in their universities as being in phase 1 (quality is still varied as a result of personal commitment) and phase 2 (there is a start of systematic process thinking about quality). This self-identification proves that the present institutions and staff have become more realistic about their situations. In these two phases quality assurance should still vary on programme level, as the quality level on institutional level is still variable. It is only in phase 3 (quality is assurance through systematic internal and external quality assurance) that the national framework can move towards institutional level.

Project outcomes are shared

The ARQATA project website was launched in March 2012 at the occasion of the seminar on internal quality assurance. The website includes information on the project, documents, partners and participants, and news items. Most importantly, all reports on the project (except three) are posted on the website so that outcomes are shared with all stakeholders. In total 20 reports have been written including 5 panel reports, 2 interim reports, 2 milestones reports on lines 1 and 4, and this final report. Communication on the website is basically in English but the forum and surveys also allow for Armenian. Outcomes were also shared at the conclusion of the various subprojects and the national stakeholders' conferences in October 2012 and December 2013.

For the project website see: www.anqa.am/arqata.

3 Evaluation

All ARQATA reports contain elements of evaluation mainly at the level of the project activities. Evaluation of outcomes is also part of the interim reports, and the reports on internal quality assurance in line 1, and quality culture in line 4. Line 5 in particular deals with the evaluation and validation of the project's results.

The main outcomes of the evaluation of the ARQATA project are:

1. The project contributed significantly to the quality enhancement of Armenian higher education and the further development of a quality culture;
2. All targets were met as defined in the project after the relaunch;
3. The various activities fostered team work amongst Armenian stakeholders, with other international partners, and within NVAO.

On the downside:

1. The initial project proposal was rather ambitious;
2. The project was time consuming for all parties, and extra funds were needed;
3. The circumstances for cooperation were at times challenging also given the different cultural contexts.

Agile project management

Changing circumstances make it difficult to plan ahead, and call for an agile approach to planning and managing the ARQATA project. Early 2012 the project itself changed – from policy development towards implementation – resulting in an adaptive team, plans and methods.

So after a rather hesitant start, the ARQATA project was well on its way early 2012. One year later, a lot of progress was made but further changes were necessary. The major change concerned the postponement of the pilots on external quality assurance at the explicit request of the universities involved. HEIs needed more time to prepare for the self-evaluation reports, and the site visits for the institutional audit and the programme assessment. As a result these activities were rescheduled. Early 2014, the last subproject in line 5 was finished, and this final report completes the ARQATA project within the established time frame.

The project was presented as good practice of cross-border cooperation at EQAF⁴ in a workshop entitled 'ARQATA – An International QA Development Project. Joint Efforts in a Post-Soviet Region.' Both the EQAF Steering Committee and the participants of the workshop showed an interest in how NVAO and its Armenian counterparts managed a project preparing developing countries to successfully cooperate with international expert agencies to further improve their quality assurance system. The workshop focused on a step-by-step approach of a quality assurance development project, and identified challenges and opportunities. Hands-on advice was offered to both HEIs and quality assurance agencies. At the end, ARQATA was presented as a sample project.

Good partnership

New perspectives for a fruitful cooperation motivated all parties to play their respective part in the project, and they did so with vigour and perseverance. All subprojects were organised in good partnership with and in close collaboration with ANQA, HEIs, the Ministry of Education and Science, and NVAO. As such, they all contributed to the overall enhancement of the quality of higher education in Armenia.

Indeed both HEIs and ANQA invested largely in the further development of their respective systems of internal quality assurance (lines 1 & 3). This work made it possible to organise mid-June 2013 the four pilots on external quality assurance in two state universities (line 2) and the proof external review of ANQA as a quality assurance agency (line 3).

Given the rather ambitious goals of the project, efficient and competent team work from both sides was called for. The implementation could only be successful if such a team was readably available to take up this task in all its complexity. All team members proved to be open to both the needs and concerns in Armenian higher education, and the transfer of knowledge and good practice in the European context.

Also the cooperation and input of international experts were much appreciated. Experts encouraged their Armenian colleagues to improve their quality assurance system and the quality of their programmes. Experts tried to the best of their abilities to deal with all quality assurance issues raised by the participants. Even so, at times it proved a challenge to address specific concerns and needs. The international involvement and settings of many ARQATA subprojects showed a shared interest in quality assurance. And this common interest hopefully enhanced the Armenian quality culture.

⁴ European Quality Assurance Forum, Gothenburg, 23 November 2013 (Ruben Topychan & Michèle Wera)

Learning effect

HEIs and ANQA worked closely together in the various subprojects. As such, the project had a positive effect on the team building not only within HEIs and ANQA, but also between HEIs and ANQA. It is essential though that HEIs and ANQA keep working on quality assurance and continue encouraging a quality culture making full use of lessons learned through ARQATA. Products and tools presented and discussed on various occasions must be made fit for purpose. This can only be done by investing largely in terms of time (and money). If not, the impact of ARQATA will fade away.

Based on the results of the surveys of the subprojects and the individual feedback, participants were positive about the learning effect and the general approach of training sessions and workshops: separate group assignments, practical exercises involving own material, intermediate group discussions and group evaluations, setting targets on specific products, and direct involvement of international experts both from quality agencies and European universities. The trainings, workshops and feedback sessions were evaluated as detailed, practical, frank, helpful and productive, but at times rather short. Suggestions were made for further online help facilities. The ARQATA certificate for the training was much appreciated. Negative comments related to the tight time schedule for the assignments, the limited and untimely feedback on the assignments in line 1, the limited knowledge of the local context, some overlap, the overemphasis of good practice and the language constraints.

Quite a number of HEIs were actively involved in the ARQATA project, and they also collaborated with other international projects and experts. So many projects, so many different inputs, so many different opinions and visions can be confusing instead of being helpful. Once clear and well-founded choices are made, processes and procedures have to be made fit-for-purpose, taking into account the Armenian context. Only then the actual implementation of quality assurance can be successful.

Challenges in a post-Soviet region

Higher education in Armenia is putting a lot of effort in preparing itself for the European Higher Education Area. But the ambitions and expectations are high within the foreseen time frame. This concern has been communicated with the Armenian stakeholders at an early stage of the project.

HEIs demonstrated a genuine drive to meet the (inter)national standards and substantial efforts are being made to meet the requirements. However, their internal quality assurance systems are still under development. This is not surprising: even after 30 years preoccupation with quality assurance, European universities still struggle with the efficacy and effectiveness of a quality assurance system at institutional level. The same can be said about ANQA: a lot of progress has been made, particularly within the framework of ARQATA, but the work is not finished yet. The proof external review made this clear.

The actual support and commitment of the academic leaders – rector, vice rectors, deans and vice deans – are prerequisites for the acceptance and the success of quality assurance systems. Without their explicit engagement and open support there is a considerable risk for failure despite all efforts and good intentions of quality assurance staff involved in the various international projects. It is essential for universities to seriously contemplate academic leadership and ownership of quality assurance, and to take appropriate actions. During the course of the project, academic leaders have become more explicitly and structurally involved in both internal and quality assurance, and there seems a strong will to continue to do so. The attendance and active participation of many academic leaders at the national stakeholders' conference in December 2013 were certainly proof of a positive development. After all, in the end the responsibility for adapting a true quality culture lies with the universities.

It is also clear that some HEIs are ahead in adapting a quality culture; others are still at the early stages of developing their quality assurance policies and systems. Actually the present situation makes the position of HEIs both crucial and vulnerable. On the one hand, HEIs need to adapt to a rapid changing society with more openness, more autonomy, more demands; on the other hand, HEIs need to comply with (inter)national quality assurance standards they cannot yet fully meet. The ARQATA project, therefore, focused on the further development and implementation of an internal quality assurance system.

Internal quality assurance first

Indeed, internal quality assurance will always be the leading principle. External quality assurance will always follow and refer to the internal processes. Especially the teaching staff and the students have a vital role in these internal quality processes. The ownership of quality lies with them, not with the quality assurance professionals. Without the commitment and input of teaching staff and students, an important opportunity for improvement will be missed. And that brings us to the quality assurance at programme level. Focussing on learning outcomes, and the teaching and learning environment is essential to any quality assurance system. That should be at the heart of education, that should be the focus of attention in quality assurance. The recent ministerial decision to make programme assessment compulsory is considered a positive effect of the ARQATA project.

This quality message – the importance of content over procedures, of internal over external quality assurance, of quality culture over quality control – was conveyed at all meetings, and will hopefully continue to be so in years to come.

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