Answers and proposed actions from the coordinator – University of Craiova - for the next phase of the EDUQAS project implementation

based on

The Project Implementation Report
COMMENTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1) Concerns about the coordination and communication at project level, as well as about the lack of cooperation between national teams and between the different country teams.

In spite of the slight improvement in the swiftness of the replies noted by the Partner Country partners after the appointment of a communication officer by the coordinating institution, the Report does not demonstrate that the coordination and the cooperation between and within the teams has improved. We could not understand from the Report how the local teams are organized, how they cooperate together for the achievement of the project goals and how the coordinator ensures that the specificities and the very different contexts in the field of Quality Assurance in Kazakhstan and Ukraine are taken in consideration during the project implementation.

Answers	*Proposed actions for the next phase*
A. As far as communication is concerned: *- **first** of all, as part of the management procedure of the project, regulations have been established concerning communication, including a maximum of 2 working days for any requirements/questions from the partners. When more time is needed in order to answer a specific request (e.g. information is required from other university departments, such as the accounting or financial department), the partner is duly informed;* *- **second**, there are both regional and national coordinators, as well as institutional coordinators (elected during the kick-off meeting in Craiova, February 2018) who contribute to a faster and more efficient communication as part of the management and coordination activities for both activities implementation and the decision making process within the project;* *- **third**, every day basis communication is also supported by a communication officer from the University of Craiova team, a project email has been created from the very start of the project implementation, a project website is also functional – including an interactive interface (private area) that supports communication with partners, monitors activities implementation from a technical and financial point of view (each partner has access to all project documents, schedules, tasks, can upload reporting and current working documents,*	*- a more detailed progress report was proposed to partners – project partners periodically submit a brief assessment of the activity they have implemented with specific action, staff involved and results, the template is available here: http://web.elth.ucv.ro/eduqas/protected/;* *- project partners have proposed lists of study programmes that shall be evaluated as part of the pilot evaluation activities of the project, also taking into account the specificities of each country – Ukraine and Kazakhstan. Further on, the EU countries part of the EDUQAS project will provide their support in appointing specialized evaluators for every study program proposed in accordance to the specific field of study.*

etc.) http://web.elth.ucv.ro/documente/

*- **fourth**, after every project meeting, feedback questionnaires concerning both management and implementation aspects have been filled in, centralised within a specific data base, analysed, and available on the project website http://web.elth.ucv.ro/eduqas/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2019/03/6_EduQAS_Restitution-ateliers-mercredi-13-mars-2019.pdf;*

*- **fifth**, aiming to enhance communication, with the occasion of every project meeting, a specific meeting concerning management and implementation aspects has been organised with the participation of partners' representatives and one or two representatives of the University of Craiova management team (while the other members of the management team in Craiova, have attended the meeting online via Skype). Skype meetings aiming for an enhanced and efficient communication have been organized.*

B. Consideration of the specific aspects and needs of the partners:

*- **first**, the project idea and application have been generated starting from the specific needs of partner countries who have addressed the EU partners and especially the University of Craiova, whom they had previously worked with, in order to work together in supporting the development of higher education QA systems in Ukraine and Kazakhstan;*

*- **second**, during the project meetings, partner countries representatives have presented their specificities and needs in the field of QA. During the kick-off-meeting in Craiova, but also during later meetings as well, each partner presented their institution, expectations from the project, the actual status of the higher education QA system in their countries and thus specific aspects have been identified and put forward for future work. Proof of the presented and discussed specificities are also available on the project website, for example: http://web.elth.ucv.ro/eduqas/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2019/03/EDUQAS_presentation_Nancy.pdf*

*- **third**, given such specificities and their awareness on a project implementation level, as part of every meeting, work-groups have been organised in order to be able to specifically address such issues. Meeting programmes specifying the work-group activities are available online on the project website, for example http://web.elth.ucv.ro/eduqas/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2019/09/Meeting-agenda-Riga_May-*

2019.pdf - ***fourth***, *the Ukrainian and Kazakh situation have been approached differently, on different levels, and as a consequence specific measures were taken (e.g. partners have stated the stage of the higher education QA system and instruments have been adapted, partners have proposed their own suitable approach in terms of development, evaluated programs and domains, specific documents needed).*	

According to our understanding, the Ukrainian teams, under the local coordination of one of the partners, are working on their institutional Quality Standards and Guidelines for study programme evaluation. In Kazakhstan there seems to be no local coordination and the two Kazakh partners are working in isolation from each other. The report does not succeed in explaining what are the achievement of each of the teams and how they do relate to each other. Moreover, in Ukraine, the new legislation in Higher Education requires the HEls to modernize their internal QA systems and the national authorities intend to develop and integrate external quality assurance in the HE national strategies. Despite the numerous interventions impacting the internal and external QA system in this country (e.g. Guidelines on policies and procedures for external QA system or criteria for HEI self-assessment, the EDUQAS Report does not refer to these initiatives and there is a clear risk of duplication of work and overlapping activities at country level if these elements are not taken into account.

Answers	*Proposed actions for the next phase*
- ***first***, *both in Kazakhstan and in Ukraine, there are national coordinators appointed within the project kick-off-meeting who work closely with partner institutions, even if geographical distances are sometimes a barrier. They have been working together as part of the project, both online (skype and email) and face-to-face in both project and specific national/regional meetings/activities. The project documents also contain proof of such common work.* - ***second***, *The Ukrainian Higher Education Quality Assurance Agency, that is a partner within the EDUQAS project, started functioning with a full legal body and financial account in May 2019 (according to the information provided to us by its representative who participated in the Riga meeting in May 2019. At that time, they did not have a banking account. Still, the partnership agreement has been signed, cooperation with the project activities started and allocated budget has been transferred by the University of Craiova, as soon as it has been requested by the Agency in May*	- *Further operationalization of the QA units developed within the EDUQAS project as part of the study programs evaluation piloting activities in Ukraine and Kazakhstan - November – December 2019;* - *the development of a Best Practice Guide on QA in Higher Education – as part of the EDUQAS project based on implemented activities, specific national aspects and recent EU partners experience in QA.* - *further cooperation, feedback and input on the documents, methodologies and QA instruments developed by national QA Agencies;*

2019). As the report has been submitted shortly after, its role in the project networking and activities couldn't be strongly highlighted. Meanwhile, cooperation and common activities started building up, members of the project partnership are represented within the Agency and are contributing to the development of the national QA system also, by means of the results of the EDUQAS project. We have been well aware of the overlapping risk, and thus, the project has been working in cooperation, in supporting and adjusting the developing QA instruments and methodologies proposed by the Agency by means of the input of the EU HEIs involved in the EDUQAS project.

*- **third**, at the beginning of the EDUQAS project, partner countries' HEIs involved in the project only had isolated QA staff working as part of non-specialised departments. At this point, given the project activities, these institutions have specific QA departments, working according to specific procedures and methodologies included and according to national and institutional policy. Supporting documents and organisational charts illustrating the existence and functioning of these departments/units are displayed on the project website as part of specific reports (project deliverables) - http://web.elth.ucv.ro/eduqas/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2019/04/EDUQAS-WP-3.3.-report-.pdf*

*- **fourth**, after the delivery of the interim report, the establishment and operationalization of the Ukrainian National Agency for Higher Education Quality Assurance, project experts disseminated and discussed results delivered in cooperation with project partners, within the international conference organized by the UNAHEQA – "The First Large Scale International Conference on Higher Education Quality Assurance in Ukraine", June 2019,- aiming to strengthen EDUQAS contribution to the development of a sound and efficient quality assurance system in partner countries. The conference programme and link are also available on the EDUQAS project website: http://web.elth.ucv.ro/edugas/dissemination/*

Related to the above, we note that some training activities have been normalizcd, but it is not clear how the specific needs of each of the Partner Countries have been taken into consideration. Indeed, the materials available show examples of practices carried out in Europe, but do not provide proof of targeted training according to the different needs in Kazakhstan and in Ukraine, nor on how this training will contribute to the establishment of national networks of experts evaluators. In addition, the training plan seems to lack coherence, as training activities are foreseen under WP1 and WP2, without specifying different training aims or different target groups. In order to be able to evaluate the impact of the training programmes, the project should request the participants' evaluations of these trainings and make them available for the Agency assessment at Final Report stage. The consortium must ensure that the participants in project trainings keep on disseminating the gained experience in their institutions and make available proofs of this dissemination.

Answers	*Proposed actions for the next phase*
- *first*, as already stated above, the partners presented the specificities and the particular needs of each system as part of the training sessions and have been provided with group working sessions tailored to these specific needs during each meeting; - *second*, the specific need have been further assessed by the project coordinator and EU partners based on survey conducted during the Stockholm meeting and displayed on the project website - *http://web.elth.ucv.ro/eduqas/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2018/10/Draft-minutes-Stockholm.pdf* - *third*, after each training session, feedback questionnaires have been filled in by participants, results have been centralized in a data base, processed and results were implemented in the design of the programme and the content of the meetings. E. g. *http://web.elth.ucv.ro/eduqas/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2019/03/6_EduQAS_Restitution-ateliers-mercredi-13-mars-2019.pdf* And a feedback form facilitating statistical processing:: *https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSfN_2Y2nBdvI_QhMqRez_fH4guCs1Q-yi1TT_MVgIwbmg5oXg/viewform* - *fourth*, the EDUQAS project training sessions have been addressed to specialized staff, delegated as such by the project partners HEIs representatives, based on certain competences and positions as part of the QA system. They have further disseminated the information, the knowledge and the developed competences within the institutional QA units and towards their practical activity in this field. Participants in the training sessions were appointed by their own institutions.	- Ukrainian and Kazakh experts shall further improve their QA competences by observing and taking part at the pilot evaluations of the study programs in their countries. This process will also function as a valuable feedback instrument for the documents, methodologies, practices and tools developed as part of the EDUQAS project. Results and feedback shall be presented to National Agencies and Ministries together with a Best Practice Guide. - Documents regarding the specific training of experts within partner countries shall be posted on the project website.

The involvement of the numerous associated partners is also a reason for concern since the role of these stakeholders is not clear. According to the project proposal, the associated partners would have a role in disseminating the results to the civil society sector and to the labour market

but it is not reported whether any of these activities have taken place. Although the Report mentions that "the employers' demands have been taken into account for the development of framework methodologies for the assessment of the quality of study programs" we could not understand how (/when) this consultation has taken place and how (/when) the employers' feedback has been embedded in the project. As mentioned during one of the monitoring visits, the sustainability of University-Business-Government network, which is one of EDUQAS outputs, strongly depends on the ability of the project team to establish close relations and contacts with stakeholders from academic and non-academic communities. At this point, no proof of links with these stakeholders has been provided.

Answers	*Proposed actions for the next phase*
- the development of specific indicators for quality assessment implies the need for a feedback from stakeholders, a necessary aspect for both Ukraine and Kazakhstan. This consultation becomes important when evaluating the programs (at this stage, this responsibility of the consultation rests with the national agency to create the indicators, and the educational institutions interact with them for the evaluation stage). Meanwhile, the partner countries' HEIs involved in the EDUQAS project have been in contact with important stakeholders, such as the companies.	*- Within the EDUQAS project activities, a questionnaire for employers, will be developed and distributed with the support of the partners from the project as part of the evaluation piloting process;* *- Documents certifying cooperation with essential stakeholders for the QA process in higher education are available and will be uploaded on the project website;* *- Also, as part of the EDUQAS project activities, a questionnaire for authorities will be developed (ministries of education in UA and KZ), aiming to bring together the essential actors of the QA process – HEIs – Companies – Governments (and other types of public bodies);* *- Given the information provided by the above questionnaires, EDUQAS will also develop a tool for processing questionnaires to improve in order to provide an accurate and useful insight into the QA system in Ukraine and Kazakhstan, the progress made and the necessary further adjustments.*

Also in relation to the partnership composition, the assessment of the project proposal already recommended including the Kazak quality assurance agency in the consortium, but this has never been done and no explanation has been provided. It is also hard to understand why the consortium has not involved the Ukrainian National Agency for Quality Assurance in the project activities (see below).

Answers	*Proposed actions for the next phase*
*- **first**, the Ukrainian Higher Education Quality Assurance Agency, that is a partner within the EDUQAS project, started functioning with a full legal body and financial account in May 2019 (according to the information provided to us by its*	*- strengthen even further the cooperation with NAHEQA and the Kazakh QA Agency and provide common documents on the project website;*

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representative who participated in the Riga meeting in May 2019). At that time, they did not have a banking account. Still, the partnership agreement had been signed, cooperation with the project activities started and allocated budget has been transferred by the University of Craiova, as soon as it has been requested by the Agency in May 2019). As the report has been submitted shortly after, its role in the project networking and activities couldn't be strongly highlighted. Meanwhile, cooperation and common activities started building up, members of the project partnership are represented within the Agency and are contributing to the development of the national QA system also, by means of the results of the EDUQAS project. As shown above, cooperation with NAHEQA is ongoing. *- second, the INDEPENDENT AGENCY FOR ACCREDITATION AND RATING, Astana, Kazakhstan is and associated partner to the project and it has been involved in activities by the Kazakh partners. The Kazakhstan national coordinator presented QA policies, the role and the involvement of specialized agencies in the kick-off meeting of Craiova:http://web.elth.ucv.ro/eduqas/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2018/03/P11.pdf*	

Dissemination activities seem to be decentralized and the responsibility for the dissemination of results at departmental, institutional and national levels are in the hands of each of the teams. Taking into consideration the nature of the project, the organization of dissemination activities at EU partner institutions does not seem relevant and should be clarified.

Answers	*Proposed actions for the next phase*
- dissemination has been decentralized, beyond the common Project Dissemination Strategy - http://web.elth.ucv.ro/eduqas/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2018/10/dissemination-strategy-EDUQAS-final.pdf, partners countries have undertaken dissemination activities on a national and regional level as presented on the project website - http://web.elth.ucv.ro/eduqas/dissemination/. Also, each partner institution has got a website section dedicated to the EDUQAS project and displays a link to the project website on their institutional internet page.	**-** *Further strengthen decentralization of the responsibility for the dissemination of results at departmental, institutional and national levels;* **-** *Each EU partner institution shall undertake dissemination activities on a local level aiming to spread the information and results of the EDUQAS project.*

2) Lack of project's structural dimension

Although the EDUQAS objectives remain relevant in the Kazakh and Ukrainian national context and there are no doubts about the benefits that participating higher education institutions will obtain from modernizing their internal QA systems, the report does not succeed in demonstrating the innovative added value of this intervention at the wider national higher education sector in Kazakhstan or in Ukraine. This major weakness put s at risk the overall relevance of the project outcomes in the local context.

The activities carried out during the first half of the project, in particular the development of institutional standards and processes for the assessment of the quality of study programs and the creation of Units responsible for internal QA in each of the Partner Countries' HEls, have the potential to enhance the quality of the individual Universities. But none of the activities implemented until now demonstrates that the project results will bring innovative added value to the wider national higher education sector in Kazakhstan and Ukraine compared to its current state.

Answers	*Proposed actions for the next phase*
- taking into account also the fact that this project is a structural one, and leaving from the very needs of partner countries manifested before the start of the project, EDUQAS provides an impact and added value on the higher education systems in both Ukraine and Kazakhstan by means of the QA methodologies, instruments and trained evaluators working together in order to enhance the quality of the academic activity in HEIs on a national and regional level. First the EDUQAS project develops these tools in cooperation with National QA agencies and ministries, QA units are created within partner HEIs, then these instruments and evaluators are put to test as part of the piloting evaluations, feedback is provided to QA agencies on developed instruments and finally a Best Practice Guide on QA will be delivered as part of the EDUQAS project. The added value of the project, beyond documents, procedures and units, is to provide a change in the QA culture within partner countries. That will be achieved through the dissemination of the project activities and results, through the pilot evaluations, through continuous contact with stakeholders. All these will change the perception on quality assessment in higher education and will determine, over time, a quality increase in academic teaching, research	*We will propose to the coordinators from the partner countries, that, after the completion of the evaluation stage in December 2019, they should coordinate the development of a good practice guide of the internal evaluation activity and disseminate it through the national agency at the level of all the interested institutions. This guide will contain the elements identified within the project, but also from the experience of the EU states. The purpose of the guide is to prevent shortcomings inherent in quality management.*

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| *and students' competencies according to the labour market demand.* | |

In their evaluation of the grant application, the experts already mentioned that it would have been beneficial to dedicate a specific deliverable to the planned 'Quality Assessment Standards and Procedures Guidelines', determining in particular the key deliverables at national level. It does not seem that the consortium has followed this advice.

Answers	*Proposed actions for the next phase*
- at the time of the intermediary report delivery, the standards and guides were subject to testing by project team experts, according to their specificities. They have been developed and will be delivered in the second stage of the project. Their testing under the evaluation piloting activities has been scheduled according to the structure of the academic year as they require the presence of all involved categories – teaching and administrative staff, students, stakeholders, etc. Also, the evaluation reports of the proposed study programs shall be presented as deliverables of the project. At the end, after analysing and observing all the details and aspects of the evaluation process, a Best Practice Guide on QA shall be developed as presented above.	*- the completion and testing of the Standards and Guidelines, the development of the Best Practice Guide on QA with specific focus on the specificities of each partner country.*

The National authorities responsible for Higher Education have a crucial responsibility in ensuring the mainstreaming of the project results in the national system. For this reason, these bodies must be involved and consulted during the whole project preparation and implementation. The Report does not mention the role, tasks or responsibilities of the two Ministries of Education involved. Moreover, although the recently established Ukrainian National Agency for Quality Assurance, main responsible for Ukrainian national regulations on external quality assurance, is formally included in the consortium, it doesn't seem to be involved at all in the project activities. The National Agency for QA in Kazakhstan is not a partner of the consortium, in spite of the recommendation provided at selection stage.

Answers	*Proposed actions for the next phase*
*- **first**, the NAHEQA has became an active part of the project activities after the delivery of the interim report, as described before, given the fact that it did not have a legal body up to that moment.* *- **second**, the INDEPENDENT AGENCY FOR ACCREDITATION AND RATING, Astana, Kazakhstan is an associated partner to the project and it has been involved in activities by the Kazakh*	*- further strengthen cooperation with the 2 national QA agencies. Representatives of these agencies will also be invited to take part in testing the EDUQAS developed QA instruments, standards, guides and trained evaluators as part of the piloting activities in partner countries. The Best Practice Guide in QA shall be disseminated on a national level of the partner countries, and shall be developed in*

| *partners.* | *cooperation with these institutions.* |

In addition, as far as Ukraine is concerned, the coordinator seems not to be aware of recent initiatives in the field of QA that resulted in self-evaluation tools, quality assurance guidance and templates for QA and programme accreditation that are being integrated in the work of the National Agency for QA.

Answers	*Proposed actions for the next phase*
- the coordinator is continuously informed by the national Ukrainian coordinator concerning these developments, as language is a barrier in this respect (given the fact that QA developments on a national level are mostly in Ukrainian). Given that, the coordinator has the entire availability and flexibility to adapt to any requirements and answer partners needs on a project level generated by the changes in UA national regulations in the field of QA, within the limits of the financing request approved.	*- the Ukrainian coordinator (also member of the NAHEQA) has been requested by the project coordinator, to periodically send the coordinator info on the most recent developments in the QA field. These updates will be made visible on the project website together with links to the authorities' internet pages where such documents are made public.*

In this context, the expected project result of integrating the QA Standards and Procedures Guidelines in the process of external evaluation by National QA agencies of Ukraine and Kazakhstan does not appear realistic.

Answers	*Proposed actions for the next phase*
- the EDUQAS project draws up and proposes a set of procedures, methodologies, guides, and other QA instruments, in cooperation with project partners, public authorities developing and implementing QA for higher education in partner countries, but also with essential stakeholders, but it cannot impose national policies. We can still influence the development of these QA systems that are under construction and/or adjustment. From this point of view, the involvement of the QA agencies and of the ministries for education in partner countries represent an essential plus in further initiation legal regulation as a sustainability result of the EDUQAS project implementation.	*- Project experts will work even closer with national authorities aiming to integrate the EDUQAS developed Standards and procedures within the national QA systems.*

In addition to these two main weaknesses, we would like to raise the consortium's attention on the fact that overall, the Report does not provide indicators to measure the achievement of the

objectives. The project proposal engages to promote the creation of quality culture at various levels, to develop the staff' capacities and to improve the quality of the research, education, governance activities on the basis of the study of procedures and processes of EU universities. Without the use of measurable indicators it is not possible to estimate the impact of the intervention in the Partner Countries. In the Final Report the project must be able to provide quantitative and qualitative information on how Quality Assurance system is working in each of the Universities, on the impact of the project in each beneficiary institution, on the number of staff and students reached, on the changes in the quality culture of the institutions, on the scope and concrete impact of the new procedures for internal QA and of the pool of experts/peer networks, etc.

Answers	*Proposed actions for the next phase*
- the intermediary report has presented, up to the reporting moment in time, the indicators in annex C (TABLE OF ACHIEVED / PLANNED RESULTS) with links to the existing deliverables at that time.	*The coordinator works on a set of indicators that they will send to the partners. It will quantify through this set of indicators, both the results already obtained in the activities carried out, as well as for the future ones, and will indicate the value thresholds for each indicator, so that the object can reach its objectives. The indicators will include, for example: no. of programs included in the evaluation pilot activities; no. of experts involved per partner; no. of expert evaluators trained in the project; no. of expert evaluators trained in the project and involved in the piloting activities; no. of persons participating in dissemination activities, etc.*
	deadline: December 2019

As regards your financial statement, and in view of the little achievement to date, the staff cost allocation for certain activities appear to be very high in relation to the outputs available at this stage. Moreover, the costs for Management should be thoroughly revised, in particular in what concerns the management costs claimed by the Programme Country institutions. We would also like to draw your attention to the fact that we highly recommend to launch the equipment tendering procedure at national level and not at each institution individually. Please take into account that 1) you are legally obliged to ensure cost-efficient management of the grant and 2) that you cannot split the purchase to avoid tendering. Therefore, a joint tendering procedure appears as the most cost-efficient approach when purchasing equipment unless the project can demonstrate that a joint tender is either not feasible or less cost-efficient than separated tenders. If you decide to split the tender, the project needs to be able to demonstrate in case of an Audit that splitting the tenders was the most cost-efficient way to proceed. Finally, we would like to remind you that Catering costs cannot cover the costs incurred by participants receiving Costs of Stay.

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Answers	*Proposed actions for the next phase*
- first, in order to ease the tendering activities for partner countries, the coordinator has undertaken legal steps in trying to provide support and perform such activities as part of a tripartite contract. Unfortunately, we did not obtain institutional approval for that. Even though, tender in Ukraine has taken plan on a nationally coordinated online system, according to legal regulation for public bodies. Thus, tendering has not been split and is strictly following national regulations starting with a centralised acquisitions' plan.	*As tendering has been finalized meanwhile, the coordinator provided partners with labels to be visibly placed on the equipment bought from the EDUQAS project and photos of this equipment will be displayed on the project website. The project coordinator requires from project partners, as part of financial reporting online platform within the project website, continuous reporting on equipment acquisition (documents, expenses reports, photos, etc.).*

In view of the points raised above and in order to minimise and mitigate the risks as much as possible, the Agency wishes to invite the project coordinator, as well as one representative from the Ukrainian partners and one representative from the Kazakh partners, for a meeting at the Agency's premises in Brussels. The objective of the meeting will be to clarify the points raised above, to discuss the project's weaknesses and to agree on the areas that require improvements and closer follow-up by the project coordinator. The project coordinator should therefore contact the Agency's project officer in charge of the project as soon as possible, in order to fix a meeting date in September 2019. In preparation to the meeting, the consortium partners must be given a copy of the report as well as of this feedback letter.

Answer - The project coordinator and the financial officer from the University of Craiova, as well as the two national coordinators from Ukraine and Kazakhstan have been present in Brussels on September 17th, 2019 - for a very useful meeting with the project officer.

September, 25th, 2019

Project Coordinator

Assoc. Prof. PhD. Anca Bandoi