

REPORT on NCEQE project

In August 2020, the Georgian National Centre for Educational Quality Enhancement (NCEQE) announced a call for an assignment to assist it in developing “**Evaluation criteria and guidelines on online and/or blended teaching and learning** that will guide institutions in maintaining quality of online and/or blended teaching and learning in post-COVID period and/or when resuming studies from the next semester”.

The detail of the call guided the direction of our subsequent report and its recommendations:
“The developed product should...provide guidance to experts and institutions on evaluating institutional strategies to support innovation and online mode of teaching and learning...”

Throughout the world, the COVID-19 pandemic has created challenges at all levels of society; higher education in Georgia is no exception. As in other countries, the shift to online modes of delivery has created immediate challenges and also concerns in relation to the quality of online and blended learning.

This project, initiated by NCEQE with the support of EWMI/USAID was deemed timely; higher education and quality assurance will have to operate in a new context in the future and the project provides an opportunity to step back and think about what that future may look like and what it may hold. Certainly both higher education and its quality assurance must be flexible enough to take account of that new context.

The bid put forward proposed a methodology that could lead to deliverables that were:

- a) Flexible enough to be used in different circumstances and in different approaches;
- b) Provide guidance that will help HEIs demonstrate how they are meeting the criteria, regardless of their institutional approach to delivery;
- c) Will allow NCEQE flexibility in the future if it wishes to develop its EQA methodology for institutional assessment (possibly as a hybrid).

The Consultancy Team

The contract was awarded in September 2020 to the team of consultants formed of Ms Fiona Crozier and Prof Anca Greere, for joint-implementation, and the project commenced in October 2020.

The team of consultants highlighted the benefits of a joint-bid:

- The bid was fully inclusive of the costs of both consultants; the fee paid would cover access to the complementary experience and expertise of both consultants;
- Both consultants have been involved with and have continued access to a wide range of international projects, networks and publications. They, therefore, have a considerable body of expertise and resource on which to draw; some overlapping but also complementary experience.
- Both consultants have experience in working with centralised and fully autonomous HE systems; they understand the Georgian context and its aspirations for the future.
- A joint bid enables discussion between the consultants as they work around a wider range of topics and ideas. NCEQE is presented with a set of deliverables that will have been tested and refined through debate.

Project Timeline

The initial project timeline was delayed by one month, i.e. the contract having been signed on 29 September 2020, with full delivery renegotiated for 30 November 2020.

Activities undertaken

The activities conducted were as follows:

1. Project set-up and review of documentation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Two methodological meetings with NCEQE and EMWI representative set the methodological details• The team conducted a review of documentation as by NCEQE which directly informed the project of the current context in Georgia• The team conducted a wider scanning of the international environment to allow the project to be informed by the European/global perspective;• European documentation as issued by ENQA and the EUA provided a framework for comparison with other countries in the EHEA.• A template for analysis and data collection was developed based on key areas of implementation for online/blended education.
2. Mapping of situation for online/blended teaching and learning with key stakeholders	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Collection of data was conducted through three focus groups representing key Georgian stakeholders: students (14102020), teaching staff (15102020) and senior management (15102020) and senior QA staff (16102020), members of the Internal Quality Assurance Working Group constituted of representatives from a wide range of HEIs.• Detailed PowerPoint presentations supported the four events and allowed for focused discussions on key points through structured interviews.• Multiple polls were run during the focus groups to allow for a quantitative dimension, alongside the qualitative one.• Full notes were collected from the events and provided the platform for analysis of priorities and trends in the Georgian Context.• Regular planned meetings with staff from NCEQE allowed for relevant adjustments to be made.

<p>3. Developing of standards and guidance specific for online/blended higher education in Georgia</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comprehensive analysis of all data collected • Detailed comparison with the Authorisation Standards to allow for a relevant approach to be designed • Drafting of principles for development as context-dependent and culture-sensitive • Drafting of detailed, specific criteria for online/blended education presented as an additional layer to existing authorisation standards. <p>SUBMISSION OF DRAFT DELIVERABLE: 01 November 2020</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feedback received from NCEQE through track changes (05112020) and via a detailed meeting (06112020) • It was agreed that more detailed prescriptive criteria would be beneficial for the HEIs rather than generic descriptors to be implemented at will by HEIs.
<p>4. Disseminating of standards and guidance through online workshops</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NCEQE sent the draft for feedback to various HEIs before the workshops. This allowed for more familiarization with the structure and content. • Two workshops were delivered with NCEQE staff (17112020) and staff of HEIs (18112020). The workshops were supported by a detailed PowerPoint presentation allowing participants to form a fuller opinion about the document. • Following the workshops, the Report was finalised with a view to feedback/reaction received, specifically clarifications were included about the usage options of the document and the steps to be taken cautiously before new legislation was passed to allow for full online delivery. <p>SUBMISSION OF FINAL DELIVERABLE: 30 November 2020</p>

Anticipated Risks

In regards the anticipated risk, we note that we did not encounter any technical problems, we used Zoom throughout and generated links ourselves when we wanted to use the poll feature. Though an interpreter was contracted for one of the focus groups, we ended up not using him as there was no possibility to have simultaneous interpretation via Zoom – however, to compensate for any interpretation needs, NCEQE colleagues summarized the content in Georgian, when necessary.

Final Deliverable

The final report sets out the results of discussions and information gathered during the course of the project. It makes recommendations at an overarching level and at the level of detail of the Georgian national Authorisation Standards. It also proposes some interim steps to be considered in advance of any decision or legislation in relation to online/blended teaching and learning in Georgia.

Lessons learned

There are some elements which we believe could have been improved in the initial requirements for the project, including but not limited to:

- The number of days allocated for the project was exceeded in the actual work. The detailed approach to the criteria proved extremely time-consuming and required comprehensive attention.
- In the design of the data collection, it could have been beneficial to spend more time with the IQA working group or, at least, to have had two separate focus groups with them, using them as a sounding board. We suspect that this may follow in negotiation stages between NCEQE and HEIs.
- The number of days allocated to the project was also insufficient to cover all the details that were uncovered and all the areas that could have been explore. Other related pieces of work can be proposed for NCEQE, if desired.

Potential follow-ups

The specifications of this call were well defined and tightly timed. The task focussed on the ground work for criteria and guidance. However, for the future, the Consultancy Team would like to make the following recommendations in the spirit of facilitating that NCEQE is in a strong position to ensure the project's ongoing success and that HEIs and accreditation experts receive all the details necessary to allow them to operate at institutional but also department/programme level:

Other additional areas warrant attention for follow-ups of this project based on the criteria and guidance proposed in the final deliverable.

1. Adjustment of specific criteria and guidance to highlight elements applicable for Covid-19 response so as to allow for increased quality of online delivery as part of ongoing pandemic solutions

POSSIBLE DELIVERABLE: A distilled document which highlights quality priorities for the current still-Covid situation with focus on what would create most impact in delivering quality closer to online requirements.

2. Facilitation of specific interactions with individual HEIs to determine the priorities at institutional level for the development of online/blended teaching and learning

POSSIBLE DELIVERABLE: A document specifically filtered to allow HEIs to prioritise and achieve more steps to get closer to positioning themselves for online/blended. This could be work with individual institutions or NCEQE.

3. Development of specific external quality assurance methodology to allow for the appropriate usage of the specific criteria and guidance for online/blended teaching and learning. As shown in the report this should be piloted.

POSSIBLE DELIVERABLE: A document which arranges the criteria by level of importance for the piloting phases. These are threshold/minimum standards but they can still be implemented in a staged approach some being more time-consuming than others, and some needing to be there from the very beginning and others maybe not.

POSSIBLE DELIVERABLE: A detailed action plan for agency/ministry/HEIs to take this forward.

4. As part of the pilot, the additional criteria and guidance be monitored for implementation by NCEQE and evaluated by the HE sector with revisions as necessary and also to allow individual HEIs to discuss their own approach to implementation thus providing further case studies to assist with embedding.

POSSIBLE DELIVERABLE: A monitoring methodology for the implementation of additional criteria and guidance for online/blended teaching and learning.

5. For more concrete support to HEIs the criteria and guidance should be extended to include case studies and examples with highlights on priorities and action lines/concrete practices to be considered and adopted depending on context.

POSSIBLE DELIVERABLE: Collection of case studies to support and exemplify the specific criteria and guidelines for online/blended education.

6. For increased relevance, the criteria and guidance should be extended in the future with such details that can be sensitive to and specific for:
 - Bachelor, Master's and PhD levels
 - Programme/Discipline-specific arrangements (e.g laboratory-based, work-based, resource-intensive, arts portfolio) that may need particular nuancing in relation to on-line and blended teaching and learning

POSSIBLE DELIVERABLE: Evaluation criteria and guidance with differentiation by level and educational speciality.

7. Development of a recognition methodology for online/blende education based on the criteria and guidance proposed in the final report.

POSSIBLE DELIVERABLE: Recognition methodology to be used by NCEQE/Ministry.

Having developed already a strong sense of the specificities of the Georgian context in relation to online/blended education, we believe we would be in a favourable position to take forward any of the follow-up options presented above and develop the deliverables indicated. As such, we would be happy to discuss these options with NCEQE, if desired, for future extension to the current project.

Acknowledgements

Finally, we would like to thank all those who assisted us during the project, in particular the staff of EMWI/USAID and NCEQE, the institutional representatives and the students who so willingly gave up their time to talk to us and who engaged in open and interesting debate with us.

30 November 2020

Fiona Crozier and Anca Greere