

**“NATIONAL CENTRE FOR PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION QUALITY ASSURANCE”  
FOUNDATION**



**EXPERT PANEL REPORT  
INSTITUTIONAL ACCREDITATION OF INTERNATIONAL SCIENTIFIC-EDUCATIONAL  
CENTER OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES OF THE REPUBLIC OF ARMENIA**

**Yerevan 2021**

## INTRODUCTION

The institutional accreditation of the International Scientific-Educational Center of the National Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Armenia (hereinafter as ISEC or the Center) was carried out based on the application submitted by the mentioned institution.

The process of the institutional accreditation was organized and coordinated by the National Center for Professional Education Quality Assurance Foundation (ANQA), guided by the regulation on “State Accreditation of RA Institutions and their Academic Programs” set by the RA Government decision N 978-N as of 30 June 2011 in as well as by the decision N 959-N as of 30 June 2011 on Approval of RA Standards for Professional Education Accreditation.

The expertise was carried out by the independent expert panel formed according to the requirements of the ANQA regulation on “Formation of the Expert Panel”. The expert panel consisted of 4 local experts and 1 international expert.

The institutional accreditation is aimed not only at the external evaluation of quality assurance but also the continuous improvement of quality of the Center's governance and academic programs. Hence, two issues were put forward to the experts:

- 1) to carry out an expertise of institutional capacities in accordance with the RA standards for state accreditation;
- 2) to carry out expert evaluation from the perspectives of compliance with international standards and the Center's ambitions to integrate into the European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

This report reflects on the results of the expertise of the ISEC's institutional capacities in accordance with the RA state accreditation criteria and with the international expert's peer-review observations from the perspective of the Center's integration into the EHEA.

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## SUMMARY OF EVALUATION

### EVALUATION OF INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITIES ACCORDING TO ACCREDITATION CRITERIA

The expertise of the ISEC's institutional capacities was carried out by the independent expert panel<sup>1</sup> which was compiled according to the requirements set by the ANQA regulation on “Formation of the Expert Panel”. The evaluation was carried out according to the 10 criteria for state accreditation, approved by the RA Government decision N 959–N as of 30 June 2011.

In the evaluation the expert panel took into consideration the fact that the ISEC is an independent scientific educational institution of the system of the National Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Armenia (hereinafter as the RA NAS or the Academy) and it has a status of the institution of the RA NAS. The mission of ISEC is to prepare specialists in compliance with current scientific, educational and economic requirements, conditioned by the state and private needs in the field of education development within the scope of strategic plans by means of application of modern innovative technologies.

The main objectives of ISEC are as follows:

- a) preparation of highly qualified specialists, scientific-pedagogical staff, training of specialists with higher education and enhancement of their qualification;
- b) implementation of scientific, teaching-methodological and scientific-pedagogical research activities in different fields of science;
- c) improvement of the content of education on the basis of integration of education and science, development and establishment of systems of specializations and specialties.

In accordance with the set objectives, the Center provides postgraduate professional education with Postgraduate, Researcher, PhD Applicant and Doctoral academic programs, as well as higher professional education, including paid Master's (MA) degree academic programs, by using full-time, part-time and distance learning modes.

In 2016 the ISEC underwent institutional accreditation process as a result of which it was awarded with institutional accreditation for 4 years in 2017.

The Center made a plan on implementation of shortcomings taking into consideration the recommendations provided in the expert panel report. In 2018 the ISEC submitted an interim report on performance of the action plan on solution of identified problems and improvement of processes to ANQA. The latter made mid-term monitorings of the plan on elimination of shortcomings.

Since its previous accreditation the Center has taken steps to develop and invest outcome-based academic programs. The chairs reviewed and improved the academic programs and their expected learning outcomes (LOs). The goals of academic programs are interrelated with the priorities and research directions of the RA NAS. Benchmarking was conducted with international and local partner universities with the aim to modernize the academic programs and to foster mobility of students and teachers.

However, the application of mechanisms of best practice dissemination will also enable to make that practice widely applicable to all ICEC chairs by ensuring the training of highly qualified

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<sup>1</sup>APPENDIX 1. CVs of expert panel members

specialists, scholars and scientific-pedagogical staff as defined by the ISEC Strategic Plan (SP). In this context, ISEC should focus on the MA admission of the Center from different Bachelor's (BA) specializations by ensuring the envisaged outcomes of academic programs.

The academic programs are implemented by the teaching staff having respective qualifications, scientific and pedagogical experience, by also involving human and material resources of the ISEC's institutes. The Center also needs to pay due attention to the expansion of training opportunities for teaching staff, not limited by trainings organized by the ISEC institutes. In order to achieve the outcomes of its academic programs, the ISEC is also provided with appropriate material and technical base. The application of material and technical resources of the ISEC institutes is an additional opportunity, including the possibility to use the basic library of the Center for the teaching staff and students. In recent years the resources have been modernized and enhanced through international projects in which the ISEC participates, which provides an additional opportunity for students to develop practical skills.

Taking into account the fact that ISEC has taken steps to improve the outcomes of academic programs, recruits respective qualified teachers and continuously improves the infrastructure and resources, it can be concluded that the Center mainly ensures credible qualification awarding.

Based on the statutory goals of the Center, the ISEC has developed the SP 2019-2023 which reflects the Center's mission, vision, main directions of its activities, fundamental values and priorities. The Center uses the data obtained through feedback from its internal and external stakeholders in its strategic planning processes. However, there is a need to use the data in the evaluation, analysis of the SP and further improvement processes by using the PDCA cycle of quality management. After its previous accreditation, the ISEC has undertaken the commitment to analyze and assess the compliance of its structure with the SP goals, as well as the effectiveness of the management system, but the imperfections of the indicators for comprehensive assessment hindered the realization of the mentioned plan.

Taking into consideration the peculiarities of the ISEC's organizational structure, the Center needs to regulate its decision-making processes based on the data collected by the quality assurance (QA) system to avoid situational management. This may also impede the continuous improvement of academic programs, and although the QA mechanisms have been diversified and involved a wider scope of stakeholders, the analytical component is still poorly reflected in the above-mentioned analyses.

Hence, it should be noted that after the previous accreditation the strategic planning processes have been regulated, however, there is a need to institutionalize management processes, improve the mechanisms of unified cooperation and accountability among different chairs and institutes. The expert panel finds it important to ensure managerial decisions based on data collected by the QA system in order to foster the increase of efficiency of the management system. The ISEC has taken steps to improve the services provided to students. It has diversified the admission mechanisms, has invested an electronic system of admission. The Center has mechanisms for identifying students' needs (surveys, focus group discussions). Besides, the results of the site visit state that the MA graduates of the Center are generally satisfied with the provided services and, upon necessary, the administrative staff is also ready to support students to solve their problems.

The students are involved in the Center's scientific research activities by preparing MA theses, conducting joint research with teachers. The ISEC has defined research priorities by making

attempts to interconnect them with the directions of its institutes. However, it should be noted that the level of student involvement in research varies by chairs. Some chairs of the ISEC cooperate with European universities, carry out research projects, but this is not institutionalized yet.

With the aim to develop its external relations and be involved in international projects, the ISEC has done considerable work to expand, develop and internationalize its external relations. The Center expanded its international cooperation in 2016 by launching an exchange of students and teaching staff within the framework of the Erasmus+ KA1 project. Currently there are 8 exchange projects, and within the scope of different programs, the ISEC has cooperated with more than 40 foreign universities and scientific-educational institutions. The benchmarking of academic programs has also been an additional trigger for the implementation of mobility projects, but, in this regard, there is a need to institutionalize these processes and to apply the mechanisms of adopting best practice. The Center also makes continuous efforts to enhance foreign language skills of its internal stakeholders by organizing various courses for teachers and students.

Taking into account the recommendations provided as a result of the previous accreditation, the ISEC has also improved the accountability mechanisms, has made its processes more transparent by providing information in different sections of its website. Taking into consideration the tendencies of internationalization, the Center should also highlight the importance to ensure the accessibility of academic programs and current processes to international foreign language stakeholders in a transparent way.

Hence, the expert panel finds that the ISEC takes steps to ensure its long-term development by continuously improving the services provided to students, by establishing new collaboration and by developing the mechanisms of accountability and transparency.

### **Strengths of the Institution**

1. Availability of strategic planning mechanisms and involvement of internal and external stakeholders in the mentioned process.
2. Investment of tools directed to the development of outcome-based academic programs, existence of best practice of benchmarking in some chairs.
3. Existence of procedures relating the monitoring of academic programs, its impact on the mobility.
4. Conduction of activities directed to the identification of students' academic needs.
5. Efforts taken by the ISEC towards establishment of educational and research links.
6. Availability of teaching staff having respective professional qualities.
7. Existence of the research environment.
8. Joint application of the RA NAS' resources aimed at formulation of practical skills of students.
9. Application of mechanisms for ensuring accountability.
10. Continuous expansion of cooperation with the RA and international organizations.
11. Diversity of QA policy, procedures, mechanisms and toolset for identifying needs.

### **Weaknesses of the Institution**

1. Imperfection of the toolset of evaluation and revision of the SP.
2. Gap between the SP and mid-term and short-term planning.
3. Incomplete application of the PDCA cycle of quality management in the governance processes.

4. Incomplete mechanisms of human resource (HR) management, recruitment and retention of competitive specialists.
5. Lack of evaluation of efficiency of financial long-term planning and made expenses.
6. Absence of invested mechanisms of teachers' self-evaluation and peer-review.
7. Lack of professional trainings to be followed by teaching staff evaluations.
8. Imperfection of mechanisms of dissemination of best practice due to international cooperation at the level of all chairs of the ISEC.
9. Descriptive character of the ISEC's reports.
10. Lack of consideration of data collected by the QA system as a basis for the decision making.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **1. Mission and Purposes**

1. To revise some of the ambitions of the Center and to reformulate them based on the analysis of the ISEC's comparative advantages, available human capital and material resources.
2. To base the strategic planning on the state priorities and feasible, documented analysis of the market and NQF descriptors.
3. To make the key performance indicators (KPIs) of the strategic planning more realistic and measurable, to ensure the visible link among the indicators and the goals, objectives and actions.
4. To ensure the analytic nature of reports directed to the evaluation of the mission and goals.

### **2. Governance and Administration**

5. To make professional analysis of the Center's governance system by making comparative studies of the practice of local and foreign higher education institutions (HEIs) functioning efficient governance systems as well as by identifying ad-hoc problems and gaps of the sphere of governance.
6. To implement complex policy of HR attraction, recruitment, retention and development.
7. To develop and take activities aimed at dissemination of best practice at the ISEC.
8. To implement long-term, mid-term and short-term planning processes at the levels of both the central governance of the ISEC and its structural units.
9. To enhance the system of data collection and analysis by serving it as a basis for the decision making.
10. To ensure the availability of information on graduates' career and advancement on the Center's website and other information platforms.

### **3. Academic Programs**

11. To promote external stakeholders' involvement in the processes of development, implementation and monitoring of academic programs.
12. To improve academic problems by involving detailed and measurable outcomes at the level of syllabi, teaching and learning methods as well as assignments for students.
13. To revise the ISEC's procedures of MA admission of graduates from different HEIs and having different professional backgrounds (especially in case of specializations of Natural and Technical Sciences).

14. To replenish the lack of knowledge and competences that are necessary for the MA education by means of selective or additional separate courses, thus fostering the formulation of students' research and analytical competences.
15. To evaluate the effectiveness of changes made as a result of benchmarking and monitoring of academic programs, to disseminate the best practice in all directions.

#### **4. Students**

16. To observe the opportunities of joint application of resources of the RA NAS and the ISEC from the perspectives of involving students in research activities at the levels of all academic programs.
17. To improve the services fostering career in terms of ensuring wider scope of involvement of employers and reinforcing of the ISEC-employer link in all directions of the Center.
18. To improve the activities taken by the Student Council from the perspectives of involving more students and carrying out activities directed to the identification of students' needs and protection of their rights.

#### **5. Faculty and Staff**

19. To set requirements for teachers' professional knowledge, skills and competences in the academic programs.
20. To ensure the process of teacher evaluation by students and graduates through the complete chain of the PDCA cycle and in a documented way.
21. To identify some good cases regarding teachers' self-evaluation and peer-review (e.g. the case of the Chair of Foreign Languages), their professional development and organization of mobility, to adapt them in other chairs.
22. To set standards reflecting the output-competences of teachers in the processes of their selection and qualification enhancement.

#### **6. Research and Development**

23. To make the bonuses for scientific publications competitive as compared with those paid by the RA NAS institutes and centers in order to motivate teachers to represent themselves as teachers of the ISEC.
24. To develop efficient mechanisms to stimulate joint scientific publications authored teachers and students, in particular, to organize inter-chair seminars and conferences by involving students and teachers to jointly make reports.
25. To take additional steps towards fostering international research projects to apply mechanisms for disseminating current best practice in different chairs.
26. To encourage students to make group research activities.

#### **7. Infrastructure and Resources**

27. To make fundraising activities to activate different projects and research by order.
28. To improve the policy of financial distribution by aiming it to the implementation of goals set by the SP and academic programs.

## **8. Societal Responsibility**

29. To improve the reports by making the analysis of progress more targeted in accordance with the strategic goals.
30. To improve the ISEC's website in order to ensure the involvement of international students.
31. To carry out activities to make the academic programs attractive in social networks.
32. To enhance the mechanisms of information dissemination in order to ensure the availability of information relating the activities organized for the dissemination of knowledge among the society.

## **9. External Relations and Internationalization**

33. To develop the external relations in a centralized way and to encourage less active chairs to follow the examples of the chairs which are most active in the field of internationalization.
34. To allocate financial support to the chairs that ensure highest number of students and teachers involved in international exchange programs.
35. To activate the launch of joint qualification awarding in cooperation with non-Armenian universities (French, Slavonic and American Universities) functioning in Yerevan and to expand the scope of real opportunities for the development of international relations.
36. To develop one full program in a foreign language (not only elaboration of documents but also implementation of courses), thus increasing the international visibility of the ISEC and involving more students from abroad through ERASMUS+ exchange projects.

## **10. Internal Quality Assurance System**

37. To revise the load of responsible members involved in the quality management processes by avoiding to put extra responsibilities onto those having significant administrative load.
38. To improve the mechanisms of the ISEC's data collection and analysis by highlighting the component of qualitative analyses.
39. To revise the QA Manual, taking into consideration the current challenges.
40. To ensure the functioning of the PDCA cycle in the processes relating all the spheres of the ISEC, to improve the mechanisms of evaluation of the processes.
41. To take steps towards improving the mechanisms of putting forward and disseminating best practice at different ISEC chairs/institutes, to increase the role of the QA Center in this direction.

**Date: 30 December 2021**

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**Menua Soghomonyan**

**Signature of the Head of expert panel**

## PEER-REVIEW FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF EDUCATION INSTITUTION'S INTEGRATION INTO EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION AREA

### Observations

Before listing the various observation, I would like to emphasize, as international and external expert, the great quality and the fine atmosphere of the visit, even by a “Zoom” link. During these days, I had the opportunity to have direct contacts to the various stakeholders (employees, Director and vice-directors, students, Alumni, representatives of the different groups...) and in-deep discussion to enlighten the points that needed to be completed after the reading of the documents. Altogether, and after a long discussion with the internal experts and local colleagues, it appears that ISEC have made important efforts to increase the quality of items pointed out during the previous visit. This has to be highlighted and acknowledged as the underlined progresses needed many resources to achieve resolving these points. ISEC's name contains fundamental points: “research” and “education” and, linking both words, “international” could be considered as the third part of the tripod. Solely based on that, ISEC should be the most valuable place in Armenia to study and to achieve the highest level in order to give all the students the possibility to become the future of the country. However, there are some discrepancies between the ambition of ISEC, the possibilities given by the trustees, and what is observed by external reviewers.

In order to be fully integrated to the European Higher Education Area (and thus the Bologna process), observations and points of attention are listed below, and followed by concrete recommendations to help ISEC for bypassing the points.

#### 1. Structural organization

While ISEC has a clear mission in order to give the best chance of the students to have a high qualified job after their graduation, its structural organization makes difficult

- to establish contacts with various “independent” chairs;
- to make well developed Q&A analysis for the programs;
- to have the possibility to develop a high internationalization process;
- to take quickly long-term planning decisions;
- to collect the data for Q&A;

Altogether, ISEC lacks a central governance with a “real power of guidance”, which makes difficult for ISEC to exist as a real institute of education and research. This impedes ISEC to have its own policy of development.

#### *Recommendations:*

1. to create a body allowing a larger space to external stakeholders (private companies, banks, pharmaceutical companies...) This could give more visibility for ISEC graduated students and thus a better employability;
2. to reorganize the governance of ISEC, making it stronger, more centralized and less dependent on NAS;
3. To give the director a real role of management for allowing a long-term vision;

## **2. Research**

ISEC describes “research” as one part of the tryptic for allowing the best employability of the graduated students, as the majority of European Universities of the top level. Research is thus encouraged however only highly motivated students try doing true research work. Booking one or two weeks per semester will obviously imply decreasing the amount of “top-down” teachings. Practical courses cannot be equivalent to research practice, it is only the basis to understand how to practice research. True “doctoral schools” are not present.

### *Recommendations:*

1. To promote research by dedicating a mandatory period of time for all students, and not only a summer school, where only volunteers could attend;
2. To devote research development to a central body of ISEC instead of the chairs or the departments;
3. To develop the link between research and private companies by favoring PhD research programs with co-tutorships between ISEC and private stake holders.
4. To promote the links between the research activity and the Armenian society by frequently presenting the work performed to a wide audience.

## **3. Internationalization**

International relationship department does its best to promote international exchange. However, the organization in strong chairs and strong departments makes difficult to have a strong policy on this subject. The results is that the number of exchanges (students and teachers) is really low and does not fit with ISEC’s ambition

### *Recommendations:*

1. To develop a centralized organization for the international relationship and to encourage the less active departments to take example of chairs being the most active in IR;
2. To attribute incentive money to the chairs that enroll the most students/staff in international exchanges;
3. To accelerate the establishment of the joint-degrees with the non-Armenian speaking universities (UFAR, Slavonic and American) located in Yerevan, a real opportunity to develop an international network;
4. To develop an entire program (not only giving the documents but also giving the class) in a foreign language. This would also increase the international visibility of ISEC by recruiting more students from abroad through an Erasmus exchange.

## DESCRIPTION OF EXTERNAL REVIEW

### COMPOSITION OF EXPERT PANEL

The external evaluation of the ISEC was carried out by the following expert panel:

1. **Menua Sghomoyan** – PhD in Historical Sciences, Associate Professor of the Chair of Political Institutes and Processes at Yerevan State University, Armenia.
2. **Jean Marc Lobaccaro** – Professor of Molecular Physiology, Dean of the Faculty of Biology of the Institute of Genetics, Reproduction and Development at Clermont Auvergne University, France.
3. **Sona Tonikyan** – PhD in Philological Sciences, Associate Professor of the Chair of Arabic Studies of the Faculty of Oriental Studies at Yerevan State University, Armenia.
4. **Varazdat Avetisyan** – PhD in Technical Sciences, Head of the Chair of Informatics and Physical & Mathematical Sciences at Gavar State University, Teacher of the Center of Teacher Training and Continuing Education at National Polytechnic University of Armenia, Armenia.
5. **Sona Antonyan** – MA Graduate of "Organization of Education" MA program at Yerevan State University, PhD Student of Russian-Armenian University, Armenia.

The composition of the expert panel was agreed upon with the Center and was appointed by the decision of the ANQA Director.

The activities of the expert panel were coordinated by Meri Barseghyan, Specialist at the ANQA Division of Policy Development and Implementation.

The translation was provided by Ani Shahinyan, teacher of Brusov State University.

All the members of the expert panel, the coordinator and the translator signed declarations of confidentiality and exception of conflict of interests.

### PROCESS OF THE EXTERNAL REVIEW

#### Application for State Accreditation

GSU applied to ANQA for institutional accreditation by submitting the application form, the copies of the license and respective appendices.

The ANQA Secretariat examined the data presented in the application form and the attached documents. After making decision on submission of the application, a bilateral agreement between ANQA and the Center was signed. The time-schedule of activities was compiled and approved.

#### Self-Evaluation

Within the set deadlines and according to the form set by the ANQA, the Center submitted its self-evaluation report (hereinafter as SER) in Armenian and English and the package of attached documents.

The SER of the Center was made by the work group which was particularly compiled for the self-evaluation. The work group involved members of the Center's administrative, academic, teaching and support staff as well as students.

ANQA examined the report to check its technical compliance with the ANQA requirements. The SER of the Center was not compliant with the defined unified form; there were technical and content related shortcomings. The SER was returned to the Center which, within the set deadlines,

eliminated the shortcomings and made the report in compliance with the ANQA form. The mentioned report was submitted to ANQA on 27.05.2021. Afterwards, the SER, the package of attached documents as well as the electronic questionnaire filled in by the Center were provided to the expert panel the composition of which was agreed upon with the ISEC in advance and was approved by the order of the ANQA Director.

### **Preparatory Phase**

In order to train the expert panel for the upcoming activities and to ensure the efficiency of processes, ANQA conducted 4 trainings on the following topics:

1. main functions of expert panel members,
2. preliminary evaluation as a preparatory phase of the expert panel report, as well as the main requirements set for the report,
3. methodology of examination of documents and resources,
4. ethics and techniques of conducting meetings and inquiries.

Having observed the SER and the package of attached documents of the ISEC, the expert panel made a preliminary evaluation according to the set form by also preparing the list of necessary documents for additional review as well as questions and issues for clarification by also mentioning respective structural units or target groups.

During the preliminary evaluation the members of the expert panel also made observation of the ISEC's resources of infrastructures of the ISEC as well as those of the ISEC which were in the RA NAS institutes and center. The international expert observed them by means of videos which were prepared by the Center.

Within the planned deadlines the expert panel summed up the preliminary evaluation results and compiled a time-schedule for the site visit<sup>2</sup>.

In accordance with the ANQA manual on expertise, the time-schedule comprised planned meetings with all the groups, close and open meetings, review of documents, etc.

### **Preparatory visit**

On 8 September 2021 a preparatory visit was made at the ISEC. During the visit the time-schedule of the site visit was discussed and agreed upon with the Center, the list of additional documents for further examination was presented, the organizational, technical and informational issues, the ethical norms relating the meetings discussed and respective mutually agreed decisions were made. The conditions for focus group meetings and the activity of the expert panel were discussed.

### **Site Visit**

The site visit was made in the period of 13-16 September 2021. According to the time-schedule, the activities of the site visit launched with the closed meeting with the aim to have a discussion with the international expert and to come to an agreement on the frame of the expertise, on the issues subject to examination during the site visit, the Center's strong and weak points per criteria, the procedure of focus groups meetings as well as to clarify further steps. All the members of

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<sup>2</sup> APPENDIX 2. Time-schedule of site visit

the expert panel, the coordinator and the translator participated in the site visit. The international expert joined the site visit and discussions online – through the ZOOM platform.

The site visit launched by the meeting with the ISEC Director and completed by the meetings with the ISEC leadership. All the meetings planned by the time-schedule were held. The expert panel also made a review of documents<sup>3</sup>. In the closed meeting of the expert panel held at the end of each working day of the site visit, the interim results of evaluation were put forward, and the main results of the site visit were summed by the closed discussion upon the end of the site visit.

The expertise was made within the framework of the state accreditation criteria and standards as well as ANQA procedures according to which the evaluation has two levels – satisfactory/meets and unsatisfactory/does not meet.

### **Expert Panel Report**

The expert panel made a preliminary evaluation based on the electronic questionnaire filled in by the ISEC, the SER, results of observation of attached documents, online class observations and the site visit observations as a result of regularly organized meetings. Based on the observations made after discussions, the expert panel and the ANQA coordinator prepared the draft of the expert panel report.

The international expert also prepared a separate opinion on the peer-review. The documents were translated and provided to the expert panel. The opinion of the peer-review opinion was fully integrated into the report. The draft report of the expert panel was provided to the Center on 29.11.2021.

The ISEC sent its feedback on the draft of the expert panel report to ANQA on 15.12.2021. The ANQA provided the ISEC's observations to the experts. On 22.12.2021 the ANQA organized an online meeting for the Center and the expert panel, during which the provided observations on the draft of the expert panel report were discussed.

Taking into consideration the observations of the ISEC, the expert panel compiled the final expert panel report which was approved by the expert panel on 30.12.2021.

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**Meri Barseghyan**

**Signature of the Coordinator**

**30 December 2021**

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<sup>3</sup> APPENDIX 3. List of reviewed documents

## BRIEF INFORMATION ABOUT THE EDUCATION INSTITUTION

### **1. History**

In 1997 the International Scientific-Educational Center (ISEC) of the RA NAS was established based on the PhD Division which functioned in the system of the NAS. The goal of the activity of the ISEC was to train high quality scientific-pedagogical specialists based on the RA NAS material-technical base through the implementation of Postgraduate, PhD and Doctorate studies.

In 2004, taking into consideration the rich scientific potential and the international standards set for professional education, the ISEC of the RA NAS expanded the scope of its activities by organizing education with MA academic programs. The mentioned was aimed at acceleration of the transition from education to the scientific activity.

### **2. Education**

The mission of the ISEC of the RA NAS is to prepare specialists in compliance with current scientific, educational and economic requirements, conditioned by the state and private needs in the field of education development within the scope of strategic plans by means of application of modern innovative technologies. The Center implements higher professional (Master's Degree) and postgraduate (PhD) academic programs in accordance with the RA legislation.

### **3. Research**

The predominance of scientism of education and research component are highlighted at the Center, based on the crucial fact that the ISEC chairs function in the research institutes and scientific organizations of the RA NAS. The mentioned important statement gives an opportunity to the Center's MA and PhD students to be in a professional academic environment during their learning experience, to work with world-known scientists while implementing educational and scientific projects and research activities, to make use of necessary material and technical base of the RA NAS organizations as well as to apply their available toolset.

### **4. Internationalization:**

The main and most important goal of the ISEC's internationalization is to ensure complex development of MA, PhD students and staff members in the educational, scientific and professional life of the Center; to become an exceptional international scientific-educational center by involving the citizens, namely MA, PhD students and applicants and teachers of both Armenia and other countries; to continuously develop cooperation links with foreign leading HEIs and scientific-educational centers; to increase its international recognition in compliance with its ranking and reputation through firm and stable steps.

### **5. Quality Assurance:**

According to the Center, the quality of education is viewed not only as a strategic goal aimed at formation of knowledge-based society and provision of high-quality educational services but also as a strategic means under conditions of internal and external factors and in the competitive field which is directed to the development of the Center's activity in the international arena. The quality

of education is the compliance of provided educational services with the ISEC's mission and the adopted SP.

The Center gives importance to the formation and provision of academic programs and educational services which are formed to meet the societal needs at both national and international levels by means of prediction of changes in requirements of the society and economy in Armenia and beyond.

*Source: sources for the identification of facts in the above-mentioned fields are the documents provided by the Center (e.g. self-evaluation report, strategic plan, action plan, plans of the departments, concept papers, etc.)*

## EVALUATION ACCORDING TO ACCREDITATION CRITERIA

### I. MISSION AND PURPOSES

**CRITERION: The policies and procedures of the institution are in accordance with the institution's mission which is in line with ANQF.**

#### FINDINGS

**1.1. The institution has a clear, well-articulated mission that represents the Institution's purposes and goals and is in accordance with National Qualifications Framework (hereafter NQF).**

The mission of the ISEC is stipulated in its SP 2019-2023. According to the SP, the ISEC mission, among others, includes the preparation and training of specialists who will be in compliance with the current requirements set in the fields of science, education and economy, by the application of modern innovative technologies; the internationalization of education and assurance of competitiveness; the investment of innovation in the spheres of scientific research and social services; the implementation of the scientific-educational process directed to the improvement of active civic and social life; the professional development and lifelong learning.

According to the SP, the important component of the Center's mission is the preparation of MA and PhD graduates in line with the current requirements of the labor market, which shows that the mentioned mission assumes an activity which is in compliance with the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> levels of the RA NQF. In terms of qualitative compliance of the Center's mission and goals with the descriptors of the mentioned levels of the RA NQF, the following circumstances, at least formally, state about the compliance:

- The point reflecting the labor market requirements is referred to in the Center's mission, vision and goal-oriented actions for several times which complies with the following descriptor of the NQF 7<sup>th</sup> level: "advanced professional knowledge... which is used in learning, research and working activities".
- The requirement defined by the same descriptor - the knowledge should be applied in research, is reflected in the ISEC's strategic provisions which relate to the preparation of scholars (whose function is to make research) for the RA NAS.
- The SP of the Center refers to the NQF: the 1<sup>st</sup> action of the 2<sup>nd</sup> guideline (Educational-scientific activity) of the SP contains the following: "implementation of academic and research professional programs taking into account the prospective development visions of the country and ensuring their compliance with the National and Sectorial Qualifications Frameworks".

Another statement relating the linkage between the ISEC's activity and the NQF worth mentioning is that the RA NAS institutes participate in the process of defining Sectorial Qualifications Frameworks.

It should be noted that the ISEC SP is obviously not based on the state priorities, analysis of the NQF requirements and other fundamental documents. The expert panel itself identifies such methodical links by stating the absence of analyses related to them. Hence, after the adoption of the SP the above-mentioned commitment (to take into account the prospective development vision of the country) was not fulfilled in a coordinated way by the Center.

The vision of the Center which is also stipulated in the SP, contains ambitions having 18 provisions which differ from each other both in terms of emphases on the given ambitions, the time measurements of set goals as well the achievability. In particular, in the provisions reflecting the vision there are some statements (e.g. “tries to sign local and international contracts in compliance with its name...”, “is available especially for the youth who have stepped into the science, and it provides wide scope of opportunities to different layers of the society”) that are formulations stating current realms and current processes rather than reflecting any vision. On the other hand, the vision is reflected in such too ambitious provisions as, e.g., “to become an exceptional international scientific-educational center by involving the citizens, namely MA, PhD students and applicants and teachers of both Armenia and other countries”, “plays a significant role in the national and regional innovative programs of economic development”. In case it is taken into consideration that suchlike ambitions are formulated in certain time periods, in this case – up to 2023, as well as taking into account the development tempos of the Center, on the other hand, it becomes clear that the ambitions are based on kind wishes rather than on rational evaluations.

Although the ISEC upholds the ambition to become an exceptional international scientific-educational center, the mentioned ambition is not adapted to the actions of some related guidelines set in its SP. For example, the mentioned ambition is not visibly reflected in the actions formulated under the 1<sup>st</sup> guideline of the SP - “Assurance of learners’ qualitative and quantitative increase”; it is not clear what strategic steps the Center has planned in the direction of involvement of foreign students. And the actions formulated under the 8<sup>th</sup> guideline of the SP – “International cooperation” either do not reflect the aforementioned ambition or are not fulfilled, judging by the by the internationalization indicators the Center has registered so far. For example, in terms of the action on “Continuous assurance of the process of implementation of joint academic programs in cooperation with foreign research universities” it should be mentioned that the Center hasn’t fulfilled any suchlike activity, namely, implementation of a fully joint academic program in collaboration with any foreign research university, so far. The component of the application of the action on “Development, piloting and application of courses in foreign languages in distance mode” is not carried out.

From the study of the Center’s academic programs, the way it passed through, as well as from the review of the documents and the site visit, it became clear that the content of the Center’s mission actually has two main parts- one refers to the training of scholars/research staff for the RA NAS’ institutes and centers (it mainly refers to the academic programs that are implemented on the basis of the infrastructure of the RA NAS’ institutes and centers, are mostly served by the researchers of the RA NAS), and the other refers to the training of specialists having practical skills for the labor market (this mainly relates to the academic programs that are carried out in the chairs established within the ISEC, e.g. the chairs of Law, Psychology and others), and in some cases - again in the chairs that are based on the infrastructure of the RA NAS’ institutes and centers).

The review of the documents showed that the annual plans of the ISEC are not so much derived from the strategic plan as from the annual operation plans that have been formed by tradition. It became clear from the site visit that the ISEC lacks human resources who would be able to skillfully organize strategic planning and implementation processes in the Center.

## **1.2. The mission statement, goals and objectives of the Institution reflects the needs of the internal and external stakeholders.**

Based on the recommendations provided by the previous expert panel, the Center planned to activate the participation of stakeholders (especially alumni) in the processes of development, implementation, evaluation, and improvement of the ISEC's Center's mission, goals and objectives in its improvement plan. As the review of the documents and the site visit revealed, the fulfillment of this commitment, even partially, mainly relates to the development component, and the cycles of implementation, evaluation and improvement have not been closed. Particularly, it is obvious that the internal stakeholders (the ISEC considers its internal stakeholders to be the students, teaching and administrative staff) were involved in the development of the SP. And the applicants, graduates/alumni, employers, government bodies, local and international partners are external stakeholders. The situation is somehow special in terms of the fact that some of the alumni and the RA NAS Presidency are considered to be external stakeholders of the Center; it became clear from the site visit that the RA NAS Presidency is not functionally the same body as the Boards/Boards of Trustees for public universities.

The alumni who are employed as researchers in the structure of the RA NAS, are not thus automatically become external stakeholders of the Center, taking into account the convergent state/overlap of many functions of the Center and the RA NAS. According to the ISEC SP 2019-2023, the mentioned document was developed with the active participation of the structural subdivisions of the ISEC, taking into consideration the results of the analysis of current issues and processes of the multi-sphere professional education field as well as those of internal and external stakeholders of the Center.

It is obvious that the Center organizes meetings and discussions with employers and alumni. As a rule, these meetings provide feedback on the Center's academic programs. Meanwhile, the Center's reports do not contain any information on the discussions about the Center's mission, goals, objectives with internal and especially external stakeholders. Besides, it should be noted that the ISEC's strategic planning includes data which have been extracted from student and alumni surveys and interviews, as well as from the meetings with employers, however, there is no documented analysis that would reflect the links between those data and strategic planning of the Center.

The same can be stated about the following fact; in May 2020 the ISEC established a system of KPIs for the evaluation of results of the implementation of its mission, strategic goals and objectives. The system was developed by the work group which consisted of the Center's staff, students and other stakeholders. However, the reports of the ISEC do not contain any facts about the attainment of the KPIs. The expert panel didn't register any facts on the existence of self-analysis of stakeholders' participation in the revision, evaluation and improvement of the KPIs system.

## **1.3. The Institution has set mechanisms and procedures to evaluate the achievement of its mission and goals and further improve them.**

There are mainly three mechanisms of evaluation and improvement of results of the implementation of the ISEC's mission and goals:

1. reports (annual reports submitted to the RA NAS Presidency as well as the reports of the ISEC structural units submitted to the Center's Scientific Council),

2. system of KPIs evaluating the results of implementation of the ISEC's mission, strategic goals and objectives,
3. internal informal communication on implementation of strategic actions and their efficiency.

The ISEC functions bottom-top accountability system. The structural units of the Center (those which do not function on the basis of the infrastructure of the RA NAS institutes and centers) and administrative units submit report to the ISEC Scientific Council, and the ISEC Director submits annual reports to the RA NAS Presidency. Taking into consideration the peculiarity of the ISEC's structure and governance system, the accountability of chairs based on the infrastructure of the RA NAS institutes and centers is made within the frames of the procedure on accountability provided to the RA NAS Presidency by the RA NAS institutes and centers. Although the Center's reports contain facts reflecting the performance of activities set within the scope of the ISEC SP guidelines, those reports are compiled in the logic of enumeration and description, and the analytical component can hardly be observed. For instance, it is not evaluated to what extent the reached achievements derive from the logic of planning, why the planned for the given year actions were not taken, in what areas the Center had shortcomings and what objective reasons hindered, etc.

It must be mentioned that the ISEC SP is not structured on a goal-objective-action logic, instead, the mission and vision defined in the SP have too long formulations and contain narratives reflecting goals, and the actions are grouped in accordance with the directions of the Center's activity. In any case, those directions (formulated as guidelines in the SP) are not presented in the formulation that would reflect goals. On the other hand, there is no any plan-schedule that would derive from the SP actions, instead, the Center considers that the improvement plan based on the recommendations provided by the previous accreditation expert panel to be such a plan-schedule.

As it was mentioned above, in May 2020 the ISEC established a system of KPIs for the evaluation of results of the implementation of its mission, strategic goals and objectives. It's worth mentioning that those KPIs are not formulated in accordance with the SP actions and the structure of guidelines which generalize them. Moreover, some of them are neither specific or clear (e.g. "participation in the Center's research projects, including scientific and pedagogical staff, postgraduate/PhD and MA students", "international conferences, scientific periodicals, cooperation programs, involvement in scientific topics", " growth rates of average monthly salary of the Center's staff", etc.); in suchlike formulations the KPIs do not indicate what problems are set against the Center to solve.

The analysis of achievement of the KPIs is missing in the reports or other separate documents. There is no information, especially any analysis on the revision, evaluation and improvement of the KPIs system probably because of the fact that only a year and a half has passed since their adoption. Thus, it becomes clear that the PDCA cycle of the processes through which the Center evaluates the results of the implementation of its mission and goals is not closed.

## **CONSIDERATIONS**

The expert panel evaluates it positive that the ISEC gives importance to the strategic planning and links its mission with the NQF. The fact that the Center involves all the directions of its activity (formulated as guidelines) in its development strategic plan (SP) and formulates respective actions under them gives the Center an opportunity to have a wider and full picture of its activity. At the same time, the Center has undertaken such ambitions that are not compliant with the quality of its

human capital and material resources and especially that of governance, which makes it difficult to make strategy-based and prospective evaluation of the Center's activity. Hence, the ISEC will be in a more beneficial position if it makes realistic evaluation of its ambition to become an exceptional international educational-scientific center in the next five-year strategic planning process. This should particularly be taken into consideration as far as in the current strategy the direction of internationalization is not compliant with the mentioned ambition and with the name of the Center, and the significant part of planned activities hasn't been fulfilled, and the reasons are not analyzed.

The expert panel finds it positive that the scientists who directly deal with the ISEC, i.e. representatives of the RA NAS institutes, participate in the process of formation of the NQF, considering it as a possibility to visually link the Center's mission and goals with the NQF. However, the absence of analyses relating the state priorities, labor market requirements and the links with the descriptors of the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> levels of the NQF makes the methodical base of the Center's strategic planning less valid.

According to the expert panel, the data extracted from the feedback received from activities that the ISEC's organizes for its internal and external stakeholders are applied in the strategic planning processes, and this is evaluated positively. On the other hand, taking into account the fact that the results of those activities (surveys, focus groups, meetings) are not analyzed, the obtained data are not clearly formulated and they do not serve as an analytical base for the SP and reports, the expert panel registers this gap as a factor that impedes the completion of the chain of strategic planning, implementation, evaluation and improvement.

Another positive fact mentioned by the expert panel is the replenishment of the KPIs of the SP by the ISEC which is an important condition for evaluation and improvement of implementation of the Center's mission and goals. At the same time, the expert panel draws the Center's attention to the fact that the list of KPIs were adopted in the midst of 2020, and the SP was planned in 2018 and was put into practice in 2019, while those two activities should have been taken at the same time as far as the development of KPIs forms part of the planning process, and it is made while planning the actions. Accordingly, some timely and content related incompliance of SP actions and KPIs can cause problems while evaluating the implementation of indicator-based strategic steps. The same also relates to the fact that the SP is not based on the goal-objective-action principle in order to make it possible to understand to what extent the actions were fulfilled and how close they were to the implementation of defined goals.

## **SUMMARY**

Taking into consideration the fact the ISEC has a mission which mainly reflects its activities and relates to the link among science, education and industry, the mission reflects the stakeholders' needs, the implementation of the mission is observable, that is, preparation of scientific researchers/scholars for the RA NAS institutes and centers, assurance of generation change, training of specialists with practical skills, and there are some indicators of evaluation of results, the expert panel finds that the Center meets the requirements of the Criterion 1.

## **CONCLUSION**

The compliance of institutional capacities of the ISEC with the requirements of the Criterion 1 is **satisfactory**.

## II. GOVERNANCE AND ADMINISTRATION

**CRITERION:** The institution's system of governance, administrative structures and their activities are efficient and are aimed at the accomplishment of mission and goals of the institution preserving ethical norms of governance.

### FINDINGS

**2.1. The Institution's system of governance ensures structured decision-making process, in accordance with defined ethical rules and has efficient provision of human, material and financial resources to accomplish its educational and other purposes.**

As a higher education institution, ISEC has management, status and organizational peculiarities. It is an institution of the RA NAS<sup>4</sup>. The legal basis for the management of the Center is the Charter of the Center, the SP, the ISEC policy of management and administration, the charters of internal structural subdivisions of the Center, different regulations, other normative documents.

The governing bodies of the ISEC are the RA NA Presidency, the Scientific Council and the Director of the ISEC. In regard to the functional framework, the RA NAS Presidency is partly similar to the governing boards of the universities, as it hears and evaluates the annual report of the ISEC, approves the selection of the ISEC Director made in the Scientific Council. One of the prioritized goals of the SP 2019-2023 is to improve the Center's governance system, to ensure its efficiency and transparency.

According to the SER, the organizational structure of the ISEC corresponds to its mission, reflects the needs and wishes of the staff, undergoes regular revisions in line with changes of the strategy and tactics. In the previous accreditation process improvement plan, the ISEC undertook the responsibility to analyze and evaluate the compliance of the Center's structure with the SP goals as well as to analyze and evaluate the effectiveness of the its governance system. In order to fulfill this, it was planned to develop KPIs to evaluate the efficiency of the Center's governance system with the support of external experts, as well as to evaluate the compliance of the Center's current structure with the SP goals and solutions of the SP objectives. It should be noted that this process has not been documented. Relevant analyzes and evaluations in the form of one or more documents are missing. It is not known what problems were identified in this process on an analytical basis, what was assessed as effective and what was not. It should be emphasized that this process was not documented; respective analyses and evaluations in the form of one or more documents are missing. It is not clear what problems were identified in this process on the analytical basis, what was evaluated as effective and what was inefficient. It became clear from the site visit that the mentioned process was carried out in a fragmented way, moreover, it was fulfilled by oral working discussions, without introduction of indicators and professional expertise. As a result, some changes were made, among which the establishment of the position of Deputy Director for Scientific Research Issues, the clarification and separation of functions of the Dean's Office and the Academic Department can be mentioned.

It should be highlighted that the ISEC didn't make any comprehensive, documented evaluation of the efficiency of its governance system. Currently clear mechanisms of evaluation are missing either. In particular, there are no KPIs related to the strategic goals and actions that would allow to assess the effectiveness of the processes. Although in the previous accreditation process

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<sup>4</sup> The statement was re-formulated based on the ISEC's observations.

improvement plan the ISEC undertook to develop policy and procedures of evaluation and revision of the SP and its plans, to conduct SP monitoring and evaluation, it should be noted that the process was not carried out in accordance with the planned components, and the SP evaluation, as such, is made in a very fragmented way which can be stated by the purely descriptive nature of the annual reports and the poor interrelatedness with the SP in terms of the content.

The governance system of the ISEC has two important peculiarities. **Firstly**, it doesn't have a higher collegial governing body (board). As it was mentioned above, some limited functions of the governing board are fulfilled by the RA NAS Presidency. However, it should be observed that the functional framework of the RA NAS Presidency involves the whole scope of the Academy, including all its institutes and centers, one of them being the ISEC. The internal and external stakeholders of the ISEC are not widely represented in the RA NAS Presidency (and cannot be represented) and, as a rule, the ISEC's activity is usually reflected once a year in the mentioned Presidency in relation to the annual reports. Conditioned by this, the RA NAS Presidency in fact does not hold comprehensive discussions on different areas of the ISEC's activities, its academic programs or other processes (or does not have the opportunity to do this), does not analyze the compliance of the Center's annual performance indicators with the SP goals and objectives, etc. This allows to ensure that the ISEC in fact does not have a higher collegial governing body that would control the activities of the ISEC as a university, would provide guidance and set issues for it. The other collegial governing body - the Scientific Council of the ISEC, cannot replace the governing board in this respect, as far as the half of the members of the Scientific Council are the administrative staff members of the Center, which states that the chain of problem-setting -implementation-control-evaluation is not formed.

**Secondly**, there are some problems relating the functional and status-based relations among the ISEC administrative staff on the one hand, and the main academic structural units, i.e. chairs, on the other hand. In particular, some of the ISEC chairs have been established and function directly within the structure of the Center and on the infrastructure owned by the ISEC. These are the Chairs of Management, Foreign Languages, Psychology, Journalism, Pedagogy, Sociology, Economics, and Law. Being directly in the ISEC system, it is clearer and easier to apply mechanisms of accountability and control over these chairs. Meanwhile, there are chairs that were based and currently carry out their activities on the building and laboratory infrastructure of the RA NAS institutes and centers, and the human capital, including the heads of the chairs, are the staff members of those institutes and centers (for example, the Chair of Oriental Studies, which operates in the RA NAS Institute of Oriental Studies; the Chair of Molecular and Cellular Biology – in the RA NAS Institute of Molecular Biology; the Chair of International Relations and Political Science – in the RA Institute of History; the Chair of Environmental Protection and Nature Management – in the Ecologanospheric Research Center of the RA NAS, and other 12 suchlike chairs). Although the relations with the ISEC chairs belonging to this second group do not formally differ from the relations with the chairs belonging to the first group, the research priorities of the mentioned institutes, corporate culture and traditions, physical distant location of some of them and other circumstances do not allow the ISEC leadership to set problems towards those chairs and to apply accountability and control mechanisms<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> The statement was re-formulated based on the ISEC's observations.

As a result of the review of documents and the site visit, the expert panel found out that after the previous accreditation the ISEC has improved the following indicators and processes of its activity:

- the Moodle e-learning system has been invested. The quality and efficiency of the system differs from chair to chair, even from one teacher to another; in one case, for example, many tools of the platform are used (tasks, forums, test exercises, etc.), in another case, only educational materials are posted on the platform.
- Almost all of the job descriptions of administrative positions have been defined. It is noteworthy that this process takes place within the framework of the commitment which the Center undertook by the previous accreditation improvement plan, that is, to clarify the responsibilities of all the structural units, to invest a system of job descriptions. In some job descriptions, however, there are content related problems; for example, in the job description of the Head of the chair there is a confusion of rights, liabilities or functions (the right of the Head of the chair is to conduct chair sessions, class observations, to supervise the educational and scientific-methodological activities of the chair, etc.). The site visit showed that in spite of the existence of job descriptions, the appointments in administrative positions are not based on competition yet. It is true that there are some vacancy announcements posted on the website (the criteria for positioning are specified), however, the absence of the procedure on competitive selection of administrative positions makes it unclear how compliance of the candidate with the set standards is evaluated. Besides, some appointments made after the set deadline of descriptions were not based on competition<sup>6</sup>.
- The Center has taken some activities towards replenishing human resources particularly in the areas of QA, external relations and internationalization. The positions of the Specialist of the QAC, the Sociologist, the Senior and Leading Specialists of the Department of External Relations have been established. The review of the documents and the site visit showed the impact of these positions on the improvement of indicators of QA and internationalization processes, at the same time revealing the fact that the effectiveness of both the mentioned and other newly established positions is not analyzed in the Center.
- The functions of the Dean's Office and the Academic Department have been separated and clarified, in the frame of which the Academic Department undertook the organizational functions, and the Dean's Office – monitoring and control.

The review of documents and the site visit put forward the following statements relating the ISEC's governance system and respective processes:

1. The ISEC needs to solve the problem of centripetal governance. In fact, the majority of the ISEC chairs has a wide scope of autonomy in the spheres of QA of academic programs, internationalization, implementation of HR policy and organization of admission. In spite of the fact that the expert panel doesn't negatively evaluate the mentioned internal autonomy, still, this creates difficulties for the Center to become a viable and stable educational-research HEI with its specific policy of development and respective procedures. This also conditions the differences among chairs in terms of quality of academic programs, internationalization and achievements in other spheres<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> The statement was re-formulated based on the ISEC's observations.

<sup>7</sup> The statement was re-formulated based on the ISEC's observations.

2. In spite of the fact that as stated by the SP, the ISEC has adopted the ambition to become an exceptional international scientific-research center, there is an internal agreement in the Center according to which the mission of the ISEC is to prepare scientific researchers/scholars for the RA NAS institutes and centers as well as to train practitioners for the labor market.
3. The number of the Center's staff members and students is not high due to which the labor relations are established and regulated on the basis of direct communication.
4. It is not possible to often evaluate to what extent the strategic priorities have served as a basis for the distribution of financial means as far as there isn't any budget based on revenue and expenditure detailed classifications, respective analyses and forecasts; secondly, the actions defined the SP mostly have a generic formulation without any specific indicators. From this respective there is a beneficial point: in the SP 2019-2023 of the ISEC there is a separate goal which relates to the development of information resources and application of ITs. Upon the mentioned goal a number of specified measurable actions are formulated, e.g., development of distance management electronic system in the Center, enhancement of the Center's internal management electronic system, upgrade of the Center's information systems server, etc. As within the framework of the site visit the observation of resources, as well as the recent introduction of relevant staff have shown, the ISEC allocates appropriate resources for the implementation of the mentioned strategic priority.
5. Although the ISEC leadership is able to adapt its best practices (during the meetings organized in the site visit the achievements of the ISEC Chair of Environmental Protection and Nature Management which was based on the Ecologanospheric Research Center of the RA NAS), it does not yet function mechanisms of disseminating best practices. This is also conditioned by the factor of the above-mentioned disproportional relations of the ISEC chairs. For example, the case of the ISEC's participation in the ERASMUS+ MENVIPRO project can be observed. There are two Armenian partners in the mentioned project - the ISEC and the Ecologanospheric Research Center. It should be reminded that the Chair of Environmental Protection and Nature Management of the ISEC is situated in the Ecologanospheric Research Center. Although it is acceptable that within the aforementioned project a group of teachers was involved by the quota of the very Chair of Environmental Protection and Nature Management of the ISEC, the expert panel had such an impression that the impulse of being involved in this project is given by the Ecologanospheric Research Center, taking into consideration the peculiarities of the latter's staff, corporate culture and tradition (in a positive sense). The absence of involvement of other chairs in the Erasmus+ capacity building projects makes it clear why the ISEC leadership cannot uniformly set similar problems to other chairs<sup>8</sup>.
6. The salaries of the administrative, teaching, technical and service staff are low (teachers are paid on hourly rate, taking into consideration their curricular load, exams and tests (in order to teach in a foreign language, the Candidate of Sciences gets 3500 AMD, Doctor of Sciences - 4000 AMD per hour, including taxes), the extracurricular activity of teachers is not paid), and the insufficient tendencies related to the significant increase in the number of students, the involvement of international grants and the investment of fundraising functions do not inspire any hope for their significant growth in the near future. In this regard, there is some hope in terms of possible increase of salary rates of the scientific researchers by the state program.

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<sup>8</sup> The statement was re-formulated based on the ISEC's observations.

7. Despite the ISEC's high ambitions for internationalization, there are no goals relating the attraction of best specialists (including foreign ones) to the Center. This may also be due to the above-mentioned issue concerning the low salaries.
8. The HRM Department hasn't been assigned the task to develop and implement a complex and coordinated policy of HR recruitment, retention, promotion and motivation, and there wasn't any concern raised which would relate to the training of staff members fulfilling those functions or to the recruitment of new specialists.

In 2017 the Code of Ethics of the ISEC was approved which, however, is not popular in the Center.

## **2.2. The Institution's system of governance gives an opportunity to students and the teaching staff to take part in decision making procedures.**

According to the previous accreditation process improvement plan, the ISEC undertook the commitment to ensure the wider and practical involvement of teachers and students in the processes of making decisions related to them. Within the frameworks of this action, it was planned to study the opinions of the teaching staff and students about their participation in suchlike decision-making processes, in the current regulations to clarify and add the provision on their wider and practical participation in management processes, as well as to inform teachers and students about the opportunities envisaged by the regulations.

The SP 2019-2023 outlines a number of actions that state about the importance that the Center gives in relation to the engagement of internal stakeholders in the processes of making decisions related to them. Thus, within the framework of the 5<sup>th</sup> guideline of the SP (work with students) it is planned to carry out activities directed to the assurance of awareness among students and staff members about their rights and responsibilities, and within the framework of the 10<sup>th</sup> guideline it is planned to ensure open dialogues with stakeholders and their involvement, maintenance of democratic principles in governance and decision-making processes, cooperation with student self-governing bodies. It should be noted that some of the mentioned actions are formulated in a generic way, there are no indicators of evaluation interlinked with the strategic goals and actions, the annual reports are descriptive and superficial when it comes to the presentation of reports on the in-depth analysis of strategic actions.

In the RA NAS Presidency (which, according to the SER, is the supreme governing body of the Center) the stakeholders of the ISEC are represented indirectly (the point is about some members of the Presidency who teach on double-jobbing basis in the MA studies of the Center), and the ISEC administrative staff and heads of chairs are not in fact represented in that body. In the other collegial governing body – Scientific Council, besides the administrative staff members, some teachers and heads of chairs as well as representatives of the Center's Student Council and Student Scientific Union are also involved.

As the site visit showed, students' participation in making decisions related to them is mainly ensured according to the working regulation, and the representatives of students are free to raise their concerns in the Scientific Council. The main format of teachers' participation is the chair sessions some part of which (the point is about the chairs that are based on the RA NAS institutes) is combined with the Scientific Council sessions of the institutes.

The self-analysis, surveys and the communication on the ISEC's Facebook page are considered to be the means or forms of involving the Center's internal stakeholders in making decisions relating them. The expert panel considers this to be a mediated form of participation, as far as in case of surveys more feedback is provided, and a study of the Facebook page shows that although the page is regularly updated with news, it has not become an open platform for discussion.

### **2.3. The Institution formulates and carries out short-term, mid-term and long-term planning consistent with its mission and goals as well as has appropriate mechanisms for the implementation and monitoring of those plans.**

The long-term planning is carried out in the form of a strategic plan in the Center. As it is known, currently this planning is summarized in the SP 2019-2023 which, however, does not have a time-schedule with clear deadlines and responsible units which would allow to specify the planning.

The mid-term and short-term planning are not given importance to either in the SP or in the previous accreditation improvement plan. There are no documented mid-term plans in the ISEC. Although in the ISEC document on "Policy of Governance and Administration" the tactical planning (up to 1 year) is mentioned the content of which is not disclosed, it can be assumed that it is about the short-term planning which to some extent derives from the SP. In terms of annual plans of the structural unit, there are some components of short-term planning. However, the annual plans of chairs and structural units are rather operational plans than those which derive from the logic of the SP.

According to the SER, the annual reports of administrative units and chairs are heard and discussed in the Scientific Council. In spite of the fact that this is a mechanism of evaluating the short-term planning, it must be noted that their documented conditions do not allow to anyhow evaluate those planning. As the studies of the documents of "annual work plan and report" of the Chairs on Oriental Studies, Environmental Protection and Nature Management, Informatics and Computer Engineering have shown, the performance of activities carried out annual is just enumerated, in best cases brief description is provided (in case of the Chair of Foreign Languages). At the same time, the expert panel understands that it is not possible to make a detailed documentation to ensure high quality management especially under conditions of low salaries and work overload, which was a matter of concern in some of the meetings of the site visit.

### **2.4. The Institution carried out examination of facts affecting its activities and draws on reliable findings during the decision-making process.**

According to the introduction of the ISEC SP 2019-2023, the SP was developed taking into account the results of the analysis of current issues and processes of academic multi-sector professional and teaching-research education, the scope of the Center's external and external stakeholders, its capacities and working environment. The mentioned shows that the Center gives importance to the identification of possible impulses and data collection in the strategic planning.

In the SER, with the repetition of the descriptive part related to the problems which have served as a basis of the SP 2019-2023, it is presented that the working group responsible for the development of the SP formulated those problems as a result of detailed studies. Appreciating the work done by the mentioned group, the expert panel, however, takes into account the number of

problems and the volume of provided content and respectively finds that such conclusions couldn't have been conditioned by the outcomes of studies made by the working group as far as those problems are very comprehensive in terms of observing them as a subject of research. Besides, both the aforementioned studies and references to the documents containing state priorities (the government program, Sectorial strategies, etc.) or global governmental priorities (strategic documents of the UN and other international organizations) are lacking which could serve as a documentary and methodical base. The formulation of such problems can be made based by their generic perception.

The site visit has shown that the ISEC receives external impulses relating its activity in different ways and through different channels, among which the followings can be mentioned:

- contacts with a large number of teachers employed on double-jobbing basis at the Center. Some of them represent different scientific organizations of the RA NAS and, based on their mission and functions as researchers, they communicate with the scientific world, receive news, learn about developments, and get involved in them. The other part of them are staff members employed in the state/public and private sectors who are also aware of constantly growing changes of the labor market;
- meetings with employers;
- observations of students' internship results. Students who have internship within the framework of state or international grant projects or in the organizations that are considered to be the employers of the Center, face the challenges posed by the science and the labor market, and they make research of those issues which are reflected in their MA theses. The observation of the topics of MA theses of students studying the academic programs in Computer Science, Environmental Protection and Nature Management, Psychology states the mentioned fact (while, for example, some of the topics of MA theses of students studying the academic program of Turkish Studies, such as "The Life and Activity of Katherine Bodil Biorn – Representative of the "Women Missionaries" organization, "The Woman in the Economic-Political and Socio-Cultural Life of the Hittite State", do not speak in favor of the mentioned observation). It is another issue how these impulses are summarized, collected as data, analyzed and applied.

The Center conducts surveys among students, teachers and alumni. Focus-group interviews are held with alumni and the results of interviews are collected as valuable data. As the site visit showed, some part of the data reaches the addressees. For example, the Chair of Environmental Protection and Nature Management was aware of the alumni's opinions on some of its teachers. However, there aren't any documents reflecting the data analysis which points out the fact that the chain of data collection – analysis - problem-discussion – problem-perception – task-formulation – implementation is ensured in a very fragmental way.

The fact that external stakeholders do not directly participate in the governance process of the ISEC (there aren't external stakeholders that are not involved in the RA NAS Scientific Council, and even in the RA NAS Presidency the ISEC is not represented directly) limits the Center's opportunities in terms of identifying factors which impact its activity.

## **2.5. The management of the policies and the processes is based on the quality management principle (plan-do-check-act /PDCA/).**

Judging by the obligation the Center has undertaken, as mentioned in its improvement plan of the previous accreditation, i.e. to revise the Center's administration by investing the PDCA cycle

in all processes, it becomes clear that the integration of components of the quality management principle in the ISEC launched starting from 2017 when the Center was in the phase of undergoing first institutional accreditation.

The formation of perception of the PDCA cycle itself positively influences the administration of some processes.

The SER refers to the document which reflects the ISEC's governance and administration policy and procedure by considering it as a function through which the Center's governance and administration approaches and principles are organized and ensured. Meanwhile, the review of the mentioned document shows that at best it is functions as a methodical supporting manual mainly for the central governance in order to ensure the management process on the basis of the PDCA cycle. According to the SER, within the framework of the above-mentioned activity envisaged by the improvement plan of the previous accreditation, the Center conducted a survey among its staff, the efficiency of governance and administration was evaluated, and the results were taken into consideration in making the ISEC's structural changes in 2020. This fact states that the phases of evaluation and improvement of some processes are ensured mainly at the management level, while several unfulfilled processes planned by the improvement plan state about the fact that they underwent only the first stage.

The site visit showed that only in few structural units of the ISEC the PDCA principle and culture have been adopted. For example, while fulfilling the planned activities and facing some problems in the process of teaching of interdisciplinary courses, the Chair of Foreign Languages took the initiative to apply to the QA Center to identify the problems through the use of respective toolset, after which the improvement activity was carried out. Such initiatives were also taken by the Chairs of Economics and Environmental Protection & Nature Management<sup>9</sup>. It also turned out that the evaluation processes are sometimes carried out of the consecutive logic of the PDCA chain, in accordance with the set working regulation. For instance, the predominance of theoretical-historical component in the academic program of International Relations and the lack of practical component were revealed not due to the monitoring of the mentioned program (which is considered to be the "Check/Evaluation" ring of the PDCA chain) but as a result of meetings which were organized twice per year among the Dean and the monitors of student groups.

## **2.6. The Institution has evaluation mechanisms in place ensuring data collection, analyses and application of the data on the effectiveness of the academic programs and other processes.**

According to the SER, the study of documents, the collection and analysis of information received from the site visit, as well the information on effectiveness of the ISEC's academic programs and other processes are carried out through the reports of the Center and its structural units, surveys conducted among students and alumni, toolset used for monitoring academic programs, surveys conducted among teachers for evaluation of efficiency of governance and administration, discussions, meetings and seminars held with students, teachers and employers, as well as by means of the section of feedback which is available on the Center's webpage and the ISEC's Facebook page.

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<sup>9</sup> The statement was re-formulated based on the ISEC's observations.

It should be noted that these tools have not been thoroughly evaluated in terms of their effectiveness. The descriptive-enumerative nature of reports points out that there has been no discussion (or it was ineffective) on to what extent the current content of reports and means of providing reports were trustworthy, to what extent they served as means of identifying problems from the QA perspective. It is clear that the data obtained through the above-mentioned information collection tools have to some extent been used as a basis for the decision-making, leading to the improvement of some processes.

The study of results of conducted surveys and focus-group interviews did not allow to understand to what extent the stakeholders give importance to these mechanisms and consider them to be effective. Although there are one or two elements in the teacher surveys conducted for the evaluation of management effectiveness and administration (for example, the question on satisfaction with the website (which is somehow a mechanism for collecting information)), neither the form of the survey reveals stakeholders' opinion on the efficiency of the mentioned mechanism, nor it is clear from the study of the website to what extent the suggestions made by them regarding the improvement of the website have been implemented.

## **2.7. There are objective mechanisms in place evaluating the quality of quantitative and qualitative information on the academic programs and qualification awarded.**

The ISEC website (IT section) has a link to the survey on stakeholders' satisfaction with the website, which, according to the SER, aims to find out how satisfied the students and staff are with the materials available on the website, what the main advantages and disadvantages of the site are, if the necessary materials are available, etc. It turned out that the analysis of the survey on satisfaction with the website was conducted only once, based on the data collected during 2016-2017. According to the SER, the results of that survey were used to make improvements of the website, e.g., the days of courses were posted, some regulations relating students were integrated, etc.

Judging by the study of the website, it becomes clear that a number of important suggestions made by from stakeholders were not involved here (materials related to the activities of students from different faculties, submenu on best students, more detailed information about academic programs, courses taught in each chair, biographies of teachers).

The main tools for disseminating information about the ISEC are the latter's website and Facebook pages, and it is described what kind of information is posted here. However, this part of the SER doesn't address the requirements set by this standard, i.e., the mechanisms for evaluating the publication of quantitative and qualitative information on the quality of awarded qualifications and academic programs. The case of the survey on satisfaction with the website and the analysis of results can be considered as an exception, however, the content of the survey is not directly related to the information on the quality of academic programs and awarded qualifications.

The section on Alumni of the website displays short interviews with 16 alumni of the ISEC, in particular, those who are more or less known to the public, and who have reached achievements in their professional field or career. These interviews could be considered as a means of qualitative information about the qualifications awarded by the Center in case the questions were simply posed in such a way that the answers would reveal the specific role of the ISEC in their professional and career development. Meanwhile, the alumni's statements on the role and contribution of the ISEC are

mainly general (the ISEC has provided knowledge, friends, acquaintances, etc.), which does not fully reflect the qualitative information.

In addition, as it turned out from the study of the SER and provided documents, as well as from the results of the site visit, suchlike information is not analyzed and evaluated from the perspective of the quality of academic programs and awarded qualifications. For example, the circumstance of these interviews with the alumni may have been discussed internally, but it is not known what problems were addressed, what shortcomings were identified, what was planned to be eliminated, etc. It should also be mentioned that the course plans are missing on the website (they are very briefly presented in the course manuals and are mostly subject to annual automatic updates), and the information on academic programs such as career opportunities, teaching and learning methods and approaches, mobility opportunities, etc. which could be considered as quantitative or qualitative information on the quality of academic programs and qualifications, are missing either.

## CONSIDERATIONS

Although after the accreditation process the ISEC had taken the commitment to fundamentally analyze and evaluate the compliance of the Center's structure with its strategic goals, as well as the efficiency of the management system, no fundamental professional activities towards those directions were taken, neither documented analysis, complex and documented evaluation of the governance system were made. Besides, currently the clear mechanisms of evaluation are missing, the KPIs interlinked with the strategic goals and actions are lacking either, while they would allow to evaluate the efficiency of the processes. That is why the Center is still not capable of evaluating the efficiency of the management system in the context of adopted goals and ambitions.

Taking into consideration the aforementioned, the expert panel finds that in the ISEC the governance is mostly situational and not based on the strategic goals. The facts that the processes of evaluation and revision of the Center's SP and strategic plans are not fulfilled in line with the planned components, the SP has been evaluated only partially, the reports have merely a descriptive nature, limit the possibility of evaluating the ISEC's management system, hence, the perspectives of the development of the management system and processes become vague.

The expert panel finds that the absence of the collegial higher governing body does not enable to control the activity of the Center as a university, to provide guidance and to set problems in front of the Center. The other collegial governing body – Scientific Council, cannot replace the governing board in this respect as far as half of the Scientific Council members are administrative staff members of the Center which states about the fact that the chain of problem-setting – implementation – control – evaluation is not generated.

The functional and status incompliance between the administrative staff of the ICEC, on the one hand, and the main academic departments, i.e., chairs, on the other hand, complicate the management of the Center, thus making it problematic to apply and control the implementation of mechanisms of accountability towards the chairs that are based on the infrastructures of the RA NAS institutes and centers. Under these conditions, i.e., when dual subordination issues arise, when there are not vertical but horizontal relations, the application of accountability mechanisms becomes significantly complicated, hence, the effectiveness of the organization of academic activities, quality control of teaching and learning and other processes, depends not on systemic-functional circumstances but from the person's factor. In addition to the mentioned, the capacities and resources

of the Center's leadership (this is a separate internal issue of analysis) are not sometimes sufficient for the monitoring, analysis, control and evaluation of academic programs and processes, and it becomes clear why there can be academic programs in the ISEC which, in terms of validity of qualifications, can raise doubts (the academic program of "Turkish Studies" in case of which the majority of courses has no relation with the Turkish Studies or it relates in a strictly conditional way, indirectly)<sup>10</sup>.

The expert panel positively evaluates the improvement of indicators and processes of the ISEC's activity such as the introduction of the Moodle e-learning system, definition of descriptions of most of the administrative positions, fulfillment of some activities directed to the recruitment of human resources (particularly in the directions of QA, external relations and internationalization), separation and clarification of functions of the Academic Department and the Dean's office, existence of the Code of Ethics, etc. At the same time, the recruitment of administrative and teaching staff in a non-competitive, discretionary manner, low salaries do not allow to carry out activities aimed at attracting, involving and retaining best human resources.

The lack of centralized management in the ISEC makes it difficult for the latter to become a viable and stable, internationalized educational and scientific-research institution within the framework of its ambitions, to identify and successfully disseminate best practices, to ensure reliable control of academic programs and awarded qualifications. The absence of strategic budgeting makes the certainty to achieve the strategic goals problematic.

The expert panel positively evaluates the fact that the ISEC gives importance to the increased participation of students and teachers in making decisions related to them, which is reflected in the ISEC SP, as well as the fact that a relatively small number of internal stakeholders enable them to directly communicate with the leadership of the Center. At the same time, the general formulation of some of the strategic actions, the lack of indicators of evaluation linked to the strategic goals and actions, as well as the descriptive nature and superficiality of annual reports in terms of providing in-depth analytical reports relating the strategic actions, do not allow to identify the Center's achievements or shortcomings in the mentioned fields.

The expert panel finds it positive that currently the ISEC is already in the 2<sup>nd</sup> phase of the long-term planning, taking into account the acting strategic plan. At the same time, the absence of the mid-term planning of activities of the Center's scientific-educational units, the lack of strategy-based (but rather operational) approach to the short-term planning, among other factors, condition the fact that the Center doesn't act as an institution having a stable strategic route.

The ISEC realizes that it is necessary to make strategic planning, to ensure implementation and improvement processes based on real problems and the reality, however, it is not capable of making complex collection and evaluation of factors influencing its activity yet, and it doesn't link its strategic planning with the state priorities. Although the ISEC collects quantitative and qualitative data, no documented data analysis is carried out which disables the implementation of evaluation and improvement processes on more reliable bases.

The expert panel evaluates it positive that the discourse on the PDCA cycle has emerged at the Center, and a few structural units carry out their activities guided by this principle. Nevertheless, the reports are not evaluative and have analytical nature, and the clear indicators are missing in the planning process, which points out that in the ISEC the PDCA cycle is not fulfilled yet which has a negative impact on different processes and first of all, on the QA of academic programs.

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<sup>10</sup> The statement was re-formulated based on the ISEC's observations.

In spite of the fact that the tools of collection of data on the efficiency of the ISEC's academic programs and processes have been added and improved over time, their poor analytical component doesn't foster the ISEC to make a coordinated analysis and improvement of its academic programs and processes. Besides, the absence of objective mechanisms of evaluating the quantitative and qualitative publications on the quality of academic programs and awarded qualifications endangers their QA and quality enhancement.

## SUMMARY

Taking into consideration the fact that the ISEC's management system is being developed slowly and fragmentally, the governance is situational and not based on the strategic goals, the gaps on the management system are not put forward in a professional way, the diverse factors influencing the activity of the Center are not analyzed, the strategic planning is not obviously derived from the state priorities, the management of academic programs and other processes is not mainly ensured on the basis of the PDCA cycle, the ISEC as a HEI doesn't in fact have a higher governing and control body, the management is not centralized which brings to problems in terms of ensuring accountability and other activities of the chairs, as well as taking into account the impact of the aforementioned on the validity of qualifications of some of the academic programs, the expert panel finds that the ISEC does not meet the requirements of the Criterion 2.

## CONCLUSION

The compliance of institutional capacities of the ISEC with the requirements of the Criterion 2 is **unsatisfactory**.

## III. ACADEMIC PROGRAMS

**CRITERION: The programs are in concord with the Institution's mission, form part of institutional planning and promote mobility and internationalization.**

### FINDINGS

**3.1 The academic programs are in line with Institution's mission, they correspond to the state academic standards and are thoroughly described according to the intended learning outcomes of the qualification awarded.**

The ISEC implements MA and PhD academic programs. As it became clear from the external evaluation, while developing and reviewing academic programs, the ISEC takes into account the directions of research activities of the RA NAS research institutes, as well as the requirements of the labor market.

Conditioned by the peculiarities of academic programs, the practical component is given importance to. The content of some academic programs is designed in such a way that both components (research and applied) are ensured. For example, in case of the academic program of Informatics and Computing Engineering, a number of subjects which are of high research significance are studied - Information Theory, Computability and Recursion, Extreme Problems of Graph Theory, etc. Among the subjects of practical importance, the Machine Learning Systems, Statistical Methods and Applications, Network Operation Systems can be mentioned. In case of the academic program on Informatics and Computing Engineering, the subject of Scientometrics is also

studied. In regard to the academic program on Environmental Protection and Nature Management, the content and narration of the courses are designed in such a way that students firstly master the basics of the profession ("Biosafety", "Fundamentals of Sustainable Human Development", "Ecotoxicology"), research methods and techniques ("Ecological Monitoring and Measurement Devices", "Research Logic"), and afterwards, based on the research approach, master the ad-hoc professional knowledge, develop relevant skills and competences. All the academic programs include selective courses that aim to develop knowledge and competences that are necessary for MA students to successfully prepare MA thesis.

Since 2019 the Center has made a transition to the development and implementation of outcome-based academic programs. Since 2019-2020 academic year the new specifications/program descriptions of MA programs have been put into practice. The application of outcome-based approach to the development of academic programs is reflected at the levels of both the program and the module and some courses.

In case of the two academic programs ("Environmental Protection and Nature Management", "Informatics and Computer Engineering") among the observed three programs, the titles and content of the courses are structurally compliant with the outcomes of the academic programs. In terms of the academic program on "Oriental Studies: Turkic Studies", the list of subject courses of the program is problematic in terms of the requirements set for the specialty of Turkish Studies. There are problems regarding the interrelation among courses which is stated by the fact that in the first semester the course on "Main Problems on the History of Ottoman Empire" is taught, and in the second semester - the course on "Theory of Medieval History", and in the third semester - the course on "Basic Problems of Byzantine History". As the expert panel found out, the course on "Ethnic-Religious Map of the Republic of Azerbaijan - Political Areal Studies" was integrated into the program after the launch of the accreditation process and it was absent in the program presented to the expert panel. Instead, the courses on "Ancient Oriental Mythology", "Theory of History of Ancient World", "Basic Problems of Byzantine History" were available, which, according to the expert panel, are less-priority courses for that specialization as compared with the in-depth studies of current relations of Turkey with the neighbor countries, Turkish ethnic-religious studies (with the emphasis on the role of Sufi Brotherhood) in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. On the other hand, the Chair of Oriental Studies which provides the course, finds that the above-mentioned courses are necessary for the perception of historical and religious contexts in the regional realms, especially taking into account the fact that the content of the program involves the components of both specializations - Turkish and Oriental Studies. The chair finds that the non-major professional courses (which do not encompass the narrow scope of the given profession) have been integrated into the program with the aim to fill in the professional gap which can be observed in case of students having no professional background. At the same time, the Center provides an opportunity to such students to take facultative courses, which is a very good mechanism to fill in the gap not at the expense of major professional courses<sup>11</sup>.

The academic programs are available in the section of "Credit System" of the ISEC website. The compliance of program outcomes with the NQF as well as the concordance of course outcomes with those of academic programs are provided as appendices in the academic programs.

Since 2018 the ISEC implemented the academic program of "Business Administration" in cooperation with the Academy of Management through distance learning. The program was invested

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<sup>11</sup> The statement was re-formulated based on the ISEC's observations.

by the grant project of the Competitive Innovation Fund for Higher Education in Armenia with the financial support from the World Bank.

The MA education is research-based, and the topics of MA theses are selected in accordance with the scientific directions of the given institute/chair and on the laboratory basis. In case of the academic program on Environmental Protection and Nature Management the MA theses are distributed according to the research programs and projects which are implemented in the given period by the subdivisions of the RA NAS Ecologanospheric Research Center.

The three academic programs studied by the expert panel were compared with those of different foreign partner universities, prioritizing the compatibility in order to promote international mobility. The documents related to the studied academic programs involve the changes made in the academic programs based on comparison. For example, in case of the academic program on Informatics and Computer Engineering, due to the benchmarking with the Paul Sabatier University (Toulouse 3) in France, the titles and content of a number of courses have been revised. Benchmarking has contributed to the international mobility of teachers and students. In case of the academic program of Environmental Protection and Nature Management, based on the benchmarking results, a number of syllabi have been improved and modernized.

As it turned out from the site visit, the academic programs are compared with similar academic programs implemented by other universities of Armenia, but the priority is given to the theoretical research direction, based on the scientific-research directions of the given institute. For instance, in case of the academic program of Informatics and Computer Engineering, in many other HEIs the courses on applied programming are dominant, and there is an applied direction in the observed academic programs, however, the theoretical direction is more emphasized.

As the analyses of the expert panel showed, there are some subjects in the MA academic programs the content of which is fully or partially repetitive with those of BA academic programs. The Center explains it by mentioning that it involves graduates that have different professional backgrounds and they come from other universities.

### **3.2 The Institution has a policy that promotes alignment between teaching and learning approaches and the intended learning outcomes of academic programs, which ensures student-centered learning.**

The teaching and learning methods are not described in both academic programs and subject courses. It became clear from the site visit that the teachers of the Center select teaching and assessment methods based on anticipated outcomes of the academic programs.

According to the SER, conditioned by the given subject, the oral communication methods, i.e. lecturing and discussion, can be dominant in the teaching process. The ISEC pays great attention to the application of interactive methods as well. Conditioned by the peculiarities of the taught subject, practical, observational and reproductive methods are also widely used. Among learning methods, group, individual and pair work activities are carried out among which the practical methods are more efficient as they enable learners to quickly master and enhance the obtained knowledge.

In case of Environmental Protection and Nature Management, since the very first semester of learning, the mastering of theoretical materials is combined with the research-based teaching, and the methods of laboratory experiments, observation, measurement, research and other methods are used. The active participation of the Ecologanospheric Research Center in international scientific-

educational grants gives the opportunity to update and enrich the laboratory-technical base which conditions the research-based teaching and learning.

It became clear from the site visit that the teaching staff applies student-centered approach to teaching - interactive methods, teamwork, project-based learning, practical problem solving, simple and complicating situational problem setting and solving. The teachers also use the electronic Moodle platform for assignments. For example, in case of a number of subjects of Informatics and Computer Engineering (Data Analysis, Information Theory, Machine Learning) projects that have practical importance as well as assignments in the form of practical problems are assigned.

The formation of research skills and training of young researchers for institutes are also emphasized in the courses. The teachers who are scientists, teach research methods within their subjects during teaching and in scientific seminars. One of the two courses of the general education block of the academic program on Environmental Protection and Nature Management, for example, the ITs, provides the mastering of some elements of the research technique (making references, database creation, etc.). The "English language" course is oriented towards technical translations.

As the site visit showed, there are students who have different background BA education (especially in the specializations of Natural and Technical Sciences) in case of which the research component is sometimes difficult to ensure.

### **3.3 The Institution has policy on students' assessment according to the learning outcomes and promotes academic integrity.**

The Center has a multi-factor 20-scale system of regular testing and assessment of students' knowledge. The course, along with the final exam during the examination period, envisages 2 current (mid-term) examinations, at least one of which is based on the student's written work, and the other - on the evaluation of oral presentation (tests, individual works, projects, etc.). The form of final exam is approved by the head of the chair by the recommendation of the teacher responsible for the given course. The current grading system can be found in the Credit System in the regulations on the organization of full-time/distance education, as well as in the bulletin of the academic program, the electronic versions of which are available on the Center's website.

The assessment methods are available in the observed academic programs, but the assignments are not described. The expertise shows that the assignments are mainly theoretical and they mainly measure the abilities of reproduction and presentation of knowledge. There are a small number of practical assignments. The vast majority of exam questionnaires of the courses involved in the academic program of Turkish Studies are standard questionnaires, and the exam involves exam tickets which involves two or three questions taken from the questionnaire. The assignments for checking research skills and competences can hardly be found. However, the meeting with the teachers showed that teachers conduct tests in different formats which, however, are not involved in the course descriptions, thus making sure that the check via questionnaire-based exam tickets is a compulsory mode of check<sup>12</sup>.

The process of evaluation of the MA thesis is carried out in accordance with the procedure of implementation and assessment of MA theses. The criteria set for assessment of MA theses are the substantiation of the topic's novelty and literature analysis (maximum 2 points), research and results

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<sup>12</sup> The statement was re-formulated based on the ISEC's observations.

(maximum 6 points), quality of writing (narration and formulation) (maximum 4 points), public defense of the thesis (maximum 8 points).

The site visit showed that the internship topics were sometimes linked to the topics of MA theses, students carried out research with employers (in cases of Environmental Protection and Nature Management, Social Pedagogy, Clinical Psychology and Psychotherapy, Law). The site visit also showed that in case of the academic program on Environmental Protection and Nature Management there were orders to make interdisciplinary research in the field of Nature Protection from the authorized body, in which the ISEC MA students were involved.

The Concept of Academic Honesty was developed and approved in 2020 which was aimed at struggle against plagiarism and enrooting of academic honesty and impartiality. The policy of acquisition and application of tools ensuring academic honesty and preventing plagiarism is still in the phase of development.

### **3.4 The programs of the Institution are contextually coherent with other relevant programs and promote mobility of students and staff.**

The Center has developed benchmarking (comparative analysis) policy based on which different chairs of the Center regularly make benchmarking to study the best practices of academic programs in Armenia and abroad. Benchmarking has been carried out for the 3 academic programs, in particular, within the framework of the academic program on Environmental Protection and Nature Management, the Tuscia University in Italy was selected as a partner university, for the academic program of Informatics and Computer Engineering - the Paul Sabatier University of Informatics and Computer Engineering in France (Toulouse 3), and in case of the academic program on Oriental Studies – the University of Bologna in Italy. As compared with the other two academic programs, the benchmarking of the academic program on Environmental Protection and Nature Management has been made not only in regard to the list of subjects, but also in terms of the content. The modernization of the mentioned academic program was also facilitated by the ERASMUS+ Menvipro project – “Modernization of Environment Protection Studies Programs for Armenia and Georgia”.

In case of the academic program on Informatics, the "Machine Learning" and "Fundamentals of Scientometrics" subject courses have been added to the curriculum, based on the results of comparative analysis of RA HEIs. In order to ensure mobility, in the case of the academic program on Oriental Studies, the benchmarking was carried out with the subjects taught at the University of Bologna.

Within the scope of the ERASMUS+ MENVIPRO project, the academic program of Environmental Protection and Nature Management was fully modernized in 2019-2020. 12 courses of the program were benchmarked based on which 6 of them were modernized and 4 new courses were integrated (Ecostatistics, Soil Quality Monitoring, etc.). The modernization referred to the development of syllabi, the integration of employers' requirements in the academic program, the comparative analysis of the content and outcomes, in particular, with the same academic program of the Tuscia University. As a result of all the mentioned, the practical component of the courses has significantly increased, the teaching methodology and approaches have been changed.

In the benchmarking of the academic program of Turkish Studies 3 courses were selected which were compared with three courses of the Bologna University, and their course descriptions have been presented. There is no any comparative analysis either at the program or course level<sup>13</sup>.

### **3.5 The Institution adopts policies in place ensuring academic program monitoring, evaluation of effectiveness and enhancement.**

In 2020 the ISEC developed and approved the Regulation on Monitoring and Regular Revision of Academic Programs of the International Scientific-Educational Center of the RA National Academy of Sciences (new edition), which defines the processes of current monitoring and regular revision of the Center's academic programs. The process of the monitoring of academic programs is launched by the order of the ISEC Director, based on the list of academic programs under monitoring and the monitoring time-schedule, presented by the Dean. The monitoring is made by the head of the given professional chair during the academic year on an annual basis.

In the list of documents presented for the expertise, there are performances of plans of activities directed to the improvement of quality of the 3 academic programs, based on the results of their monitoring made by the chairs which are responsible for the implementation of those programs. In the list of presented documents, the analyses of results of the surveys conducted among alumni and employers are also ensured. The improvement of academic programs is also based on the analyses of results of the surveys conducted by the QA Center.

According to the SER, the current curricula practiced by the ISEC Chair of Environmental Protection and Nature Management have been fundamentally revised.

### **CONSIDERATIONS**

The expert panel evaluates it positive that based on the recommendations provided by the previous accreditation expert panel, the ISEC has made improvement in the academic programs from the perspective of revision of academic programs, selection of teaching and learning methods and investment of new format of syllabi. As a result of the investment of the new format of syllabi, both the outcomes of courses and those of topics are presented, which enables to form a picture of the student's progress. At the same time, the expert panel believes that the inclusion of assignments given to students in the subject courses will enable them to have a clearer idea of their implementation, assessment criteria, link with the outcomes and their effectiveness.

The outcomes of observed three academic programs are mainly in compliance with the requirements of the NQF, the list of selected subjects mainly contribute to the achievement of the respective outcomes. At the same time, the expert panel studies have shown that the outcomes of the studied academic programs are in some cases very general, difficult to measure, which may make them difficult to evaluate.

It is positive that the ISEC teachers who are scientists/scholars are involved in the teaching process, which can contribute to the implementation of research-based education, students are involved in research, and, in some directions, they do research with employers. It became clear from the site visit that it is difficult to ensure and, in some cases, it is not feasible to apply the research component in case of the Center's MA students having different background of BA education.

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<sup>13</sup> The statement was re-formulated based on the ISEC's observations.

Although the ISEC has included courses or topics in its academic programs which will further ensure postgraduate education of graduates with different BA educational background, the expert panel is concerned that the ISEC will be able to ensure necessary knowledge and competences of students with different BA background education especially in the cases of Natural and Technical Sciences. The ISEC still needs to take steps in this regard.

The expert panel positively evaluates the fact that the ISEC takes activities for the improvement of its academic programs, signs contracts for benchmarking at the international level, however, all the mentioned mainly depends on the institutes/chairs. There are successful chairs the experience of which needs to be disseminated. The expert panel highlights the fact that the steps taken in this direction need to be more coordinated and planned in order to contribute to a more targeted implementation of reforms and to ensure involvement of all stakeholders in the improvement directed activities. It is also necessary to analyze the effectiveness of changes made as a result of benchmarking.

It is positive that the monitoring of academic programs has led to changes the full application of which will further give the opportunity to organize education more efficiently, to expand the scope of students' academic freedom as well as to foster the mobility of both students and teachers.

### **SUMMARY**

Taking into consideration the fact that the ISEC has some experience in making improvement of academic programs, the latter ones are linked with the priorities of the RA NAS institutes, there are teaching and assessment methods in concordance with the anticipated learning outcomes, there are some mechanisms of monitoring of academic programs, and the ISEC has some good practice in the field of benchmarking, the expert panel finds that the ISEC institutional capacities meet the requirements of the Criterion 3.

### **CONCLUSION**

The compliance of institutional capacities of the ISEC with the requirements of the Criterion 3 is **satisfactory**.

## **IV. STUDENTS**

**CRITERION: The Institution provides support services to students ensuring productive learning environment.**

### **FINDINGS**

**4.1. The Institution has set mechanisms for promoting students' recruitment, selection and admission procedures.**

The admission and selection of students of the RA NAS ISEC is regulated by the RA legislation and internal legal acts. According to the admission procedure of the ISEC MA program for the 2020-2021 academic year, a person with a Bachelor's degree, a diploma specialist or a Master's degree from RA state universities and accredited non-state/private universities can be admitted to the MA program. Graduates of the relevant specialty of the last 2 years can apply for the existing free of

charge places of MA degree. The competition is conducted in the form of an examination according to the relevant pre-published questionnaires. The decision on admission is made by the Admission Committee on the basis of the protocols submitted by the examination commissions of respective subjects. In case of equality of the competition results the GPA as well as the sum of the points of the final paper and final attestation examination are taken into account as a matter of priority. Admission for full-time, part-time/correspondent studies and distance learning systems is organized according to the current admission procedure.

The admission of foreign citizens and Diaspora Armenians in the RA NAS ISEC is carried out according to the procedure approved by the decree No. 700-N of the RA Government as of 28.04.2011.

In order to recruit applicants, in the section "Applicant" of the Center the list of MA degree specialties, mode of education, tuition fees, admission questionnaires, application, schedules of entrance exam or interviews are presented. The electronic admission system has been operating at the RA NAS ISEC since 2020, which allows applicants to submit documents online.

Taking into account the recommendations of the previous accreditation, in order to ensure the increase of the number of students, the ISEC planned to develop an action plan, which should be based on the improvement plan. Accordingly, the Center planned to conduct a study of student needs to provide feedback to students and graduates. As a result of the site visit, it became clear that the administrative staff of the Center makes efforts to support the professional orientation of students, to attract new students, including international ones, and to identify their needs. The Center also cooperates with RA and international universities, career centers and institutions to increase student involvement. Career and entrepreneurship fairs, round-table discussions, summer schools, announcements, booklets, the ISEC website, the student guide, Facebook page, etc. are used to gather and recruit students at the ISEC.

However, studying the admission rates in recent years, it becomes clear that the admission rates have decreased in some professions (Oriental Studies, Geology), but the number has increased in Business Administration, Jurisprudence, Political Science and some other professions. According to the studies of the Center, the tendencies conditioning the decrease in the number of students relate to the emigration, state of emergency and martial situations, as well as the decrease in demand for certain professions.

#### **4.2. The Institution has policies and procedures for assessing student educational needs.**

The ISEC has envisaged to develop policy and procedures on the identification of students' educational needs and this is defined in the plan for the elimination of shortcomings developed in 2017 as a result of the previous accreditation of the Center. In 2018, the Center introduced the "Student Survey Procedure for Identification of Educational Needs of the ISEC Students" to ensure that ISEC students have the right to participate in the QA functions and to evaluate the effectiveness of the Center.

The Needs are identified at the ISEC through surveys conducted among students and alumni. The student survey is conducted by the Education Quality Assurance (EQA) Department of ISEC anonymously, with the participation of at least 51% of the students of the group. The results of the student survey are presented by the EQA Department to the relevant chair, and the evaluation results of each individual course are also provided to the relevant teacher by e-mail.

However, during the site visit, it became clear that the results of the surveys do not serve as a basis for changes and amendments to the curriculum for all chairs. During the visit it also became clear that most of the students prefer to solve the problems by applying to the administrative staff. As a result of such discussions the teaching staff changed, the practical hours were increased and so on. It became clear from the meetings held during the site visit that the position of the Dean was also established to identify and respond to the needs of students.

#### **4.3. The Institution provides opportunities for extra-curricular activities and advising services aimed at supporting student effective learning.**

According to the SER of the Center, in order to increase the efficiency of students' learning process, the Center creates opportunities for organizing additional classes and providing consultancy. There is a position of an educational consultant in the chairs of the ISEC whose main function is to work on increasing the progress of students, as well as to provide information to the latter about the educational process, selection of courses and development of individual curricula. The expert meetings showed that the students were satisfied with the work of the consultants, however it also became clear that the students with different BA backgrounds who are admitted to ISEC for MA studies sometimes have difficulties in mastering professional courses and in those cases the teaching staff of the Center helps them to overcome the difficulties both during the lessons and in the implementation of MA theses.

During the expert visit, it became clear that facultative classes are organized for students to increase the level of English proficiency. The Foreign Languages and Intercultural Communication Club has been operating at the ISEC since 2017, offering additional training to the students. However, the meetings that took place during the site visit showed that the level of language proficiency among students is still insufficient, which often becomes an obstacle for them to participate in both mobility programs and to study professional foreign language literature.

#### **4.4. There are precise regulation and schedule set for students to turn to the administrative staff for additional support and guidance.**

In the time-schedule for the elimination of shortcomings mentioned in the expert report of the ISEC accreditation in 2017, it was envisaged to develop a procedure for students to apply to the administrative staff. In order to effectively carry out the work with students by the administrative staff of ISEC, the regulation on the procedure and mechanisms for the students to apply to the administrative staff of the ISEC has been developed and has been operating since 2018. The mechanisms defined by the regulation are the official website of ISEC, provision of individual e-mail addresses to students, establishment of direct communication between ISEC coordinators and students, assurance of a direct and interactive communication of teaching staff and students, possibility of communication with the ISEC administrative staff, heads of departments, Legal Advisor and Scientific Secretary.

There is no timetable for providing support and guidance to students, but students are free to contact administrative staff and those responsible for the academic program with any issues they may have. In order to ensure greater involvement and activeness of students in the educational process, the ISEC administrative staff also organizes sessions to discuss students' concerns. One way to reach out to administrative staff is to raise awareness of students through group leaders. During the site visit

it became clear that in this way changes were made in the academic programs, new opportunities were created for the use of electronic library resources.

#### **4.5 The Institution has student career support services.**

Student career services at ISEC are coordinated by the Department of Public Relations and Career which has been operating since 2019. The Department deals with the study of job competitiveness of ISEC students and graduates, enhancing regular connection, cooperation and dissemination of information among internal and external stakeholders and the ISEC. The mentioned Department organizes one-month practical courses on "Career Building Skills", during which students learn how to write autobiography, motivation letters, acquire communication skills, learn to represent themselves correctly to the employer, and at the end of the course they have the opportunity to meet with employers to get job offers.

According to the SER, as a result of the surveys conducted among the students it becomes clear that 90% of the students are satisfied with the work done by the Department of PR and Career. The site visit showed that the students and graduates are aware of the functions of the Department, but it is viewed more as a skill-building structure rather than a support department for further work planning, as most of the MA students already work while studying.

One of the student-promoting services of ISEC is the regular meetings and discussions with various employers, which provide an additional opportunity for students to get acquainted with the peculiarities of their profession and the demands of the labor market.

#### **4.6 The Institution promotes student involvement in its research activities.**

Being one of the structural units of the RA NAS and cooperating with the NAS institutes in horizontal relations, the ISEC uses the material and human resources of the Academy. Current scientists of the RA NAS institutes teach MA students and it is an additional opportunity to transfer experience and rejuvenate the academic staff of the scientific system. The ISEC students have the opportunity to be involved in research activities carried out by the institutes, as well as to present their individual research papers and be published in scientific journals. One of the most important functions of the Center is to ensure the full involvement of the students in research activities. However, it should be noted that the implementation of this commitment depends on the willingness of the head of the chair providing the particular academic program (the management of the Institute of the NAS). Expert panel studies show that in some professions, the involvement in research is limited to the implementation of MA theses. A good example of student involvement in research is the direct involvement of students in current research assignments or in research carried out by the teaching staff within the framework of the academic program on "Environmental Protection and Nature Management" based on the existing material-technical base and professional resources in the Ecocenter. The topics of the MA theses in the Chair of Environmental Protection and Nature Management are given to the students from the thematic-targeted grant projects of the departments of the Ecologanospheric Research Center of the RA NAS. The allocation of topics here takes place in the first semester of study, and the distribution of students according to the research topics of the Center's departments is carried out based on a proportionality principle.

The Student Scientific Union (SSU) operates in the ISEC, the aim of which is to promote the scientific, creative and spiritual development of students. According to its charter, the SSU carries out

its goals and objectives in cooperation with the chairs of the ISEC, the Student Council, the Public Relations and Career Department and other departments. The SSU supports the initiatives of students in scientific-educational spheres, the organization of student conferences, seminars, lectures, other scientific-educational events, promotes the inclusion of students in scientific groups and in various scientific programs.

#### **4.7 The Institution has a special body, which is responsible for the protection of students' rights.**

According to the SER of the ISEC, the Students Council is the very body dealing with the students' rights at the ISEC. The Student Council is a non-political and self-governing elective body which presents and protects students' rights and interests, promotes their educational, scientific, creative, moral and spiritual development. According to the charter of the Student Council, it is comprised of the President, Vice-Presidents, Secretary and members. Based on the need with the decision of the Student Council, temporary committees can also be established. The President, Vice-Presidents, Secretary and members of the Student Council are elected and hold the position until their graduation. The Student Council also organizes different events and meetings with employers and specialists of the fields; however, it became clear during the site visit that although most of the students are aware of the activities of the Student Council, they address the issues concerning their rights through administrative structures and the group leaders.

The legal advisor of ISEC also provides legal assistance and support to students. The legal advisor provides students various consultancy and clarification concerning legal documents.

The ISEC has prepared a number of guides for its students (logging in to the student emails, distance learning platform through student emails, organization of pre-defense and defense through distance mode) through which the information becomes available and transparent for students too. According to the SER, all the students are informed about relevant services and 80-95% of students are satisfied with the above-mentioned processes.

#### **4.8. The Institution has set mechanisms for the evaluating and ensuring the quality of educational, consultancy and other services provided to students.**

From the SER and expert studies, it became clear that the QA system has been reviewed by the Center within the framework of the project "Investment and Further Development of Internal QA System" and also based on the recommendations given by the ANQA external experts during the institutional accreditation of the ISEC.

Evaluation of educational, consultancy and other services provided to students of the ISEC is mainly carried out through student surveys about courses and teachers and based on this, the ranking of the teaching staff is made. The Center also conducts surveys and discussions among graduates according to the Regulation on the Survey Conducted among the Graduates about Satisfaction with the Education provided by the ISEC. In this regard, the issue concerning the needs of graduates is problematic as according to the regulation, the graduates fill in the questionnaire immediately after graduation, sometimes not having enough experience to do professional work and to assess the knowledge, skills and competences received by the ISEC. Upon receiving the diplomas, the graduates receive a questionnaire from the EQA Department, complete it, submit it to the EQA Department, or the survey is organized electronically.

The expert meetings showed that the ISEC always responds to the questions raised by students and graduates, the results of the surveys are discussed in the chairs and, if necessary, in other departments as well in order to develop and implement measures to improve the quality of various aspects of the Center. However, it should be noted that in case of some departments located in the institutes, the main factors influencing the implementation of changes didn't relate to the surveys, as those responsible for some academic programs and teaching staff members were not informed about the results of the surveys.

### **CONSIDERATIONS**

The expert panel positively evaluates the regulated implementation of student recruitment, selection and admission processes by the Center. It is also a positive fact that the ISEC has invested an electronic admissions system, enabling applicants to submit documents online. It is positive that the ISEC has been working to increase the efficiency of admissions process since its previous accreditation, which has brought to the increase in the number of applicants.

It is positive that in order to increase the efficiency of students' learning process, the institution highlights the creation of opportunities for organizing additional classes and providing consultancy in spite of the fact that there are no clear procedures for conducting additional classes. The position of an academic advisor in the chairs of the ISEC is particularly important in terms of ensuring students' academic progress.

The expert panel positively assesses the work carried out by the Student Council and the existence of a legal advisor at the Center. All the mentioned creates an opportunity for the protection of students' rights. However, there is still a need to increase the involvement of the Student Council in the protection of students' rights.

The expert panel values the work carried out by the Department of Public Relations and Career with students and alumni, in particular, the steps taken to develop student-employer cooperation that will enhance the effectiveness of student career support services. It is also a positive fact to have regular discussions with employers to get acquainted with the peculiarities of the given profession.

It is positive that using the human, material-technical and laboratory facilities of the institutes of the NAS, the ISEC creates a favorable environment for the involvement of students in research activities. However, it should be noted that good experience is not disseminated in all professions, which would provide additional opportunities for the development of research capacity under the 7<sup>th</sup> level of the NQF.

The expert panel highlights that the ISEC regularly reviews the collection of information on students' satisfaction and evaluation of educational, consultancy and other services that may contribute to the improvement of the quality of services.

### **SUMMARY**

Taking into account the fact that the ISEC has student recruitment and admission structures, there are some procedures for identifying needs, in order to ensure an effective educational environment students are provided with appropriate guidance and consultancy, the institution organizes additional classes and consultancy for students, students have the opportunity to apply to the administrative staff directly or indirectly and address their issues, there is a favorable

environment to be involved in research activities, the body for the protection of students' rights is functioning, the expert panel finds that the Center meets the requirements of the Criterion 4.

## CONCLUSION

The compliance of institutional capacities of the ISEC with the requirements of the Criterion 4 is **satisfactory**.

## V. FACULTY AND STAFF

**CRITERION:** The Institution provides a highly qualified teaching and supporting staff to achieve the set goals of the academic programs and institution's mission.

### FINDINGS

**5.1. The Institution has policies and procedures promoting recruitment of a highly qualified teaching and supporting staff for the provision of academic programs.**

According to the improvement plan of the previous accreditation process, the ISEC undertook to implement the recruitment of teaching staff on a competitive basis. For this purpose, it was planned to apply the Regulation on the Formation of the Teaching Staff. The mentioned regulation was adopted in a new edition in 2018; it defines the categories of positions of the ISEC teaching staff, the principles of their replacement, appointment of positions. It is noteworthy that the regulation does not define the procedure for competitive selection of teachers, though it is mentioned in the SER that the vacancies of heads of chairs, professors, associate professors and teachers are filled by contracts based on the results of the competition. It became clear from the site visit that the positions of the heads of some chairs have been filled according to the competitive selection, and the competitions of the teaching staff as such do not take place yet. The recruitment of the teaching staff in the ISEC takes place in the following ways: heads of chairs, based on the requirements of the courses of the academic program, as well as on the basis of the criteria set out in the above-mentioned regulation and in job descriptions, recruit the teaching staff mainly from researchers of the institutes and centers and sometimes from specialists of other institutions. An annual labor contract is signed between the teachers and the ISEC leadership. Some educational workload is placed on the postgraduate students of the institutes and centers of the RA NAS, as well as the chairs of the departments of the ICRC. Later, after the defense, the postgraduate students are enrolled in the teaching staff.

The PhD students of the institutes and centers of the RA NAS, as well as the chairs of the ISEC take some educational workload. After the defense PhD students become members of the teaching staff.

It should be noted that the system for selecting teachers includes entrance criteria (academic degree, title, number of published works, etc.). Meanwhile, there are no criteria for output capabilities (how to ensure research-based, innovative, collaborative teaching, etc.). The primary source of recruitment of the support staff is the researchers of the centers and institutes of the RA NAS, the PhD students of those institutes and centers, as well as the chairs of the ISEC and students of MA programs.

It became clear from the site visit that the lack of a real selection process for the teaching and support staff at the ISEC is primarily due to low salaries (that is why the positions are not attractive), and therefore priority is given to the practice of hiring staff on contractual or hourly paid basis from among the RA NAS researchers, teachers of other universities, employees of different institutions. In this case, the existence of job descriptions of the teaching staff can be useful, but it is not functional. In any case, the site visit showed that in the recruitment of teaching staff the heads of the chairs do not focus on the descriptors defined in those job descriptions.

## **5.2 The requirements for qualifications of teaching staff per academic program are comprehensively stated.**

The requirements for the professional qualities of the ISEC teaching staff are defined in the Regulation on the Formation of the Teaching Staff of the ISEC, according to which the teaching staff of the Center includes the categories of a Teacher, Associate Professor and Professor. For the mentioned categories indicators of professional qualification, scientific degree, work experience, performed scientific and educational work are defined in a differentiated way. According to the SER, "the minimum professional requirements for the teaching staff have been clarified, which are also reflected in their job descriptions". It should be noted, however, that both on the ISEC website and in the package of documents submitted by the Center the job descriptions of the teaching staff are missing, in contrast to that of the administrative and technical staff.

Information about the academic programs of the ISEC is included in the course descriptions which, however, do not reflect the professional requirements for teachers. In the expert report of the previous accreditation (2016), it was stated that "the requirements according to which the correspondence of professional qualities of teachers to the program or course should be determined are not clearly defined. That is why it is not possible yet to assess the compliance of competences of the teaching staff to the qualifications awarded within the academic programs.

In the improvement plan, the ISEC stated that there was a need to "define the requirements for competencies of the teaching staff for all academic programs in accordance with the qualifications awarded to the graduates." However, it should be noted that this need was neither included in the improvement plan, nor formulated as an action, nor actually implemented.

However, it should be noted that even though the requirements for the professional qualities of the teaching staff do not exist in a documented form for each academic program, they are presented to the teachers in a working manner and by the power of adopted tradition. Especially the teachers of the academic programs implemented on the basis of the infrastructure of the institutes of RA NAS, who, as a rule, become teachers through postgraduate education, receive the necessary scientific-pedagogical competencies. However, it shouldn't be ignored the fact that the lack of documented requirements for each academic program, in addition to managerial and other shortcomings, sometimes leads to inconsistencies between the program LOs and qualifications awarded on the one hand, and between the course list and content, on the other hand. This is what the expert panel witnessed in the case of the "Turkish Studies" academic program.

### **5.3 The Institution has well established policies and procedures for the periodic evaluation of the teaching staff.**

The main tool for regular evaluation of the teaching staff at the ISEC is the student surveys on the quality and effectiveness of teaching, which are conducted after the examinations at the end of each semester. According to the Regulation, the results of the surveys are discussed in the sessions of the chairs. However, the reports of the chairs do not give the opportunity to understand the depth of the discussion of the survey results. Therefore, it is not clear to what extent these results are analyzed, what follow-ups are done, what improvement actions are taken, etc. According to the SER, the survey results are used in the placement of teaching staff positions, for international exchanges and other processes. It became clear from the site visit that the most effective way of assessing the teaching staff is the semester consultations with the Dean, during which students have the opportunity to express their opinions, complaints, remarks and suggestions which they also do while direct communicating with the ISEC leadership. It also became clear that due to those communications one or two cases of change of teachers have taken place.

Another format for the evaluation of the teaching staff that is not functioned on a regular basis, but has been successfully invested recently, is considered to be the focus group interviews with alumni. The number of questions and formulations make it possible to identify as many problems as possible concerning teaching methods, tactics, interpersonal relationships and more.

Based on the improvement plan of the previous accreditation process, the ISEC undertook to add self-assessment and peer-review mechanisms to the list of those of teaching staff evaluation. However, it became clear from the site visit that the mentioned mechanisms were applied only in special cases (Chair of Foreign Languages) and were not practiced beyond them.

### **5.4. The Institution promotes professional development of the teaching staff in accordance with the needs outlined during regular evaluations (both internal and external).**

In the improvement plan of the previous accreditation process, the ISEC undertook to invest a system for the enhancement of qualifications of the teaching staff and to develop mechanisms for evaluating the effectiveness of trainings. In particular, the ISEC planned to study the experience of investing a system of enhancing the qualifications of the teaching staff. In 2018 the Center adopted the Regulation on Enhancing the Qualifications of the Teaching Staff, the study of which showed that the basis for this regulation was the experience of Yerevan State University (YSU). This regulation is carried out in a 5-year period with a credit system and it includes general professional and research blocks.

It became clear from the site visit that the Center pays special attention to developing digital skills and enhancing foreign language proficiency among teachers. An online training has been successfully conducted at the ISEC during the Covid-19 pandemic. As the program is envisaged for 5 years (2018-2023), it is still early to speak about its evaluation and improvement stages. In the S of the Center, the training of teachers is a priority for the establishment of electronic resources and organization of distance learning courses (Guideline 3, Provision 4 of the Strategic Plan).

The program for the enhancement of qualifications of the teaching staff lacks in the capacity component ensuring research-based teaching output.

According to the SER, other mechanisms of the enhancement of teaching staff's qualifications are as follows:

- initiatives of individual consultancy, exchange of experience, round-table discussions, workshops, trainings and seminars;
- professional trainings of a particular field provided within the framework of scientific programs in the research institutes of the RA NAS, participation in state and international conferences, workshops and seminars;
- scientific-practical seminars and master classes provided by invited specialists, employers, experts and alumni;
- trainings organized within the framework of ERASMUS+ and other formats of international cooperation.

The site visit showed, however, that the above-mentioned measures for enhancing the qualifications of teachers have recently been encouraged by the administrative staff of the ISEC, nevertheless, their regularity and frequency depend on the initiative of the head of a chair / Institute of the NAS or the Director of the Center. The processes do not go through clear and regular stages of the PDCA cycle.

### **5.5 The Institution ensures that there is a permanent staff for the stable provision of the academic programs.**

According to the SER and submitted documents, 255 teachers teach at the ISEC (as of 1 September 2020), among them 17 teachers are full-time (in the Appendix 5.2 50 teachers are mentioned as full-time staff members, including administrative staff members who are, in fact, full-time administrative staff members and teach as double-jobbers). Most of the teachers work on the basis of the Civil Law contract with annual renewal of employment contracts. 90% of the teaching staff has a scientific degree, 79% have worked at the Center for more than 3 years, 60% - for more than 5 years. Although there is no clear statistics, it becomes clear that most of the teachers are researchers of the institutes and centers of the RA NAS and full-time teachers of the ISEC.

Sustainability of teachers in academic programs is a priority for the ISEC. According to the SP, the Center has undertaken to apply a system of compensation and remuneration, to clearly regulate labor relations, to encourage professional growth of young teachers, etc. in this respect (Guideline 6 of the Strategic plan). According to improvement plan of the previous accreditation process, the Center planned to launch procedures and policy for incentives and penalties of the teaching staff. In this regard, it should be noted that in June 2020 the Regulation for Calculating and Paying the Bonuses for the Encouragement of Researchers based on the Research Outcomes was introduced. In the current Regulation, however, it is planned to pay bonuses only to the main staff of the Center, who, as it can be observed, form a small part of the teaching staff. And the amount paid as an additional payment cannot exceed 500 thousand AMD annually.

It must be mentioned that low salaries and the lack of additional mechanisms of encouragement are the main reasons grounding the fact that most teaching staff members are not full-time employees. On the other hand, it should be noted that the provision of researchers at the institutes and centers of the RA NAS contributes to the stability of the teaching staff, nevertheless, here there is a constant flow of young staff which is again conditioned by the low salary of the RA NAS.

## **5.6 There are set policies and procedures for the staff promotion.**

In its SP 2019-2023 the ISEC aims to encourage the professional growth of young teachers. The review of the SER, the study of the documents and the site visit revealed that the ICRC does not have a clear mentoring policy, program, procedure for beginner teachers, however, mentoring in some departments is carried out in an informal way, by tradition. There is a widespread perception at the Center that postgraduate students, young researchers who also teach, constantly working with experienced researchers, improve their professional skills. The experienced researchers of the institutes of RA NAS, many of whom are also professors, heads of chairs and associate professors, guide the post-graduate students, applicants and even MA students employed in the laboratories of the institutes of RA NAS, both in their scientific and teaching activities by giving them the opportunities to participate:

- in their scientific programs, experiments, lessons and transferring them teaching and research methods,
- in the sessions of the Scientific Councils of the institutes of RA NAS, sessions of the chairs of the ISEC, discussing with them the directions of the scientific-research and educational-methodical activity programs of the mentioned subdivisions.

According to the SER, the factors contributing to the professional advancement of the teaching staff of the Center are the scientific-methodical and educational-methodical trainings coordinated by the EQA Department and Educational-methodological Department, as well as the improvement of foreign language skills. As already mentioned, like other universities, in the ISEC also there are different categories of teaching staff positions: Professor, Associate Professor and Teacher. Although there are differences in the salaries among these categories, these differences are not as significant to make that remuneration an important factor for encouraging professional advancement. To the best of its ability, the ISEC encourages teaching in a foreign language (for one academic hour, a Doctor of Sciences teaching in a foreign language receives 4000 AMD, a PhD Candidate - 3500 AMD and a teacher without a degree - 3000 AMD). The ISEC also encourages the international mobility of its teachers, such as business trips, teaching at foreign universities, and participation in international conferences considering them as possible motivation for professional development.

It should be noted that due to the lack of financial resources, the Center itself allocates very little money to this process, instead it is the Department of External Relations that is actively working to organize these processes and provides guidance the teachers.

## **5.7 The Institution has necessary administrative and support staffs to achieve the strategic goals.**

In the improvement plan of the previous accreditation process, the ISEC planned to develop necessary mechanisms and tools to evaluate the effectiveness of the administrative staff. Within the framework of this action, in particular, it was planned to study the experience of other universities in evaluating the efficiency of the administrative staff, to launch a procedure for evaluating the efficiency of the administrative staff, and to analyze the efficiency of the activities of the administrative staff. The studied protocols and other documents, however, do not reflect the implementation of these actions. During the site visit it became clear that those analyzes were performed orally and only on a working basis.

In its SP 2019-2023 (Guideline 6, Action 6), the ISEC has set an objective to ensure the stability of the administrative staff in the context of HRM policy, through the use of compensation and remuneration systems, and the clear legal regulation of employment. According to it, the job descriptions for the positions of a Director, Deputy Directors, Dean, Head of the Chair, Heads of Structural Subdivisions and Specialists have been defined. However, the appointment for administrative positions is mostly done on a discretionary and non-competitive basis. Financial rewards are made upon possibility, but the amount is not significant.

In addition to the central administrative system of the ISEC, the head of the chair (the latter, in addition to scientific-pedagogical functions, also performs administrative work) and the Assistant to the chair carry out the functions of organizing and supporting educational activities at the level of academic programs. The head of the chair, who is mainly responsible for the quality, content, control, benchmarking of academic programs, internships, labor market relations and organization of research, carries out his/her activities with the support of the assistant.

### **CONSIDERATIONS**

The expert panel considers it positive that the categories of the positions of the teaching staff, the principles of their replacement and appointment are defined by the ISEC. At the same time, especially due to low salaries, competitive selections are not practiced which reduces the opportunity of attracting and engaging high-quality academic staff. The recruitment of the teaching staff mainly from postgraduate students of the institutes and centers of the RA NAS solves the issue of providing qualified specialists. On the other hand, a significant number of young people leave the system of the RA NAS, finding higher-paid jobs, which has a negative impact on the organization of teaching at the Center. In the context of improving the process of recruiting teachers, the expert panel considers it necessary to invest output criteria for the selection process.

The lack of requirements for the professional qualities of teachers in academic programs reduces the opportunities for the organization of outcome-based academic programs. Though the expert panel also welcomes the fact that the ISEC has recognized the need to set requirements for the professional qualifications of teachers in the curriculum, the fact that the commitment has not yet been fulfilled indicates significant problems in the management of academic programs. In fact, there is a situation when the relevant recruitment of staff capable of ensuring the LOs of academic programs depends on the head of the chair.

The expert panel is positive about the fact that the ISEC conducts evaluation of the teaching staff using the tools of student surveys and alumni focus group discussions. At the same time, the lack of in-depth analysis of the evaluation results through the use of these tools, as well as the lack of analysis of the effectiveness of the tools themselves (surveys, focus groups) do not allow to identify the potential and opportunities for use of the mentioned tools. The lack of self-assessment and peer review mechanisms for the teaching staff, despite the fact that it was envisaged in the improvement plan, is conditioned by management issues.

The expert panel welcomes the fact that the 5-year program for enhancing the qualifications of teachers has been launched at the ISEC, the results of which are noticeable, especially in terms of enhancement of teachers' foreign language proficiency and digital skills. The ongoing analysis of the program implementation could provide a basis for its improvement. The regularity and frequency of other activities aimed at enhancement of teachers' qualification which depend on the initiative of the

head of the chair/Director of the institute of the RA NAS, indicate a lack of a coordinated and quality management approach to the process.

The main guarantee for ensuring the stability of the teaching staff at the ISEC is conditioned by the factor of researchers and postgraduate students of the institutes and centers of the RA NAS, which, of course, is positive. On the other hand, the constant outflow of young qualified staff due to low salaries in the RA NAS and the ISEC system, and the fact that some of the total academic workload is put on teachers who are external double jobbers, to some extent endanger the stability of ensuring teaching staff for the implementation of academic programs.

The lack of financial resources also has a negative impact on the tempo of professional development of teachers.

The expert panel is positive about the fact that the ISEC provides at least minimum thresholds for administrative and support staff needed for the smooth implementation of academic programs. The panel also notes that despite the availability of job descriptions for administrative positions, the recruitment is mostly made on a non-competitive, discretionary basis, one of the reasons of which is the lack of funding (in terms of attracting the best staff). With the understanding of this fact, the expert panel, at the same time, does not see any optimistic tendencies to resolve these issues yet.

#### **SUMMARY**

Taking into account the fact that the Center has the necessary teaching staff to carry out its professions, which relies mainly on the human resources of the institutes of the RA NAS, there are some mechanisms for identifying and evaluating the needs of the teaching staff and ensuring their professional development, the Center takes steps to rejuvenate the teaching staff, the expert panel concludes that the ISEC meets the requirements of the Criterion 5.

#### **CONCLUSION**

The compliance of institutional capacities of the ISEC with the requirements of the Criterion 5 is **satisfactory**.

## **VI. RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT**

***CRITERION: The Institutions ensures the implementation of research activity and the link of the research with teaching and learning.***

#### **FINDINGS**

##### **6.1 The Institution has a clear strategy promoting its research interests and ambitions.**

The 4<sup>th</sup> Guideline of the SP 2019-2023 of the ISEC is dedicated to the scientific-research activity. Here the main emphasis is on ensuring necessary environment for the conduction of research with international standards, developing mechanisms of academic honesty, promoting research activities, publicizing and commercializing its results.

After the previous accreditation, the ISEC has developed a research strategy for 2019-2023, which in addition to the objectives set out in the SO, intends to expand the scope of the activity of the Center, to establish new chairs, to apply international practice and relations to bring the Center in line with the standards of an international research institution and to promote the commercialization of science.

In this regard, a number of regulations have already been developed by the Center and are still being developed. In particular, a procedure for publicizing, informing and commercializing the process of research results, a policy aimed at promoting research at the ISEC, the mechanisms ensuring interconnection of research activities with the education process, those ensuring validation of research outcomes, the concept of academic honesty have been developed, and the Plagscan program which was tested in the Chair of Economics was obtained and is currently in the phase of investment.

The position of a Deputy Director for Research has been separated, the main function of whom is to ensure communication with the RA NAS institutes.

The "KACHAR" scientific periodical which is involved in the list of scientific periodicals approved by the RA Supreme Certifying Committee is published twice a year. The teachers, postgraduate and MA students of the Center have the opportunity to publish articles in the popular journal of "In the World of Science".

## **6.2 The Institution has a long-term strategy and med-term and short-term programs that address its research interests and ambitions.**

A long-term working plan was developed at the Center based on the research strategy, however, it does not have a time-schedule, responsible staff members or units are not mentioned either, thus, the sequence of the defined objectives, the deadlines and those responsible for coordination are not clear.

The mid-term plan mainly envisages the development and implementation of various regulations, procedures and mechanisms, organization of conferences and steps aimed at promoting research. As a mid-term plan, the ISEC also adopted an action plan for the elimination of shortcomings identified in the expert report during the previous accreditation.

As short-term programs, no other programs have been developed except the short-term program for 2018-2019, the thematic funding programs and thematic programs are viewed as such. The results of the latter ones are presented in the reports of the chairs. The research directions of the chairs are approved by the Scientific Council of the Center.

The research programs of the chairs with a base Institute are mainly compiled according to the scientific programs of the given institute or the center.

The chairs that do not have a base institute, try to carry out their research in different professional institutions by revealing problems, formulating topics and making research of their separate sections by students. In particular, in order to identify the problems of inclusive education, the teachers and students of the Chair of Pedagogy conduct research in educational institutions, make the identified problems as subjects of research for their MA theses.

## **6.3 The Institution ensures the implementation of research and its development through sound policies and procedures.**

After the expert panel report of the previous accreditation, the position of a Deputy Director for Science, as a staff member in charge of research development, was established at the Center.

The Regulation on Calculation and Remuneration of Bonuses for the Encouragement of Researchers has been developed. According to the document, it is envisaged to materially encourage

the teaching staff of the chair for publication of research outcomes in internationally recognized periodicals, writing textbooks, educational manuals, etc.

However, the planned budget is very small (in 2020 it was 400 000 AMD) and as it turned out during the site visit, bonuses are inferior to the similar bonuses provided by the RA NAS institutes, as a result of which the teachers prefer to introduce themselves as employees of the institutes while publishing their research outcomes, rather than the teachers of the Center (in 2020 13 teachers received additional bonuses, among them ten published their works in the "KACHAR" periodical of the Center).

The Regulation for the Evaluation of the Research Work of the ISEC Teaching Staff has been developed, which approves the process of collecting, processing and evaluating the information on the research activities of the teaching staff of the ISEC.

Some laboratories and centers are equipped with the latest equipment, but, as it turned out during the site visit, the Center does not always sufficiently fund the acquisition of materials and equipment necessary for research.

#### **6.4 The Institution emphasizes internationalization of its research.**

In 2020 “the Regulation on Calculation and Remuneration of Bonuses for the Encouragement of Researchers based on the Research Outcomes” was adopted, which provides for an additional 80-100 thousand AMD for each edition in the periodicals included in the Web of Science or Scopus databases (there aren't teachers who were paid for such publications in 2020).

In order to encourage joint research with foreign partners, the employees who published their research outcomes in the scientific journals guaranteed by the RA Supreme Certifying Committee, in “KACHAR” or in journals included in "Web of Science" or "Scopus" databases, receive an additional bonus of 30,000 AMD, if the published work has a foreign co-author (none of the 13 teachers paid in 2020 had a publication with a foreign co-author).

In 2019, there were 7 publications in foreign internationally peer-reviewed professional journals, and 15 in CIS peer-reviewed professional journals, mainly in the field of Natural Sciences.

Conferences and seminars are organized with the participation of international specialists in certain specialties. In particular, about ten similar seminars are held annually in the Chair of Biology. In 2020, the Center together with a number of universities and scientific centers of Armenia and Russia, organized the international distant conference on "Historical Memory and Modern Political Processes".

The Ecologanospheric Research Center of the RA NAS together with the ISEC organized an international online summer school on "Environmental Sciences for Sustainable Health" from 6 to 13 of September of 2021, the aim of which was to complement the modernization of environmental education programs in Armenia and Georgia with innovative research-based learning tools.

The internationalization of research in the ISEC is mostly encouraged on a decentralized basis, due to the individual initiatives of the heads of some chairs. Thus, in the Chair of Environmental Protection and Nature Management there is a set rule that a teacher who does not supervise an MA thesis cannot participate in ERASMUS + mobility programs.

#### **6.5. The Institution has well established mechanisms for linking research with teaching.**

The Center has developed a Procedure for Publication, Informing and Commercialization of Research Outcomes, as well as mechanisms for validating the results of research of the ISEC.

The teachers of the Center are mainly leading researchers of different institutes and centers of the RA NAS and they are actively engaged in research activities. Most of the academic programs ensure the involvement of students in research work through linking their MA theses to the research works of their supervisors, as well as by the integration of the subject of "Scientific Research Methodology".

Students studying certain specialties extensively use the resources of the institutes, they are enrolled in scientific-research programs from the first year of their studies, but in general the number of such academic programs is not high and a small percent of ISEC students are involved in the scientific-research programs of the RA NAS respective institutes.

Thesis topics are often selected according to the research done by the supervisor, and the student is involved in research work from the first year of study. The students of the Chair of Environmental Protection and Nature Management choose the direction of their research from the very beginning of their studies, which is connected with the research priorities of the Ecologanospheric Research Center of the RA NAS.

However, the number of works published or co-authored by students is very small. In 2019 3 similar scientific articles were published and in 2020 three scientific and one Open Access research works were published.

The number of programs implemented with the participation of students is not high either. In 2020 the number of such programs was 10, and the number of involved students was 14, most of the programs are implemented in the field of Informatics.

The connection of research with education is mainly ensured through the joint research work of teachers and students and through the inclusion of students in the scientific programs of centers and institutes. Some courses provide mechanisms of linking education with research. Thus, the course of "Ecostatistics" involved in the academic program on "Environmental Protection and Nature Management" through which students are taught the SPSS information system, not only equips the graduate students with the skills to provide the data science of their MA theses, but also enables them to use the tool in other courses.

## **CONSIDERATIONS**

The expert panel welcomes the fact that the ISEC has a strategy for expressing its interests and ambitions in the field of research, which it has clarified since its previous accreditation. Innovation, implementation of research, the need to develop a link between research and education are among the key strategic values and goals of the ISEC. Developing a timetable in line with these priorities and defining the sequence of steps to be implemented will contribute to the implementation of strategic goals and the development of research activities.

It is positive that as a result of the previous accreditation process the ISEC has improved and coordinated the activities of the field by recruiting the staff, developing regulatory field related documentation, as well as developing and implementing certain mechanisms for promotion. The continuous implementation of all the mentioned will contribute to the interconnection of research activities and education. However, it should be noted that the scope of encouragement for teachers to be engaged in research work is not sufficient to ensure significant increase in research work.

The expert panel positively assesses the fact that some chairs of the Center cooperate with European universities, implement research programs, which also contributes to the internationalization of research, but this process is not widespread either. It is also positive that the ISEC encourages its teachers to publish their research works in internationally cited journals, as well as has set an additional payment for co-publishing with foreign partners, which can be a source of motivation for teachers.

In most of the chairs of the Center, the connection between research and education is ensured through MA theses and involvement of students in research works of their scientific supervisors. Individually, in particular, in case of the Natural Sciences, after admission students are immediately involved in the scientific programs of the chair, according to which the topic of the thesis is chosen and students learn throughout the study, by applying the acquired knowledge in practice. This is the biggest advantage of the Center.

The expert panel welcomes the fact that the ISEC has adopted a policy of involving students in research programs and topics but the percentage of their involvement is currently small and not widespread in all directions, which may hinder the dissemination of the good practice.

### **SUMMARY**

Given that ISEC has strategic directions expressing its ambitions in the field of research, it tries to create preconditions for the internationalization of research activities, promotes the implementation of research and its interconnection with the education process, has made improvement activities based on the results of the previous accreditation process, the expert panel finds that the ISEC meets the requirements of the Criterion 6.

### **CONCLUSION**

The compliance of institutional capacities of the ISEC with the requirements of the Criterion 6 is **satisfactory**.

## **VII. INFRASTRUCTURE AND RESOURCES**

**CRITERION:** The Institution has necessary resources to create learning environment and to effectively support the implementation of its stated mission and goals.

### **FINDINGS**

**7.1 The Institution has an appropriate learning environment for the implementation of current academic programs.**

The vast majority of the ISEC chairs are located next to the relevant institutes of the RA NAS and they use the scientific and infrastructural base of the Academy. The Fundamental Scientific Library of the NAS which is the second one in Armenia with the equipment is at the disposal of the Center. The students of the Center have the opportunity to use the resources of both the above mentioned library and the libraries of the institutes and centers of the RA NAS. During the site visit it turned out that the issue of the access to international scientific journals in the Center is not solved at the institutional level; the problem is solved at the individual level through personal contacts of students and teachers.

The Center also has a Laboratory of Economics, Psychological Observatory and a Legal Clinic. The Center has a properly furnished classroom base, there are classrooms for conducting subject courses as well. The classrooms of the Center are equipped with the necessary technical means, which allows teachers and students to organize education in accordance with modern requirements. Free WI-FI access is available on all the floors of the Center.

Various institutes and structures of the RA NAS, where the professional chairs of the ISEC are located, are members of different international scientific structures. Due to close scientific links and cooperation, the modern equipment of laboratories and other opportunities are used in applied research in accordance with international standards or new laboratories are established.

The Center has a separate classroom for distance learning, equipped with the necessary technical means to conduct the distance learning courses.

As a result of the site visit and observation of resources it became clear that the resource bases available in the Institutes differ in their degree of up-to-dateness. In particular, the academic program on Environmental Protection and Nature Management is implemented on the basis of the Center for Ecologanospheric Research of the RA NAS, students use a modern microscope, the Center has an equipped laboratory, etc. The academic program on Informatics and Computer Engineering is also implemented in classrooms equipped with modern computers.

## **7.2 The Institution provides appropriate financial resources with necessary equipment and facilities as needed to achieve its mission and goals.**

The budget of the ISEC is generated from tuition fees, grants as well as funds received from paid courses. The Center has developed and approved the financial planning and management policy, and the Procedure for planning and monitoring the activities of the Center in accordance with the financial resources was approved. This policy is the basis for allocating appropriate financial resources for the implementation of the SP goals.

According to the SER< in the estimates of annual expenditure for 2019 and 2020 a special budget has been allocated for the professional development of teaching staff and for the promotion of scientific research.

During the site visit it turned out that the means allocated for practical works not always satisfy the needs, especially in the fields that require additional materials for the implementation of experiments.

## **7.3 The Institution has policy on financial distribution and capacity to sustain and ensure the integrity and continuity of the programs offered at the Institution.**

According to the SER, the policy on financial planning and management has been developed and functioned at the Center. The Financial Department of the Center carries out the monitoring of the purposefulness and efficiency of budget expenses, as a result of which, upon necessity, reallocations are made between expenditure lines.

The structural subdivisions of the ISEC are the centers of financial responsibility of the Center. Each year the heads of the subdivisions present to the Financial Department the costs of goods and materials required for the implementation of events in the coming year, as well as their justifications and final outcomes of the events. The Financial Department examines the accuracy of the submitted plans, comparing them with the envisaged revenues for the coming year, makes the

necessary adjustments, amendments, compiles the annual budget and submits it to the Director of the Center for approval. This year a Post of Financier has been established, whose main responsibilities are budget monitoring and planning.

#### **7.4 The Institution's resource base supports the implementation of Institution's academic programs and strategic plan, which promotes sustainability and continuous improvement of quality.**

According to the SER, in the annual expenditure estimates of 2019 and 2020 set out separate budget lines for respective events of education quality assurance including professional development and training of teachers, promotion of research work and participation in conferences. During the site visit, it became clear that the Center is carrying out processes to identify the needs related to the academic programs. Appropriate resources are available for the implementation of academic programs and the given resource base is updated from time to time.

#### **7.5 The Institution has a sound policy and procedure to manage information and documentation.**

Based on the results of the previous accreditation, the documentation processes carried out by the ISEC have been improved. In the departments of the ISEC the paperwork and documentation circulation are carried out in accordance with the Procedure on Paperwork and Documentation Circulation of the Center. According to the SER, the mentioned procedure regulates the correspondence of the Center, preparation of documents, processing of applications, deadlines for submission of documents, correspondence of the outgoing letters, control over the documents received by the ICRC, the further storage and archiving of documents.

According to the SER, there is also an internal electronic information network and an electronic Dean's office at the Center, but during the site visit it became clear that the system is not fully operational yet.

#### **7.6 The Institution creates safe and secure environment through health and safety mechanisms taking into account the students with special needs.**

According to the SER, the Center's annual expenditure estimates provide financial resources for health and safety measures in a separate expenditure line.

According to the SER, there is a medical unit in the Center, but during the site visit it became clear that it is not fully operational.

The main employees have the chance to use the opportunity of the social package, as well as to use the available rest houses of the NAS system with affordable conditions.

During the site visit it became clear that no special conditions are created for students with special needs. Most of the buildings have elevators, but before reaching the elevator there are stairs that do not have ramps. However, some of the Center's buildings have adequate resources for students with special needs.

During the site visit it became clear that there are air conditioners in the laboratories, which contributes to the preservation of safety rules during laboratory experiments. There is also a fire protection system in the Center.

## **7.7 The Institution has special mechanisms in place for the evaluation of the effectiveness, applicability and availability of resources given to the teaching staff and learners.**

According to the SER, the most effective mechanism for evaluating the applicability, accessibility and effectiveness of the resources provided to students and teachers is the anonymous survey on the satisfaction with the academic programs which provides a clear picture of the level of satisfaction of stakeholders. Besides, regularly organized meetings and discussions are also important and workable mechanisms.

During the site visit and observation of the documents it became clear that the majority of both students and teachers are satisfied with the resources provided to them.

### **CONSIDERATIONS**

The expert panel welcomes the fact that, in general, the ISEC has the necessary material and financial resources which contribute to the realization of the mission and strategic goals of the Center.

Although the Center provides relevant funding to promote professional development of the teaching staff and conduction of scientific research, nevertheless, the salaries of the teaching and support staff are still low, which can be risky for the recruitment of competitive staff.

The Center tries to provide an appropriate resource base for the implementation of academic programs, as well as uses the resource base of the institutes of the RA NAS which provides an opportunity for the effective implementation of the academic programs.

The ISEC budget is formed from several sources, which is positive in terms of diversification of financial sources. At the same time, the panel notes that the commercialization of scientific research will foster financial stability.

The expert panel positively evaluates the fact that based on the results of the previous accreditation, the documentation processes have been improved. Electronic databases have been created, but the system is not yet functional for communication. Full implementation of the system will contribute to a more coordinated work.

The expert panel also positively evaluates the fact that the Center tries to create a safe and secure environment for students. The Center is well equipped with necessary means, however, the ISEC is not yet fully equipped for students with special needs.

### **SUMMARY**

Taking into account that the ISEC creates the necessary environment for the implementation of academic programs by using the resources of the RA NAS, has the necessary material resources, steps are taken to improve infrastructure, an electronic document management system has been invested, some mechanisms are applied for the evaluation of availability and applicability of resources, the expert panel concludes that the ISEC meets the requirements of the Criterion 7.

### **CONCLUSION**

The compliance of institutional capacities of the ISEC with the requirements of the Criterion 7 is **satisfactory**.

## VIII. SOCIETAL RESPONSIBILITY

**CRITERION: The Institution is accountable to the government and society for the education it offers and the resources it uses as well as for the research it conducts.**

### FINDINGS

#### **8.4. The Institution has clear policy on accountability.**

The accountability process of the ISEC is regulated by the charter of the ISEC the RA NAS. Each year the Center submits a report on its activities to the Presidency of the RA NAS. The annual report of the Director is compiled on the basis of the annual reports of the separate subdivisions, which reflect the results of the current activity. The reports of the Director and heads of scientific subdivisions are submitted to the Scientific Council.

Examination of the documents conducted during the visit showed that bottom-up accountability mainly includes quantitative indicators and indices. The reports are written in a free style, no data analysis is presented in the context of the SP, quality indicators and efficiency assessment. Most of the reports are published on the website. Nevertheless, there is a need to improve accountability mechanisms.

#### **8.5. The Institution ensures transparency of its procedures and processes and makes them publicly available.**

The information on the activities of the ISEC is available on the official website, which has an available structure. All the regulations, procedures, comprehensive information about admission and examination, documents on the ISEC structure, academic programs, various events, cooperation, international programs and other processes are available on the website. Events, news, activities and announcements related to the ISEC are also presented on Facebook, Youtube, Twitter social platforms. The reports of the subdivisions are published on the website of the Center. However, it should be noted that the website does not contain the Director's reports, financial reports, minutes of the sessions of Scientific Council, reports of the chairs.

Admission questionnaires, academic programs, course manuals are available on the website. The site contains brief information about the ISEC specialties in English and Russian, however, information on academic programs and courses taught in a foreign language is important in terms of attracting international students, which is still lacking. According to the expert panel, it is important to present the professions and their attractiveness on social platforms, as well as adequately illustrate the events organized by the chairs of the ISEC which are located in the institutes of the RA NAS.

#### **8.6. The Institution has sustainable feedback mechanisms for establishing contacts with society.**

The activities of the Department of Public Relations and Career, the Department of External Relations and the chairs of ISEC relate to the development of public relations.

As a feedback mechanism, the ISEC functions surveys which are conducted among students, alumni and employers. There are means of feedback on the website, as well as on social networks. The EQA Department also carried out an analysis of suggestions presented by the stakeholders. Feedback

from external stakeholders is also provided through teachers who carry out business and public activities in various professional fields and ensure the Center's connection with the economy, the public sector and the labor market. Such an approach makes it easier and more efficient to organize internships, establish new partnerships and involve external stakeholders as well as facilitates the transfer of MA students to the labor market in the future.

The informal contacts between staff member-student, student-teacher, direct contact with graduates in the institutes of the RA NAS contribute to the formation of public relations in the ISEC.

#### **8.7. The Institution has mechanisms that ensure knowledge /value/ transfer to the society.**

The process of transferring knowledge to the public is carried out both through the administrative subdivisions and the chairs of the ISEC. It became clear from the expert visit that the Center organized trainings on distance learning in accordance with the relevant training program. The Center functions various mechanisms for transferring knowledge to the public, such as winter schools and various courses. Among organized courses and meetings, the followings can be mentioned: the series of courses on "Political Management", the Summer Law School, the series of political science courses, the open lecture on "Research Skills ", the meeting-course dedicated to the challenges and problems of energy efficiency, energy saving and energy system, the school on "Parliamentary Diplomacy", the course on "I Know my Rights", the professional school of "Current Regional Issues, Challenges and Opportunities".

The Ecologanospheric Research Center of the RA NAS has a subdivision - the UNESCO Chair of Sustainable Development, which has partnerships with about 30 schools in the country, within the framework of which schoolchildren participate in ecological education and literacy courses. The latter ones are developed both by the Chair of Environmental Protection and Nature Management of the ISEC and by the methodologists of other scientific-educational institutions.

According to the SER, the constant cooperation with mass media can be mentioned as another mechanism. During the live broadcasts and various TV and radio programs with the participation of the ISEC staff and teachers knowledge is transferred to the society.

The popular science periodical "In the World of Science" is published four times a year which contains the scientific articles of the Center's teaching staff, as well as postgraduate and MA students.

#### **CONSIDERATION**

The expert panel positively evaluates the fact that the ISEC has an accountability system, which is characterized by bottom-up accountability and regularity and is summarized in the annual report of the Director. At the same time, this process is mainly limited by the presentation of quantitative data, the absence of analysis in the context of the ISEC's strategic goals and academic program needs, which may hinder the identification of problems as well as planning and implementation of further improvement.

The expert panel positively assesses the fact that information on the activities, services, structure and events of the ISEC is available both on the official website and on social media platforms. However, in terms of internationalization it is important that the English section of the website presents academic programs in a foreign language, as well as individual courses which will increase the attractiveness and will contribute to the enrollment of international students.

It is also evaluated positively that the ISEC has launched advertising its chairs and academic programs as well as ensuring the awareness of the wider layers of society. At the same time, taking into account the fact that there are no BA programs, it is necessary to make the presentation of academic programs provided by the chairs on social media platforms more comprehensive, as well as to present in detail the activities of the chairs, data about the teaching staff, research directions, events of the chairs. All the mentioned will increase the visibility of the Center.

The panel welcomes the fact that the ISEC has various mechanisms for transferring knowledge to the public, including winter schools and various courses, but it should be mentioned that the improvement of mechanisms for disseminating information about the above mentioned processes will expand the scope of involvement of stakeholders.

### **SUMMARY**

Taking into account the fact that the ISEC has accountability mechanisms, tries to ensure the transparency of its processes, accessibility for the state and the public, steps are taken to provide feedback, there are mechanisms to transfer values to the society, the expert panel concludes that ISEC meets the requirements of the Criterion 8.

### **CONCLUSION**

The compliance of institutional capacities of the ISEC with the requirements of the Criterion 8 is **satisfactory**.

## **IX. EXTERNAL RELATIONS AND INTERNATIONALIZATION**

**CRITERION: The Institution promotes experience exchange and enhancement through its sound external relations practices, thus promoting internationalization of the Institution.**

### **FINDINGS**

**9.1 The Institution promotes its external relations through sound policies and procedures aimed at creating an environment conducive to experience exchange and enhancement and internationalization.**

The development and internationalization of external relations is one of the prioritized goals of the ISEC which is defined in both 2014-2018 and 2019-2023 Strategic Plans.

The ambitious goals of internationalization defined in the current SP are reflected in a separate document of the Strategy of Internationalization, which was developed based on the recommendation of the expert panel of the previous accreditation process.

The actions and objectives of the ISEC education process involve enlargement of internship of professional courses in a foreign language (including distance education mode as well), implementation of joint academic programs with foreign research universities.

The objectives and activities of internationalization of the scientific activity include the implementation of joint research programs with leading foreign universities and scientific-educational centers, development and implementation of mechanisms to encourage the publication of articles in high impact factor scientific journals and representative participation in international conferences.

The participation in international programs, implementation of joint projects, exchange of experience, educational and research programs with various research institutes, organization and holding of international conferences, participation in conferences organized abroad, establishment of cooperation with local and foreign universities are the means of external relations and internationalization, etc.

According to the data presented in the SER and in the attached documents, as well as the results of the site visit, it can be observed that in contrast to the external/outgoing mobility, the indicators of incoming mobility are not high; the Center is not attractive for foreign students yet. A comprehensive assessment of the effectiveness of internationalization processes is not carried out yet. The reports of the Department of External Relations are not always linked to the strategy, hence, it is not clear to what extent the objectives are being implemented and to what extent the intended outcomes are being achieved. At the same time, it should be mentioned that the ISEC's strategy on internationalization was endorsed in January 2020 and, as the site visit showed, the Center plans to involve the strategy indicators in the report<sup>14</sup>.

## **9.2 The Institution's external relations infrastructure ensures regulated process.**

The ISEC's activities on the development of foreign relations and internationalization activities are organized by the Department of External Relations of the ISEC the functions of which include establishing links with state and foreign educational institutions, research centers, organization and coordination of exchange programs of students, teaching and administrative staff, organization of recruitment of students from other countries, analysis of activities carried out within the framework of grant projects, submitting proposals aimed at increasing their efficiency, etc. The work of the mentioned subdivision is coordinated by the Head of the Department, who is accountable to the ISEC Director.

In addition to the Department of External Relations, there is a network of staff members responsible for internationalization of chairs, with whom the Department actively cooperates in order to make the internationalization process more efficient. However, those responsible for internationalization of the chairs are not extra paid for this work; the main motivation is the participation in international programs.

The Department of External Relations has two staff members, one of them is a Leading Specialist who coordinates the preparation activities of issuing visas. During the site visit, it became clear that in order to clearly implement the functions of the Department and to be more involved in the internationalization process, the ISEC needs to involve a higher number of staff.

Some chairs of the ISEC of the RA NAS are actively involved in various international programs. Conditioned by the pandemic, all mobility programs were cancelled in 2020, but the Department continued to work, it developed and signed 17 new cooperation agreements and memoranda, which is 34% of the total agreements and memoranda.

The EU ERASMUS + MENVIPRO capacity building project on "Modernization of Academic programs on "Environmental Protection (Ecology)" for Armenia and Russia" is being implemented by the Chair of Environmental Protection and Nature Management, and as a result, a unique inter-university educational-research laboratory (ERLEP) has been established in the ISEC.

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<sup>14</sup> The statement was re-formulated based on the ISEC's observations.

The ISEC is also involved in the EU Erasmus + ARMDOCT project on "Doctoral Education Reform in Armenia in line with the Requirements of the Academic And industry Community and with EU Experience".

### **9.3 The Institution effectively collaborates with local and international counterparts.**

According to the SER ISEC has about 50 agreements with various foreign universities and scientific-educational organizations. In the last 3 years, their number has increased (or been renewed) by 25. About 20 universities and institutes of the Russian Federation, Poland, Ukraine, Belgium, Italy, Georgia, Germany, France and Portugal are among the partner countries of the ISEC. The successful experience of cooperation with Tuscia University has been disseminated in a number of chairs.

A good example of local cooperation is the implementation of the "Business Administration (Management)" MA program in distance learning mode launched since the 2017-2018 academic year, with the award of the joint diploma by the ISEC and the Public Administration Academy of the RA. The program was developed by the grant project of Foundation for Higher Education Innovation Competition of Armenia - "Distance MA Education with Joint Diploma Award" with the financial support of the World Bank.

Some academic programs of the ISEC ("Management", "Financial Administration" and "Marketing and Quality"), double diploma processes have been launched. The chairs of the ISEC carry out benchmarking to resolve issues related to curriculum differences during student mobility, based on which changes are made to the academic programs. In particular, within the framework of "Modernization of "Environmental Protection (Ecology)" Academic Program for Armenia and Georgia" ERASMUS+ Capacity building project the benchmarking of courses of the ISEC MA academic program on "Environmental Protection and Nature Management" was carried out with partner universities. The Department of Informatics and Computer Engineering actively cooperates with the University of Paul Sabatier (Toulouse 3) in France, which has been selected as a university for benchmarking.

The internationalization is one of the key goals of the Center and it takes steps towards internationalization. But it should be mentioned that the indicators of mobility of students and teaching staff mentioned in the SER are not that much sufficient and do not correspond to the ambitions of the Center.

In 2017 the Department of External Relations conducted a survey on the process and projects of internationalization of the RA NAS scientific organizations, and respective brief report was presented. The report involves the action plan per scientific organization and its respective chair (located in the given scientific organization). At the same time, the ISEC doesn't have an appropriate analysis, which would reveal and complete the achievements of each chair in the context of the internationalization of the Center, as well as the reasons of the absence of high indicators and development tendencies.

The majority of mandatory courses of the two professional academic programs - "Molecular and Cellular Biology" and "Environmental Protection and Nature Management" are involved in the list of courses taught in English<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup> The statement was re-formulated based on the ISEC's observations.

#### **9.4 The Institution ensures internal stakeholders' appropriate level of a foreign language to enhance efficiency of internationalization.**

The ISEC finds it important that the staff involves administrative staff members, teachers, researchers and students who have high level of foreign language proficiency which is needed for the achievement of its strategic goals.

In 2017-2018 academic year within the framework of the training program of teaching and administrative staff of the RA NAS, based on the results of a survey conducted by the Chair of Foreign Languages and EQA Department, a foreign language (English) testing and follow-up training of the teaching staff were conducted.

The ISEC conducted tests to check the level of foreign language proficiency among the students, teaching and administrative staff members. As a result, there was a certain increase in English language proficiency among both the teaching and administrative staff. In particular, the number of teachers dominating A1 level was 0% in 2020 as compared to the indicator registered in 2018 which was 7, and the number of teachers having A2 level has decreased by 82.6%, i.e. 7 teachers, as compared to 23 in 2018. A bigger change has been registered at B2 level: 1 teacher having such a language proficiency level was registered in 2018, and in 2020 the number was already 30. At the C1 level of language proficiency there was also a positive increase by 20%. In 2017, with the initiative of the Chair of Foreign Languages, the English Club was opened, the main objectives of which are the training of all beginner and non-beginner students in all the above mentioned languages within extracurricular courses as well as the training of specialists having higher education by the efforts of highly qualified English language teachers in accordance with approved programs. The indicators of foreign language proficiency among students by years are as follows: in 2017-2018 - 92.8%, in 2018-2019 - 94%, in 2019-2020 - 91%. About 15 foreign language courses have been integrated in the programs of the chairs which are involved in international mobility programs.

#### **CONSIDERATIONS**

The expert group positively evaluates the work done by the ISEC in the direction of the development of internationalization and external relations. In particular, after the previous accreditation the Center has regulated its activities in the sector by elaborating a development strategy, the successful implementation of which can contribute to more targeted activity. Since its previous accreditation the ISEC has intensified its contacts with both local and international partners, which has contributed to the study and localization of international experience in various academic programs and courses. However, the expert panel's study revealed that the internationalization of academic programs is not widespread in all academic programs implemented by the ISEC.

It is positive that courses in English have been integrated in the Center the activation of which will contribute to the internationalization of academic programs and will increase the level of student mobility. The expert panel welcomes the efforts made by the Department of External Relations in terms of internationalization and activation of external relations of the overall activity of the Center, by promoting active participation of teachers in exchange and capacity building programs.

It is positive that the ISEC makes efforts to increase the level of foreign language proficiency, which indicates that the English language proficiency among teachers has increased in recent years.

It is also positive that preparations for the double-diploma process have launched in case of some academic programs but the process needs to be intensified.

However, the expert panel believes that the indicators of the effectiveness of the Department of External Relations are not clear and measurable. Besides, it is unclear how the chairs and other structural units are selected to participate in the internationalization process, to what extent it is considered as a priority for the development.

There is a need to disseminate good practice of chairs having indicators of activeness in internationalization, to include more chairs in international programs which will contribute to the dissemination of best practice.

### **SUMMARY**

Taking into account the fact that after the previous accreditation the Center has regulated the processes of external relations and internationalization, which has influenced the development of current academic programs and capacity building, the cooperation with local and international organizations has increased and steps have been taken to increase the level of foreign language proficiency, the expert panel concludes that the ISEC meets the requirements of the Criterion 9.

### **CONCLUSION**

The compliance of institutional capacities of the ISEC with the requirements of the Criterion 9 is **satisfactory**.

## **X. INTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEM**

**CRITERION: The Institution has an internal quality assurance system, which promotes establishment of a quality culture and continuous improvement of all the processes of the Institution.**

### **FINDINGS**

#### **10.1 The Institution has quality assurance policies and procedures.**

In its strategy the ISEC has given importance to internal quality assurance policy, transparency and accountability.

According to the Center's QA concept, the quality of education is considered by the Center not only as a strategic goal to create a knowledge-based society and provide quality educational services, but also as a strategic means to develop the Center's activities in the international arena in conditions of the internal and external factors and the competitive field. The quality of education services is in line with the mission and the SP adopted by the Center. The Center emphasizes the creation and provision of academic programs and educational services, which are designed to meet international, national and social needs in Armenia and anticipate changes in the economy and society at international levels.

The ISEC QA manual, approved in 2014, defines the QA principles, system goals and objectives, key areas, system structure, processes, mechanisms for continuous quality improvement and all regulations and procedures referring to QA. It should be noted that the QA manual has not been revised since 2014.

The benchmarking of QA policy and processes has been carried out with the examples of Tuscia University and Paul Sabatier University.

### **10.2 The Institution allocates sufficient material, human and financial resources to manage internal quality assurance processes.**

In order to manage the internal QA processes of the ISEC, the EQA Department has been operating in ISEC since 2013. Based on the results of the previous accreditation, the staff of the EQA Department has been replenished with a sociologist. According to the SER, taking into account the geography of the location of the ISEC chairs, a new quality management system - the system of QA responsibilities has recently been established in the chairs, which is becoming a more efficient mechanism year by year. The discussions of the Center's internal stakeholders with the expert panel prove that this system promotes more effective communication among internal stakeholders. However, the degree of effectiveness of cooperation is not the same in all chairs of and it is often conditioned by the involvement of the Head of the chair in QA processes.

The annual budget provides for at least 2% of the total expenditure planned for a separate article on measures to improve the quality of education. These financial resources are directed to the implementation of various trainings aimed at QA. For example, trainings were organized on the following topics: 3-day seminar-training with the heads of the chairs on "Strengthening Intra-Chair Relations, Development of the Interuniversity Quality System" in Tsakhkadzor, in 2020, a 2-day training on "Organization of Academic Programs and Internal Monitoring" held in Yerevan.

According to the SER, the QA Standing Committee has been functioning since 2014, which convenes regular meetings to discuss the implementation of the improvement plan, QA internal issues, regulations subject to review, procedures and mechanisms, and other internal quality management issues. The mentioned Committee includes representatives of students, administrative and teaching staff members.

### **10.3 The internal and external stakeholders are involved in quality assurance processes.**

According to the SER, the Center constantly emphasizes the involvement of internal and external stakeholders in QA processes. In particular, internal stakeholders are involved in the assessment of education quality by participating in current surveys conducted among students and teaching staff, surveys conducted among graduates to evaluate their satisfaction, as well as focus group discussions which provide an opportunity to identify current problems. They are included in the Scientific Council and they participate in QA processes as representatives of the educational self-governing body. The Board of Group Leaders has its role in QA processes which enables students from different groups to present their problems through the group leaders.

External stakeholders are involved in discussions about academic programs, attestation commissions, and they participate in surveys about the satisfaction of employers with professional quality. However, during the site visit it became clear that the satisfaction of external stakeholders is studied but these processes are not regulated.

### **10.4 The internal quality assurance system is periodically reviewed.**

According to the SER, the QA processes of the Center are carried out through the PDCA cycle. Many of the current rules, procedures and regulations were revised, amended and improved in

2015-2020 during their implementation. However, expert discussions have shown that their review is situational, depending on the need at the moment.

In 2020, in connection with the transition to online teaching, new procedures have been established to identify the satisfaction of students and teachers with the quality of online teaching, as well as questionnaires have been developed to identify the satisfaction with the degree of interconnectedness of research and education.

The QA mechanisms have also been used to study the Center's activities directed to research and internationalization processes, however, there is still a lack of study on management and administration processes at the Center. Taking into account the results of the previous accreditation, the Center planned to introduce mechanisms of self-evaluation and peer-review, but due to some methodological shortcomings, the process was not completed and there was no opportunity to evaluate the effectiveness. It became clear from the site visit that in the near future the ISEC envisages steps for the comprehensive implementation of those processes.

#### **10.5 The internal quality assurance system provides valid and sufficient grounds for the external quality assurance processes.**

The ISEC conducted its first self-evaluation in 2014. In 2017 the Center approved the plan on the elimination of shortcomings, which was based on the remarks made in the SER and in the expert panel report. The mid-term report on all criteria set for monitoring the implementation of the plan was submitted to ANQA in 2018. Here actions taken and implemented by the ISEC during the reporting period are described.

There is an accountability system at all structural levels. The reports can also be found on the ISEC website. However, the presented reports and the SER conducted for the ISEC's re-accreditation are quite descriptive; they present some quantitative data and do not provide a comprehensive picture of the fact-finding and analysis process in the context of external evaluation.

#### **10.6. The internal quality assurance system ensures the transparency of the processes at the Institution providing valid and up to date information on their quality to the internal and external stakeholders.**

The QA section of the official website of the ISEC contains the documents related QA - regulations, procedures, reports, etc. According to the mechanism invested after the previous accreditation, surveys on the satisfaction with the courses are first sent to the heads of the chairs for their information and afterwards, a day later, to each teacher through an individual e-mail for him/her to get informed about his/her results. In addition, regular meetings are held with teachers and group leaders and the problems are discussed. However, meetings with various stakeholders have shown that the awareness on the results is not yet shared with everyone.

In order to evaluate employers' opinions about professional knowledge and competences of the ISEC graduates, regular meetings are organized with employers. As it turned out during the site visit, the students were informed about the results of the surveys orally during the meetings with the staff of the EQA Department.

### **CONSIDERATIONS**

The expert panel positively evaluates the fact that the Center has documents regulating the QA processes, and respective bases have been created to improve and develop them. In recent years,

the system of staff members responsible for QA at chairs has been integrated, which contributes to more effective implementation of QA functions, taking into account the structure of the ISEC and the location of different chairs in the institutes of the RA NAS. However, in separate cases, the QA responsible staff member of the given chair is the head of the chair or the person in charge for the academic program, who can also be the director of the relevant institute of the RA NAS and person responsible for internationalization. Such an overload can hinder the achievement of the defined goals.

The internal and external stakeholders of the ISEC are involved in QA processes; these processes have been improved since the previous accreditation, in particular, there is a positive tendency in the process of investing mechanisms of ensuring feedback with internal stakeholders. Working groups are formed in the Center upon necessity, which allows to give operative solutions to the existing problems. However, the expert panel believes that greater access to the internal stakeholder survey results will contribute to a more detailed understanding of current processes and procedures by establishing a basis for continuous improvement.

It is positive that regular meetings are organized with employers to study their opinions.

The expert panel also believes that the Center needs to address management and administration processes and collect data to make management decisions. More regulation of these processes will lead to credible decision-making and achievement of the goals set by the Center. The QA Manual, approved in 2014, needs to be updated, based on the current challenges and changes at the Center.

The expert panel gives importance to the application of the PDCA cycle of quality management for the implementation of ongoing processes, some examples of which have been considered by the panel in the context of the expert evaluation. However, there is a need to also apply this principle for the effective implementation of processes related to governance, academic programs and other areas of the Center, which will promote dissemination of quality culture in all areas of the ISEC.

The expert panel welcomes the fact that some data collection mechanisms are available at the ISEC but they need to be improved, as the data collected is mainly quantitative, and the Center may have difficulty in making them as a basis for further improvement. The expert group considers that the Center needs to take steps to disseminate information about QA processes and the results of carried out activities, which will increase the transparency of the QA system and will increase trust.

### **SUMMARY**

Taking into account the fact that after the previous accreditation the internal QA policies and procedures have been improved, appropriate human and material resources have been provided, the scope of internal and external stakeholders involved in the QA system has been expanded, several processes have undergone through the quality management cycle, some steps have been taken to increase the level of accessibility to the information, the expert panel concludes that the ISEC meets the requirements of the Criterion 10.

### **CONCLUSION**

The compliance of institutional capacities of the ISEC with the requirements of the Criterion 10 is **satisfactory**.

## EVALUATION ACCORDING TO ACCREDITATION CRITERIA

<i>CRITERION</i>	<i>CONCLUSION</i>
1. Mission and Purposes	<b>Satisfactory</b>
2. Governance and Administration	<b>Unsatisfactory</b>
3. Academic Programs	<b>Satisfactory</b>
4. Students	<b>Satisfactory</b>
5. Faculty and Staff	<b>Satisfactory</b>
6. Research and Development	<b>Satisfactory</b>
7. Infrastructure and Resources	<b>Satisfactory</b>
8. Societal Responsibility	<b>Satisfactory</b>
9. External Relations and Internationalization	<b>Satisfactory</b>
10. Internal Quality Assurance System	<b>Satisfactory</b>

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**Menua Soghomonyan**  
**Head of the Expert Panel**

**30 December 2021**

## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX 1. CVs OF THE EXPERT PANEL MEMBERS

**Menua Soghomonian** - was an MA graduate of the Faculty of International Relations of Yerevan State University (YSU) in 2004. In 2007 he got the degree of a Candidate of Historical Sciences. In 2007-2008 he lectured at the Chair of History in Yerevan State Medical University. In 2008-2015 M. Soghomonian was the Assistant at the Chair of Political Institutes and Processes at YSU, in 2008-2011 he was the Deputy Dean of the Faculty of International Relations at YSU, in 2011-2019 he was the Scientific Secretary of YSU, in 2019 he was the Vice-Rector for Educational Affairs at YSU. Since 2015, he has been the Associate Professor at the Chair of Political Institutes and Processes at YSU. He is an author and co-author of a number of books and articles.

**Jean Marc Lobaccaro** – in 1987-1992 studied in the University of Montpellier (BA and MA Degrees), and was awarded with the Scientific Degree of a Doctor in the sphere of Reproduction and Development. J. M. Lobaccaro is a Professor of Molecular Physics at Clermont Auvergne University since 1997. Since 2004 he has worked in the Ministry of Research and International Cooperation in France and in the Ministry of Education, University and Research in Italy in the directions of Endocrinology, Cancer and Lipids. In 2012-2018 he worked in the Flemish Research Foundation against cancer. In 2015-2019 he was in the Scientific Council of French and Italian University. He is the Deputy Dean of the Faculty of Biology in the Institute of Genetics, Reproduction and Development of French University of Clermont Auvergne. Since 2018 he is an invited lecturer in the Chair of Physiology of Bari University. Since May 2019 Jean Marc Lobaccaro is a member of the International Expert Committee of the Doctoral School of Life and Health Sciences in Mongolia State University. In 2010 he was awarded with the bronze medal of the City of Clermont-Ferrand, and in 2017 - with the medal “Academic Palm Knight” of the Ministry of Education and Research of France.

**Sona Tonikyan** – is an MA graduate of the Faculty of Oriental Studies in Yerevan State University in 1994. In 2002 she got the Degree of Candidate of Philological Sciences. Since 1994 has been lecturing at the Chair of Arabic Studies. In 1994-1997 she was the Senior Assistant to the Chair of Arabic Studies, in 1997-2007 she was the Assistant to the Chair of Arabic Studies. In 2007-2009 S. Tonikyan was an Associate Professor at the same chair and in 2009-2016 she acted as the Head of the Chair of Arabic Studies. Since 2016 Sona Tonikyan is an Associate Professor at the mentioned chair. She is an author and co-author of a number of books and articles.

**Varazdat Avetisyan** – is an MA graduate in “Informatics and Computer Engineering” of Gavar State University with the Qualification of Engineer. In 2016 he got the Scientific Degree of the Candidate of Technical Sciences. Since 2013 he is a teacher of the Chair of Informatics and Physical & Mathematical Sciences in Gavar State University. Since 2017 V. Avetisyan has been lecturing at National Polytechnic University of Armenia in the Center of Teacher Training and Continuing Education. Since 2018 he has been acting as a Head of the Chair of Informatics and Physical & Mathematical Sciences and as a lecturer at Gavar State University. Varazdat Avetisyan is a Consultant for Programming and ARTIFICIAL Intelligence Disciplines at Brusov State University. He is the Co-

founder of “Lusin Mobile” company and is the Technological Director. He has authored about 15 scientific articles. V. Avetisyan has authored and co-authored a number of articles

**Sona Antonyan** – studied in the Faculty of International Relations of YSU in 2015-2019. In 2019-2021 she studied in MA in Political Science (National Security) in the Faculty of International Relations of YSU. S. Anontyan is a 2<sup>nd</sup>-year MA student with the specialization of “Organization of Education” and is a PhD student at Armenian-Russian University. In 2021 Sona Antonyan participated in the training of student-experts in “Students’ Voice” project of ANQA.

## APPENDIX 2. SCHEDULE OF THE SITE VISIT

13.09.2021 - 16.09.2021

13.09.2021		<i>Launch</i>	<i>End</i>	<i>Duration</i>
1.	Meeting with the ISEC Director	09:30	10:30	60 minutes
2.	Meeting with Deputy Directors and Scientific Secretary	10:40	11:50	70 minutes
3.	Meeting with the self-evaluation group members	12:10	12:50	40 minutes
4.	Break, session of the expert panel	13:00	14:00	60 minutes
5.	Meeting with alumni	14:10	15:10	60 minutes
6.	Meeting with employers	15:30	16:30	60 minutes
7.	Review of documents and closed session of the expert panel	16:40	18:00	80 minutes

14.09.2021		<i>Launch</i>	<i>End</i>	<i>Duration</i>
1.	Meeting with the Presidium of the NAS RA	09:30	10:20	50 minutes
2.	Meeting with heads of chairs and staff members responsible for academic programs	10:40	11:40	60 minutes
3.	Class observations	11:50	12:50	60 minutes
4.	Break, session of the expert panel	13:00	14:00	60 minutes
5.	Meeting with teaching staff members (10-12 representatives)	14:10	15:10	60 minutes
6.	Meeting with students (10-12 representatives)	15:20	16:20	60 minutes
7.	Meeting with the heads of Departments of Foreign Affairs, PR and Career, ITs, Financial and Economic Issues, HRM, Postgraduate (PhD) Education	16:40	17:40	60 minutes
8.	Review of documents and closed session of the expert panel	17:50	19:00	70 minutes

15.09.2021			<i>Launch</i>	<i>End</i>	<i>Duration</i>	
1.	Meeting with staff member(s) responsible for the academic program on "Environmental Protection and Nature	Meeting with staff member(s) responsible for the academic program on "Oriental Studies - Turkish Studies"	Meeting with staff member(s) responsible for the academic program on "Informatics	09:30	10:30	60 minutes

	Management"		and Computer Engineering"			
2.	Meeting with teachers of the academic program on "Environmental Protection and Nature Management"	Meeting with teachers of the academic program on "Oriental Studies - Turkish Studies"	Meeting with teachers of the academic program on "Informatics and Computer Engineering"	10:45	11:45	60 minutes
3.	Meeting with the Head of Educational Affairs, Dean, Head of Science			12:00	13:00	60 minutes
4.	Break, session of the expert panel			13:10	14:10	60 minutes
5.	Meeting with students of the academic program on "Environmental Protection and Nature Management"	Meeting with students of the academic program on "Oriental Studies - Turkish Studies "	Meeting with students of the academic program on "Informatics and Computer Engineering"	14:20	15:20	60 minutes
6.	Open meeting			15:30	16:30	60 minutes
7.	Review of documents and closed session of the expert panel			16:30	19:00	150 minutes

	16.09.2021	Launch	End	Duration
1.	Review of documents and closed session of the expert panel	09:30	11:30	120 minutes
2.	Meeting with the staff of the Quality Assurance Department	12:00	13:00	60 minutes
3.	Break, session of the expert panel	13:00	14:00	60 minutes
4.	Meeting with members chosen by the expert panel	14:10	16:10	120 minutes
5.	Closed session of the expert panel	16:20	17:50	90 minutes

6.	Meeting with the ISEC management staff	18:00	18:30	30 minutes
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### APPENDIX 3. LIST OF DOCUMENTS OBSERVED

	Name of the Document	Criterion
1.	Document proving the implementation of improvement with the involvement of employers (minutes of a chair or other grounds)	1
2.	Grounds proving the implementation of internal audit	2
3.	Job description of a Scientific Supervisor	2
4.	Minutes of the sessions of administrative staff with the participation of students	2
5.	Grounds on the development of policy and procedures ensuring academic honesty and preventing plagiarism	2
6.	Document on planning of tactics	2
7.	Results of surveys conducted among students and teachers for the evaluation of their satisfaction with interconnecting research with education	2
8.	Results of teaching staff surveys for evaluation of effectiveness of management and administration	2
9.	Results of surveys on the satisfaction with the website	2
10.	Annual plans of chairs and structural units	2
11.	Reports of the chairs	2
12.	Minutes of the sessions of chairs /for the last three years/	2
13.	Schedules for 2021-2022 academic year	3
14.	Registers, internship registers /one from each year/	3
15.	Final works(papers) /two for each academic program for the last three years /	3
16.	Portfolio of teachers, teacher plans (5 from each chair, upon availability)	3
17.	Filled-in diaries of internship (4 from each of the selected 3 academic program)	3
18.	Composition of academic advisors, topics and reports	3
19.	Regulation on the implementation of academic consultancy	3
20.	Staff list of a chair	3
21.	Norms of academic workload	3
22.	Schedule of the training of teaching staff	3
23.	Training packages	3
24.	List of scientific and educational-methodical works of the teachers of	3

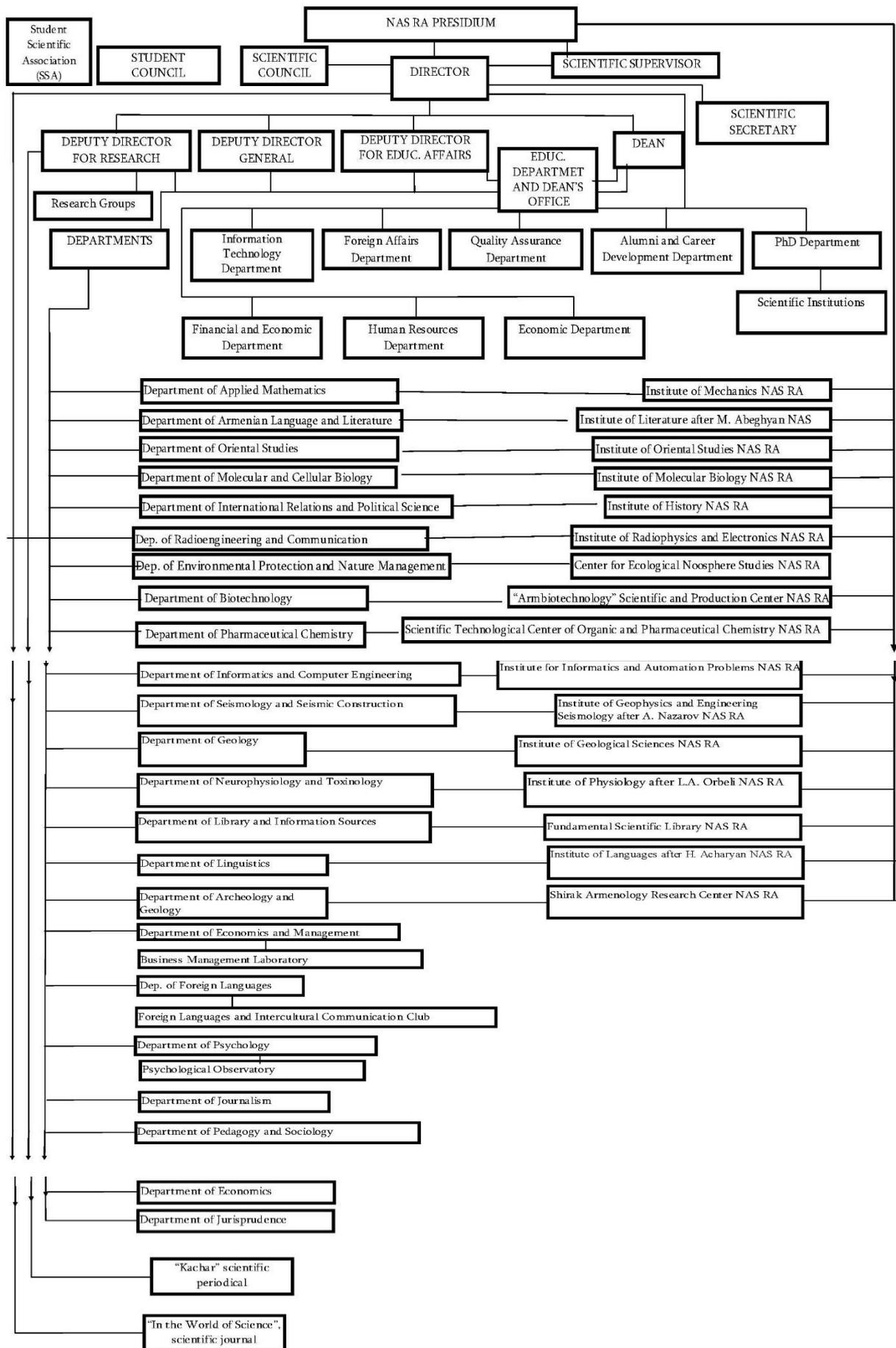
	the chair	
25.	Schedules, minutes of scientific seminars	3
26.	Analysis of surveys, improvement plans /for the last two years/	3
27.	Course descriptions	3
28.	List of MA theses topics	3
29.	Grounds showing the number of international students and PhD students	4
30.	Grounds for the implementation of education in full-time, part-time and distance systems	4
31.	Action plans for the improvement of academic needs	4
32.	Academic program monitoring reports, improvement plans (upon availability)	4
33.	Minutes of the discussion on the quality of teaching	4
34.	Reports of curators	4
35.	Report of the activities of Foreign Language and Intercultural Communication Club	4
36.	Minutes of the meetings held in accordance with the procedure for applying to the administrative staff	4
37.	Samples of CVs and video CVs formed by the students/graduates	4
38.	Lists of thematic funding grants for researchers of the RA NAS (numbers of MA students and postgraduates separately)	4
39.	Job descriptions of the teaching staff	5
40.	Analysis of surveys conducted among students for the evaluation of teachers	5
41.	Documents proving the chain of surveys-needs assessment-training chain	5
42.	Concept on commercialization of research outcomes	6
43.	Grounds on the foundation of “Amaras” analytical think-tank	6
44.	Description of the Course on “Methodology of Scientific Research”	6
45.	List of MA topics approved as a result of partner organizations’ orders	6
46.	Data on publications made by MA and postgraduate (PhD) students, including those in international scientific journals	6
47.	Plan of annual activities serving as a basis for the formation of the ISEC budget	7
48.	Budget performance and respective reports	7
49.	Staff list	7
50.	Samples of examination descriptions	7
51.	Sample of a report of the Scientific Supervisor presented to the head of the chair	8
52.	Student’s report submitted upon return from the international	9

	mobility program on their study at a foreign university, also those submitted by the teaching and administrative staff	
53.	Statistics of mobility of teachers and students according to chairs or professions	9
54.	Staff list of EQA Department	10
55.	Reports of staff members responsible for QA at the chairs	10

#### APPENDIX 4. RESOURCES OBSERVED

1. ISEC classrooms, laboratories and structural units located in the RA NAS
2. Center for Ecologanospheric Research of the RA NAS
3. Classrooms
4. Computer rooms
5. Laboratories
6. Conference hall
7. Distance learning hall
8. Structural units
9. Library
10. E-library
11. Reading Hall
12. Canteen

# APPENDIX 5. ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE OF THE EDUCATION INSTITUTION



## APPENDIX 6. LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

**ANQA** - National Center for Professional Education Quality Assurance

**EHEA** - European Higher Education Area

**HEI** - higher education institution

**ISEC** - International Scientific-Educational Center

**KPIs** - key performance indicators

**LOs** - learning outcomes

**MoES** - Ministry of Education and Science

**NQF** - National Qualifications Framework

**PDCA** - plan, do, check, act

**QA** - quality assurance

**RA** - Republic of Armenia

**SC** - Student Council

**SER** -self-evaluation report

**SP** - strategic plan

**SSU** - Student Scientific Union

**SP** - strategic plan

**YSU** - Yerevan State University