# **Support to strengthening the higher education system in Azerbaijan**

# **Twinning project AZ/14/ENI/OT/01/17 (AZ/49)**

# **Summary of recommendations from all project missions**

**Develop a vision to prepare for post-Twinning**

The selection of the components of the Twinning program reflects the will of the higher education authorities of the Republic of Azerbaijan to transform the study programmes to strengthen the employability of graduates and develop the economy of the country on a diversified basis.

Strengthening the employability of graduates which is at the core of Twinning activities is also at the heart of the objectives pursued by all the countries of the European Higher Education Area.

The purpose of this document is to propose a reading of the project recommendations to draw lessons on the dynamics of development of the higher education system. On the one hand, it is important to assess the impact of the recommendations in terms of governance and, on the other hand, to seek to identify the most effective levers to accompany the implementation of the desired transformations.

This document should also be useful for reflection that the MoE will lead on the roadmap of its future activities in terms of objectives, action plan and timetable and facilitate the prioritisation of the MoE actions as well as the reflection on the timetable of its post-twinning action plan.

**Why this comprehensive reading of all project recommendations?**

The recommendations are made by the experts at the end of each mission. They find their meaning in terms of the objectives of the mission and how it unfolds. They are contextual and respond to the needs identified during the missions. From experience and understanding of the state of the art, the expert recommends improving the actions in the field where he intervened. These recommendations highlight what is the most important in the eyes of an expert with regards to the objectives of his mission. This is a necessary and useful level of reading for the leaders of the Twinning program components.

The assembling of recommendations in a single document and their comprehensive reading allows us to go further. This compilation makes it possible to highlight recurrences or concerns shared between the experts and to draw attention to the necessary connections between the different actors of the system of higher education.

**What lessons can be drawn from recommendations in terms of governance?**

The recommendations of the experts include not only a technical dimension but also the indication of the actor who is best able to lead the actions that are recommended. These recommendations outline a division of responsibilities between the actors that contribute to the functioning of the higher education system, which is noticeably different from that currently in place.

As early as 2003, the Bologna Process enshrined in its principles the fundamental elements of a higher education governance that questions the government of higher education, particularly in countries with a strong tradition of centralisation in which ministries play a preeminent role.

If it is a given that the objectives of quality assurance are to contribute to the improvement of quality and that this is partly defined as enhancing the employability of graduates and social and economic relevance of higher education programmes, it is clear that the following excerpt from the Berlin Communiqué in 2003 holds a strong potential for transforming the steering of higher education: " *They [the ministers] also stress that consistent with the principle of institutional autonomy, the primary responsibility for quality assurance in higher education lies with each institution itself and this provides the basis for real accountability of the academic system within the national quality framework.*"

The approaches promoted by the Bologna Process: student centred learning, description of training in learning outcomes, strengthening of university autonomy, quality assurance and accountability, ... carry with them in an underlying way a transformation of the modalities of the steering of higher education systems.

**Change management[[1]](#footnote-1)**

The governance of higher education systems promoted by the Bologna Process requires higher education institutions to be fully capable of carrying out their responsibilities for development and quality maintenance. The exercise of these responsibilities is based on a form of autonomy - which is often said or demanded - but also on the ability to take advantage of it. This is the reason why it is necessary not only to assign responsibilities but also to develop the institutional skills necessary for their exercise.

It thus appears that the transformation of the methods of piloting higher education depends on:

- a political choice - Should we change or not the steering of higher education and go towards a partnership governance system that assumes the strengthening of university autonomy?

- And, if the choice is made, of a programming of the change which allows the development of the competences of the actors.

The experience of driving change shows that to bring the benefits that we hope for and be sustainable, change must be done step by step. Since the functioning of the higher education system must not be jeopardised during the period of its transformation, it is important to adapt the objectives to be attained to the progress capabilities of the actors at each step.

**Government vs governance**

The Bologna Process does not advocate the disappearance of national leadership of higher education systems. Educational systems must be piloted. Notably because they fall under the concept of public good. States and ministries are key actors, as the ministers affirm in the Berlin Communiqué (2003):

" *Therefore, they [the ministers] agree that by 2005 national quality assurance systems should include:*

*• A definition of the responsibilities of the bodies and institutions involved.*

*• Evaluation of programmes or institutions, including internal assessment, external review, participation of students and the publication of results.*

*• A system of accreditation, certification or comparable procedures.*

*• International participation, co-operation and networking.* "

If the ministries have an important role to play each actor however has its own responsibilities and notably the higher education institutions.

**Quality Assurance**

The notion of quality assurance plays a central role in the processes of transformation of higher education carried by the Bologna Process. Well-designed quality assurance mechanisms[[2]](#footnote-2) can be effective tools for change management.

Evaluation is a powerful way to stimulate and drive change. It is also an activity that can be seen as potentially dangerous. Therefore, to prevent the risk of resistance or refusal, it is important to design the national system of quality assurance on a realistic and consensual basis. The expectations of the quality system must be compatible with the progress capacities of higher education institutions. Therefore, these systems must also be part of continuous improvement of dynamics. The references and guidelines for quality assurance in higher education provide a conceptual framework validated by higher education stakeholders in Europe for the establishment of trustworthy evaluation mechanisms.

**The presentation of the recommendations**

The recommendations are classified according to the three main actors to which they are addressed: the MoE, the higher education institutions, the evaluation agency.

This presentation emphasizes the notion of systemic governance of higher education and the respective responsibilities of stakeholders.

For each actor the recommendations are classified according to four categories: governance, capacity development, tools, good practices.

# **Recommendations for MoE**

The following recommendations concern the organisation and steering of higher education as well as what is needed to support the policy of transformation and adaptation of higher education as desired by the Government of the Republic of Azerbaijan.

They concern MoE as it is responsible for overseeing higher education and coordinating ongoing changes.

The recommendations are classified in four types. The recommendations that deal with the organization of governance, those that specify the needs for capacity building, those that propose useful tools for change management and the management of higher education, and finally those that propose good practices that are possible to be inspired.

**Governance**

**Developing support and planification**

1. As Azerbaijan’s government wants to introduce competence-based approach into its higher education, the parallel work **in explaining why such a change is necessary**, how this approach could benefit the programmes should be further performed. (Activity 3.5.)
2. Therefore, experts recommend **establishing joint working group or committee** in order to review all standards to ensure that they are in compliance with needs of labour market and educational sector. (Activity 1.3.2)
3. Take into account **recommendations for performance indicators** of the National Strategy for the Development of Education of the Republic of Azerbaijan; recommendations were given during activity 1.3.2. (Recommendations includes proposal for measurements of target indicators in Strategy).
4. The main challenge is competence-based curricula implementation in practice. In order to reach the real change in higher education, support must be provided to **help HEIs’ communities** to achieve transition to competence-based higher education standards. The quality of competence-based curricula development and implementation as well as student-centred teaching and learning mostly depends on the academic staff of the HEI. Therefore, the most important measure is the system for the enhancement of competences of academic staff for the capacity building in competence-based curricula. (Activity 1.5.2)
5. For introducing the study programme accreditation, it is necessary to develop **appropriate legislative acts**, methodology and other relevant documents, as well to revise current legislative acts related to the institutional accreditation. The legal framework has clear impact on the operation of quality assurance in general. It is important that all documents, which are regulating external quality assurance, are publicly available and stakeholders shall be involved in the development and continuous updating of them. When designing the methodology, it is necessary to keep in mind that the ESG 2015 Standard 2.2. Designing methodologies fit for purpose indicates that external quality assurance should be defined and designed specifically to ensure its fitness to achieve the aims and objectives set for it and stakeholders should be involved in its design and continuous improvement. (Activity 4.1.1)

**Roles of stakeholders**

1. **Ministries that are responsible for certain areas should be involved in designing the qualifications and the professional standards in those areas**. For example, Ministry of Transport, Communication and High Technologies should be involved in designing the qualifications related to Information Technologies; (Activity 1.1.2)
2. The **writing of the learning outcomes, the description of the study programmes, the choice of the subjects, and the description of the course contents, should be made only by the academic staff of higher education institutions**. The **Ministry**, at the level of the state standards, has the opportunity to **give the generic (or transversal) and subject specific (= professional) competences for each study programm**e; obviously the learning outcomes of these programmes have to meet with, but for the definition of the leaning outcomes, only teachers can be competent. It may be the responsibility of the National agency of Accreditation to check if the course contents and related learning outcomes of the programmes fit with what is expected by the state standards. (Activity 4.3.1)
3. It is recommended **to involve both employers and students in quality assurance process** in accordance with ESG. The MoE should revise current system and in cooperation with stakeholders – higher education institutions, employers, students, to make changes in compliance with ESG. (Activity 1.3.2.)
4. To foster the **participation of student representatives** at all levels of higher education system: at the national level (for example in the national accreditation process), at the university level (for example in the university board) and at the faculty and study programmes levels (for example in the faculty board and in steering committees of study programmes) (Activity 2.1)
5. In order to facilitate the quality of higher education**, MoE, Rectors Conference, Employers and students have to agree on the model of quality assurance** and be involved in all steps in quality assurance process (Activity 1.3.2)
6. Decision on **recognition on study periods**, including the amount of transferred credits, should be decentralised and **taken at the level of higher Educations Institutions** according to consistent criteria with focus on learning outcomes (Activity 4.3.1)
7. The **composition of the national working groups for designing standards** should be thought over and **participation of labour market representatives should be ensured in all working groups**, especially the ones in priority sectors. These groups should have regular meetings to discuss the current trends in the labour market and initiate the development/ revision of study programme standards (if applicable to recommend on working groups. (Activity 1.1.2)

**Capacity building**

1. **Investments in sustainable capacity building should be made** (infrastructure for collection, analysis and dissemination of the data as well as trained and experienced analysts who can work with them). (Activity 1.3.1)
2. Experts recommend supplementing the data collection with in-depth interviews with key stakeholders involved in the labour market and education sector with perceptive insights**. Statistics Unit of MoE could make annual analyses on the educational demand and supply and publish summary report**, which helps people to make informed choices, as people need comprehensive information and advice about education and work opportunities and their relevance to labour market. (Activity 1.3.2)
3. In order to fully embed the concept of competences/learning outcomes into higher education of Azerbaijan, there is an urgent need to **review current state standards that restrain from full implementation of the autonomy of universities in building up their study processes.** New structure of state standards should be based on the concept of learning outcomes and should NOT involve the list of subjects and topics. (Activity 3.5). It could be recommended to **leave some flexibility in the state standards**, so that universities could add some subjects depending on the profile of their teaching staff, their research activities and available infrastructure (Activity 1.5.7)
4. In order to strengthen the impact and sustainability of the project for further development and real implementation of competence-based higher education in Azerbaijan it is **strongly recommended to establish within universities’ support centres for development of academic capacities to implement and maintain a student-centred approach**. (Activity 2.2)
5. **Assess the implementation of the study programmes within the universities**. There may be a gap between writing/speaking and implementation. Also **assess the efficiency of the career office within HEIs**.
6. To initiate the new **staff training program for the academics to go to other countries** where the student-centered learning approach is developed and used in practice (Activity 2.1)
7. **International mobility programs for students and academic staff** should be launched and intensively realized. This will improve: 1) English knowledge and language skills, 2) widen and quickly improve implementation and use of innovative teaching/learning methods and assessment methods in study process. If Azerbaijan is planning to comply with requirements of EHEA, mobility of students and teachers is a very important component of this process. Beside that this will allow to renew teaching staff in the near future (Activity 2.3.1).
8. **English language knowledge of teachers** could be effectively improved, if MoE would set a defined level (e.g., B1 or B2) of English language as a requirement for election and employment of academic staff. In order to improve English language knowledge Universities should provide language courses for academic staff (free of charge) (Activity 2.3.1).

**Tools**

1. In order to communicate in a common language**, national authorities and stakeholders (HEIs, employers and students) have to discuss and agree on the terminology used in the context of competence-based higher education**. This glossary (terms and their definitions) should be part of legal provisions, e.g. state education standard.
2. It is recommended **to develop a vocabulary with the main terminology of quality assurance**. As an example, the Analytical Quality Glossary developed by INQAAHE could be used: http://www.qualityresearchinternational.com/glossary. (Activity 3.4.2)
3. The **guideline on how to write learning outcomes should be disseminated to all higher education institutions** of Azerbaijan and used during the trainings. (Activity 3.2)
4. Taking into consideration the fact that the **ECTS Users Guide** represents the good practice in implementation of credit and recognition based on learning outcomes, it is recommended **to translate this document into Azerbaijan**i to make sure that it is accessible to all academics and officials. (Activity 4.3.1)

**Good practices**

1. The **New State Standard (NSS) shall explicitly refer in the general provisions section, to other national level strategies and documents such as the National Strategy for Development of Education; State Programme for international competitiveness of Azerbaijan HE** and others if required. This will create coherence between strategic level documents and clearly indicate their legal hierarchy. The general provisions section should include clear references to Azerbaijani commitments of implementing Bologna Process reforms for the full participation in the EHEA (<http://ehea.info/>), and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals towards 2030 (<https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdgs>); (Activity 4.1.1.)
2. **Decrease the number of specialties in the national classification** and make more complete and broader programmes in order to prepare more polyvalent students; (Activity 1.5.3.)
3. It is recommended to MoE to consider an option to **have classification without specialisation level** (Activity 1.6).
4. . It is recommended for further amendments in national classifications of specialties to consider developing a methodology jointed discussed between stakeholders, considering project recommendations under Activity 1.4.
5. It is recommended to **MoE to encourage the introduction of online learning management systems at all universities.** This would foster availability of learning materials for students, solutions for insufficient internet access and provide a database of student achievement (Activity 1.5.7).
6. We suggest the compulsory study course **Civil Defence and First Aid Skills** to be allocated a more reasonable amount of hours **not exceeding 3 ECTS** instead of currently 7 ECTS.
7. It seems necessary to produce a **glossary for educational terms**, like identity, curriculum, etc., in order to make the prepared SSFLT (in English) better understandable for local readers after it's translation into Azeri by avoiding translation errors. (Activity 2.4.2).
8. It is strongly recommended to develop **agreed mobility based on leaning agreements according to the European model**, because it is the best way to resolve easily the problems of mobility and recognition. The implementation of joint programmes may be also a good way. (Activity 4.3.1)
9. Considering that the **Diploma Supplement is** a very useful document for recognition and a good source for information on the competences and learning outcomes related to the programme, it is recommended that a bilingual Diploma Supplement is automatically issued to all graduates free of charge. (Activity 4.3.1)
10. Applying the concept of substantial difference, the practice of verifying aspects that are not directly related to the award should be abandoned: **Learning outcomes approach to recognition should be used with focus on the overall outcomes**. It is important to take in account that: rankings of HEI should not serve as the basis for recognition, there should be a possibility to appeal and there should be a procedure to recognise undocumented refugee qualifications. (Activity 4.3)
11. Makes it mandatory **to collect data on the students’ employment for each programme** (Activity 1.5.1)
12. Follow the recommendation **for Improving of Data Collection from Higher Education Institutions** provided in Activity 1.3.2. (Includes 4 main areas: students, academics staff, research and development and funding).
13. **Make information** publicly accessible, so that individuals could use it for their decisions, and develop regular communication channels (Activity 1.3.1)
14. The Council of Europe has set up the ETINED Platform as a network of specialists appointed by member States and of States Parties to the European Cultural Convention which mission is to share good practices in the field of transparency and integrity in education, to define guidelines on the subject and to develop capacity-building for all actors (<https://www.coe.int/en/web/ethics-transparency-integrity-in-education>). Azerbaijani authorities are encouraged to get acquainted with the work done and proceedings **of ETINED and appoint its representatives in it**. (Activity 4.1.1)
15. **Involvement of employers in the design of study programmes, in the regular review of programme**, in the formulating learning outcomes, that all ensure the compliance of higher education with labour market needs, is important so that graduates have knowledge, skills and competences for being competitive in the global labour market. (Activity 1.3.2.)
16. Establish a set of rules, which makes it mandatory **to connect labour market and HEIs representatives**, while defining the study programmes. (Activity 1.5.1).
17. **Workshops at all universities of the country how to (re-)design, develop, implement, evaluate and enhance quality** of the 1st, 2nd and 3rd cycle degree programmes should be held periodically, by foreign and national experts. (Activity 1.5.2)
18. **Support the improvement of knowledge of teachers** at all levels of education (primary, secondary, HEIs). (Activity 1.5.1)
19. It is recommended that **training seminars/workshops are organized for universities to establish management structures at the level of study programmes**. (Activity 3.4.1)
20. There is a need to **ensure that ANO has full independence in designing methodologies** and other relevant documents. (Activity 4.1.1)
21. The **evaluation of joint programmes**, which are established between national or with foreign higher education institutions, should be **in line with the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes** which was endorsed by Education Ministers of EHEA in 2015. <https://www.eqar.eu/assets/uploads/2018/04/02_European_Approach_QA_of_Joint_Programmes_v1_0.pdf>. (Activity 4.1.1)
22. The requirements to the experts included in the Accreditation Council and Accreditation Commission, the composition of these bodies, selection and **approval of experts included should be indicated in the legislation and publicly available.** It is advisable that students and labour market representatives, as well as foreign experts are included in external QA procedures in Azerbaijan for the purposes of greater objectivity and learning from the best foreign experiences. (Activity 4.1.1)
23. It is recommended to MoE that at the master level the **pedagogical part should be dissociated from the core disciplinary studies.** There is no need to develop teaching skills for a Master in Physics, for example. Teachers of Physics for general education shall be prepared through specific teacher-training study programmes (Activity 1.7)
24. To **split subjects in smaller amount of ECTS**, so that subject content area can be distributed along the study programme. Some important issues could then be repeated during 4 years of studying giving students an opportunity to strengthen and complement the relevant knowledge and skills. For example, it is recommended to have 3 different 3 ECTS courses of programming in various semesters instead of one 9 ECTS course once (Activity 1.5.7)
25. MoE should reconsider the inclusion of the long list of teaching/learning methods/activities and assessment methods in the State standard. These methods are developing continuously and very fast, and the amount of them is not limited, but the State standard will not be updated so often. (Activity 2.3.1)
26. It is suggested to **study international experience regarding the grading system**, e.g., through CIMEA (A worldwide database of University Grading Systems) or WES (International Grade Conversion Guide for Higher Education (USA)). (Activity 2.3.1)
27. To **encourage HEIs to foster application of CBE, SCL, innovative T&L approaches, T&L assessment** **based on LOs** and all related elements, e.g. by organizing training, seminars, awareness raising activities, events, etc. for administrative and academic staff, as well by providing financial and expertise support for HEIs. (Activity 2.3.3)
28. To encourage **sharing of the best experiences of innovative T&L application of CBE and SCL** approaches **among HEIs in Azerbaijan** (Activity 2.3.3)
29. In the **accreditation procedures** both at institutional and study program levels **competence-based education (CBE) and SCL elements’ assessment** must be included (Activity 2.3.3)
30. For a stronger quality assurance system, there shall be a **solid information system at every stage of education process**, to provide reliable **key-performance indicators** for more efficient study programme management (Activity 3.6)
31. To encourage and improve student mobility, we recommend to give the Higher Education institutions the possibility to depart from the general rule of the State standards, especially giving the **possibility to list recognized course units taken at another university on the transcript to the Azerbaijani diploma**, even if they do not match with the subjects in the State Standards (see articles 6.4 of the amended version of the decree 348 of 24 December 2013 on ECTS, annex 1 (Activity 4)

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# **Recommendations for HEIs**

To facilitate reading, recommendations are classified into five types: governance, capacity building, good practices, quality assurance, self-evaluation.

**Governance**

1. It is important **to improve governance system at universities and provide more independence in decision making** for the deans, chairs and other members responsible for the quality of the programmes. (Activity 3.5)
2. The **HEIs should create internal units that are responsible for the internal revision of the study programmes** and include representatives of students, graduates and employers (Activity 1.1.2)
3. To **involve students in the governance bodies of the university and of the faculty**: student representatives in the board of the university and in the board of the faculties; to have a Vice-rector (university level) and vice-deans (faculties level) in charge of students affairs; to give **students power of decision in the accreditation process** (at the faculty and the university level) of the study programmes (Activity 2.1)
4. All levels of the **strategy – vision, priority goals, objectives and actions - should be well aligned** with one another. It is not appropriate to have disconnected and different articulations of priorities, goals and objectives. Priority goals should be established based on the results of the SWOT analysis. Usually, opportunities identified in the process of SWOT are translated into the priority goals (Activity 4.5)
5. It is very important that **top management of the University would demonstrate interest and commitment to strategy development.** The strategic development plan should not be considered to stay on the shelf; it should become real management tool for the Rector to implement changes. It should help entire team to focus on the most important activities and not to sink in the details. It also should facilitate consolidation of resources to the key priority areas (Activity 4.5)
6. It is important to agree on the mechanism for **monitoring of strategy implementation**. Monitoring should be carried out on continues basis and responsibility of this should be assigned to a specific person. It is adviced to have quarterly meeting of strategic group or rectorate and request all responsible persons for priorities and goals to report about the progress. It would be very good to have on-line tool to monitor progress using traffic light principle. Activity 4.5)

**Capacity building**

1. Based on the already existing competences enhancement systems of the teaching staff at the HEIs**, support for teaching staff should be implemented in the HEIs** on the differences between teacher-centred and student-centred learning, on what is learning outcomes, on how to write the learning outcomes, because generic descriptors of Bologna cycles NQF are not specific enough to be used as programme learning outcomes. Also, courses should be provided on important issues within the ECTS, e.g. student’s workload and how the academic staff should estimate it correctly. Courses should be provided on the most critical differences between student-centred and teacher-centred assessment, because the developing assessment that supports learning and motivation is essential to the success of competence-based curricula implementation. (Activity 1.5.2)
2. The **HEIs should design a strategy for teacher development** to ensure sufficient training for the teachers and the use of innovative teaching methods. (Activity 1.1.2)
3. To provide **support to the teaching teams in order to improve the SCL implementation**: technical support, pedagogical support, organisational support, etc. Training and workshop can be organised for the teachers in order to improve their methods and to share their experiences. An “Educational innovation” department can be put in place at the university level in order to provide some support and some materials of the teaching teams (case-studies, serious games, etc.) (Activity 2.1)
4. To consider **regular trainings of HEIs administration and academic staff**, e.g. on latest development in higher education, including application of competence-based education (CBE) and student’s centred learning (SCL) elements (Activity 2.3.3)
5. To **stimulate internal and external student mobility**. HEIs should develop the mechanisms for recognition of these study periods by HEIs based on ECTS and LOs (Activity 2.3.3)
6. To **stimulate staff mobility** of both administrative and academic staff to share best practices in T&L, needed also for development of internationalization capacity (Activity 2.3.3)
7. Provide the EQAA financial and human resources so that they will have means to implement a sound evaluation policy (Activity 3.7)
8. Consider a **policy of compulsory retirement age** in order to eventually enable younger academic staff to enter universities. Possibly an increasing of retirement benefits could also be considered Activity 3.7)
9. It is recommended to nominate a person who oversees the mobility period (= **a mobility supervisor**). This person is typically the head of study programs or someone from the relevant chair of the faculty. The main task of mobility supervisor is to help the student to elaborate the learning agreement before leaving for mobility, and check that the recognition is effective when the student comes back in the home university (Activity 4.3)
10. It is recommended that **windows for mobility are included in all the study plans**. Windows of mobility are very suitable, for instance, for internships or language travels. By windows of mobility it is understood a period reserved for international student mobility that is embedded into the curriculum of a study program. It is recommended to plan a lot of free elective courses during the mobility windows time (Activity 4.3)
11. **The HEIs should develop student support centres or similar structural units** that would provide career support and guidance counselling and collect information about the graduates, internship offers and job surveys, design/perform surveys for the employers and graduates (note LB: those centres were already created in some universities in Azerbaijan, but we need to make sure that their activities cover all mentioned aspects and not only one or two of them). (Activity 1.1.2)

**Good practices**

1. It is highly recommended to HEIs **to pay important attention to recognition of study periods abroad**. Within European Union’s Erasmus+ programme, it is a general expectation that students enjoy full recognition of credits gained at another HE institution. *It is among criteria for project selection according to the applicant’s guide that recognition is granted (see page 38 of Erasmus+ programme guide: "Quality of the activity design and implementation (maximum 20 points) The completeness and quality of arrangements for the selection of participants, the support provided to them and the recognition of their mobility period (in particular in the Partner country)".* (Activity 4.1.1)
2. To **facilitate recognition of credits gained abroad**, as a rule, trilateral agreements are drafted before the mobility period, involving the sending (home) institution, the receiving (foreign) institution, and the student**.** (Activity 4.1.1)
3. **Universities should use more flexible approach for recognition of study periods** with focus on learning outcomes, not subjects. (Activity 4.2)
4. **Recognition of periods of study should be based on comparability of learning outcomes**. HEIs should consider recognising credits based on the comparability of the aims and learning outcomes of the programme and not individual course units and record mobility as a whole and not component by component. (Activity 4.3.1). it may be recommended that the decision, including the amount of transferred credits, should be **decentralized and taken at the level of higher education institutions** according to consistent criteria with focus on learning outcomes .
5. It is important that **universities initiate changes of the teaching and learning environments to support competence-based and student-centred approaches**. (Activity 3.4.1)
6. It is recommended that **universities establish clear management structures at the study programme level** (e.g. programme Committees). (Activity 3.4.1)
7. To **provide much more information to students**: study-programs descriptors, course descriptors (course catalogue both in national language and in English), information about the job market needs, feed-back about course and study programmes assessment, etc. (Activity 2.1)
8. To provide much **more resources and structures to students**: student centre, career centre, career fair, student association offices, etc. (Activity 2.1)
9. To implement **at the university level a “Survey and Analysis” office** who can design and analyse the results of the various surveys towards students and external stakeholders (employers, parents, partners, etc.). This office can provide support in order to design and implement the various assessment grids (course assessment, study programme assessment) (Activity 2.1)
10. ,
11. There should be a **possibility** to list recognized course units taken at another university on the **transcript to the Azerbaijani diploma**, even if they do not match with the subjects in the State Standards (Activity 4.3)
12. During the visits, it appeared that the learning agreement is either not well known, or not used in a systematic way. Consequently, it is strongly recommended to develop **agreed mobility based on leaning agreements according to the European model**, because it the best way to resolve easily the problems of mobility and recognition The implementation of joint programmes may be also a good way (Activity 4.3)
13. The **writing of the learning outcomes, the description of the study programmes, the choice of the subjects, and the description of the course contents**, should be made **only by the academic staff of higher education institutions**. The Ministry, at the level of the state standards, has the opportunity to give the generic (or transversal) and subject specific (= professional) competences for each study programme ; obviously the learning outcomes of these programmes have to match with the competences stated in the state standards. It may be the responsibility of the Education Quality Assurance Agency to check if the course contents and related learning outcomes of the programmes fit with what is expected by the state standards (Activity 4.3)
14. Considering that the **Diploma Supplement** is a very useful document for recognition and a good source for information on the competences and learning outcomes related to the programme, it is recommended that a **bilingual Diploma Supplement is automatically issued** to all graduates free of charge (Activity 4.3)
15. Taking into consideration the fact that the **ECTS Users Guide** represents the good practice in implementation of credit and recognition based on learning outcomes, it is recommended to **translate this document into Azerbaijani** to make sure that it is accessible to all academics and officials (Activity 4.3)
16. Recommendations for **improvement of Rules on Organizing the Credit System at Bachelor and Master** were provided. However, it is recommended to review the document structure and contents after the revision of state standards and other related documents to ensure compatibility and clear alignment (Activity 4.3)
17. It is recommended to **use PhD students as a strategic instrument for the long-term improvement of the internationalization of the higher education system**. The participation in international networks (Erasmus+, and etc.) by the higher education institutions is strongly encouraged. The higher education institutions could additionally allocate specific funds to allow PhD students to spend some time during their PhD studies abroad. In the long-term, this should have positive effects on the internationalization of the entire education system (Activity 4.3)
18. The **communication strategy and communication skills of universities** could be strengthened, upgrading the ability to express the strategy of the institution in a **more dynamic, more visible and more attractive way.** The presentation of SDPs could be revised to make sure it is more attractive for external stakeholders (i.e. students, employers, ministry of education, etc.) (Activity 4.5)
19. A discussion could be open with relevant persons of the ministry of Education about the **presence of representatives of employers in governing bodies of university**. Such a presence could allow the university to be more aware of the evolution of the labor market for graduates and to enhance their employability. In this regard, the **setting-up of steering committees, composed of both academic staff and representatives of the labour market,** **at the level of each study programme** could be considered (Activity 4)
20. The reinforcement of managerial competences of universities could consider the means to diversify the financial resources, the methods of estimating the costing of the planned activities (Activity 4.5)
21. The **collection of strategic data** could be enhanced, for example in extracting figures on the proportion of graduates amongst the cohort of new students, or the number of years students need to get their degree, in systematizing the implementation of tracer studies and in collecting feedback from employers about the competences of graduates (Activity 4.5)
22. The discussions with representative of universities pointed out the need to **promote the hiring of young faculty members,** who could support development of new teaching practices, but also new ways of management and governance within universities. Some specific measures and policies could be considered in this regard. For instance, a status of Emeritus professor could be regarded, allowing senior faculty members to get pensions, and to let recruitment of younger staff at university, without any official academic charge but with the possibility to give seminars(Activity 4.5)

**Quality assurance**

1. It is necessary to develop and **strengthen internal quality assurance system** at HEIs by designing structures, processes and tools. (Activity 3.5)
2. It is important to **provide opportunities and support relevant staff in gaining experience on the programme management and internal quality assurance**. (Activity 3.5)

**Self-evaluation**

1. It is important to ensure that the **top management supports and relevant stakeholders (faculty, administration, students, partners) are involved in self-evaluation processes**. (Activity 3.4.1)
2. It is important that **universities collect feedback on self-evaluation from the relevant stakeho**lders and use it in the self-evaluation report. (Activity 3.4.1)
3. It is important to ensure that the **results of self-evaluation are discussed among the relevant stakeholders** of the study programme. (Activity 3.4.1)
4. It is important that universities develop their **internal quality assurance procedures and mechan**isms and develop programme self-evaluation as a regular activity. (Activity 3.4.1)
5. It is important for **the top management of universities to promote, support and be involved in the self-evaluation process. (Activity 3.5)**
6. It is important to **involve stakeholders into the programme management** in a formalized and regular manner. (Activity 3.5)
7. **Employer representatives should be involved in those bodies of the HEIs that are related to the design, revision and monitoring of study programmes**. (Activity 1.1.2)
8. The **HEIs should facilitate a meeting between the management of the higher education institution, academic staff and employer [business] representatives in order to discuss the quality of graduates prepared in different study areas**. Such meetings should take place once or twice a year. (Activity 1.1.2)
9. It is necessary to develop and strengthen **internal quality assurance system** at higher education institutions by designing structures, processes and tools (Activity 3.5)
10. It is important to **involve stakeholders into the programme management** in a **formalized and regular manner** (Activity 3.5)
11. It is important to provide opportunities and **support relevant staff in gaining experience on the programme management and internal quality assurance** (Activity 3.5)

\* \* \*

# **Recommendations for ANO (national quality assurance agency)**

To facilitate reading, recommendations are classified into three types: governance, capacity building, and good practices.

It is important to note that at this stage of the development of the Twinning program, it is important to call for a reflection on the aims of the agency. Should it be one whose purpose is quality control, given the present circumstances of the country’s higher education system, or whose purpose is to support the improving of quality and strengthening the culture of quality?

The orientation of the methods, the content of the evaluation reports and the nature of the recommendations and opinions issued by the agency will depend of the answer to this question.

**Governance**

1. ANO s**hould take into account the ESG as a whole and ensure the compliance of external quality assurance is in line with the ESG**. It is recommended that **ANO and the Ministry of Education continue working to support the concept of the new model for study programme review under the mandate [remit] of ANO**. There is also a need to ensure **that ANO has full independence in designing methodologies and other relevant documents.** (Activity 4.1.1)
2. It is also proposed that an **additional guideline be to put in place for more precisely assessing the competence-orientedness and the student-centeredness of study programmes**. The proposed handbook includes a set of definitions and principles, and a checklist that allows the programme manager and/or steering comity to improve the quality of the study programme. (Activity 3.3.2)
3. The **evaluation methodology** contains too **many evaluation criteria**. Such an approach does not allow evaluators to reflect freely and identify any original aspects that may appear. Similarly, the school method of giving a mark to each of these criteria does not provide a true overall picture. There are some redundancies in the evaluation criteria, e.g. 2.8 & 4.3; 2.6 (Avtivity 3.7)

**Capacity building**

1. It is necessary **to raise the capacity of ANO staff** by involvement of all staff (where possible) in study visits and STE mission to become a competence centre. (Activity 3.2.).
2. ANO **has to prepare tools for assessment of new concepts: methodological guidelines, recommendations, and well-trained experts**. It is the work of both sides that would bring new concepts into life. (Activity 3.5)
3. **ANO must continue training of the academic and administrative staff of the universities** about the concept of competences and learning outcomes and how they should fit into the curriculum of their programmes and internal quality assurance system. (Activity 3.5)

**Good practices**

1. **It is important to involve all stakeholders into development of the process and its documents, as well as into implementation of evaluation process**. It is especially important to start communicating with employers’ representatives and students from the very beginning of the accreditation process. (Activity 3.3.2) (Similar Activity 3.1.)
2. **Evaluation processes should ensure active student participation in the external evaluation process**. (Activity 3.1)
3. Even if **the evaluation** is of a previous period, it **should indicate future prospective and it should lead to the improvements in the future** (Activity 3.1.).
4. Evaluation **should be cyclical and planned regularly** (Activity 3.1.).
5. **Final evaluation report as well as Methodology’s (Activity 3.3.1) should be published on ANO website** according to the requirements of ESG 2015 2.6 standard. (Activity 3.1.)
6. Proposed Methodology have to be adapted to the situation of Azerbaijan and after approval of new Accreditation rules or other legal documents should be revised (Activity 3.3.1)
7. The **Methodology should be discussed with all stakeholders of the process – the Ministry, academic community, students, employers’ representatives.** (Activity 3.3.1)
8. It is **recommended to ANO to consider organising trainings to universities explaining how to perform a self-evaluation of their study programmes**. In addition, workshops on designing competence-based and student-centred study programmes would benefit a lot for the universities of Azerbaijan. (Activity 3.3.2) (similar in activity 3.2.)
9. **ANO should plan in the future further trainings for higher education institutions’ staff** on a regular basis. The topics of the training should cover: a) Enhancement of quality assurance procedures within HEIs; b) learning outcomes, teaching methods and students’ assessment methods; c) calculation of students’ workload based on ECTS; d) process of self-evaluation. (Activity 3.4.2.)
10. **Personal consultations with the ANO staff should be available to all higher education institutions**. (Activity 3.5)
11. **When designing and delivering the trainings of experts who will be involved in external evaluation of study programmes, it is very important to explain the structure of the regulations for higher education in Azerbaijan** (Activity 3.5.)
12. It is strongly suggested to make every effort to **promote proper usage of ECTS within higher education institutions for credit transfer purposes between institutions within and outside Azerbaijan** (Activity 4.1.1)
13. In order to fully embed the concept of competences/learning outcomes into higher education of Azerbaijan, there is an **urgent need to review current state standards** that restrain from full implementation of the autonomy of universities in building up their study processes. **New structure of state standards should be based on the concept of learning outcomes** and should **NOT involve the list of subjects and topics** (Activity 3.5)
14. Regular **work with the representatives of higher education institutions** who are involved in the self-evaluation process in their institutions is one of the most important functions of the Quality assurance agency (EQAA) (Activity 3.5). It is also recommended to **continue trainings to the academic and administrative staff** of HEIs explaining the concept of **competences and learning outcomes** and how they should fit into the curriculum of study programmes and internal quality assurance system (Activity 3.5)
15. **Personal consultations by EQAA** staff should be available for all higher education institutions (Activity 3.5)
16. When designing and delivering the **trainings of foreign experts** for external evaluation of study programmes, it is very important to **explain the system of higher education in Azerbaijan and its specific regulations**. When cooperating with **foreign experts** from different countries, EQAA should take a chance to get a **feedback and recommendations** on current legislation structure in Azerbaijan that is related to the study process (Activity 3.5)
17. The EQAA should further develop the principles of expert selection. The selection of participants should be supported with **clear selection criteria**. **English language** should be one of the criteria as reviewers will take part in international evaluations. **Student representatives and labour market** representatives should be also included in the training. Regular trainings for the reviewers who will be involved in the programme evaluation activities is one of the most important functions of the EQAA (Activity 3.6)
18. There is a need to **continue trainings for external reviewers** in order EQAA could have experts pool who have capacity to evaluate the quality of study programmes (Activity 3.6)
19. Some **checks on the self-evaluation reports** shall be **performed by the EQAA**: make sure that SER does not exceed the **recommended 30-page length**, check SER does not mention any **name of person, whether teacher or student**, ensure that all the **stakeholders are involved** in the panel of external evaluators, namely students and employers (Activity 3.6), to check the completeness of SER, especially whether **all annexes** specified in the Methodology **are provided** (Activity 3.7). The EQAA should review and comment the self-evaluation reports (SER), so that experts receive good quality SER (Act. 3.7).
20. The chair of the peer-review team shall be nominated before the mission so that the chair can communicate with the group, discuss and decide how the tasks will be distributed among the members of the group. It is recommended that all the expert’s group including the Chair should be appointed **at least one month before the visit** in order to communicate with each other, share tasks. (Activity 3.7).
21. **During the on-site visit**, it is important: to make sure that **persons interviewed** during different interviewed are **not repeated**; to ensure that the **meetings are not interrupted** by people that are not involved in the peer-review meetings. The coordinator appointed by the EQAA must be present throughout the evaluation including the final debriefing. During the briefing session, he/she shall ensure that questions for each interview (not too many because time runs) are prepared and shared between different members of experts’ panel, it shall be ensured that someone takes notes. (Activity 3.7)
22. It is necessary to ensure that **all contributors to the evaluation process** within the evaluated institution feel **genuinely concerned by it**. The effectiveness of evaluation strongly depends on the interest it receives. Therefore, it is recommended to communicate clearly the accreditation outcomes to higher education institutions before the accreditation starts. The Agency should brief university on how the site-visit is organised, what is the purpose of it, what requirements are, etc. (Activity 3.7)
23. Before the on-site visit, the AQAE should **emphasise more on ethical principles**. A possible **conflict of interest between evaluators and the programme** shall be systematically checked (Activity 3.6)
24. In accordance with the methodology, the **expert panel chair** has to **divide the tasks among the members of the experts’ panel**. However only EQAA knows the experts and their background, therefore in this step ANO support to the chair is essential. In addition, it is a good practice if agency provides CV of experts’ panel to each expert (Activity 3.7)
25. **Time management is very important** while drafting the agenda of on-site visit. The agency knows better (than experts) the location of the university, its size and number of buildings, therefore it should be carefully considered and reflected in the agenda of site-visit. Moreover, It would be very important to **develop guidelines for HEIs** on how to **host the on-site visit**. In the on-site visit agenda, time shall be planned for consulting additional data and documents and it shall be ensured that all members of expert group, including students and employers, attend all interviews (Activity 3.7)
26. During the on-site visit, the **Agency`s staff should take responsibility on all technical and organisational issues**. He/she should act as the communicator between the experts’ panel and university. (Activity 3.7).
1. In a rapidly changing world, higher educations need to develop their capacity to rapidly adapt their study programmes in ways that are relevant to students’ needs and changing socio-economic systems. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The guarantee of quality is based on the evaluation of the actions and outcomes of higher education. It mainly serves two types of actions. Actions in the field of quality control (accountability) and actions in the field of quality enhancement. It is necessary to develop both aspects to enable higher education institutions’ change and adaptation capacities. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)