Support to strengthening the higher education system in Azerbaijan

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**Guideline for a good PRATICE OF mobility and recognition**

**Two preliminary remarks:**

1. *Why national and international mobility is important in the study programs?*

Academic world cannot escape the globalization phenomenon. Consequently mobility becomes a necessity. This is why Bologna process has created the European Higher Educations Area (EHEA), but it works only if student can move easily inside this space. If H.E. Institutions do not include windows of mobility in their study programs, it means they cut themselves from the outside word and cannot longer claim to be universal and implement Bologna process. Mobility is one of the most important criteria for excellence and guarantees for quality.

1. *Why recognition is a crucial issue?*

If the periods of studies abroad are not entirely recognized, there is discrimination between moving and not moving students. If students have to complete the semester of mobility by passing additional exams when coming back in the home institution, they need more workload, more time, more money and consequently they may be discouraged. As long as students do not have the guarantee that the period of studies abroad is automatically recognized and integrated in the curriculum of the home institution, it is clear that student mobility is not concretely possible and cannot be encouraged.

1. **Some definitions**

*Assessment (for learning):* set of testsduring (continuous assessment) and/or at the end of a teaching/learning process (final exams) that checks if the learning outcomes of a course unit (or module), included internship, are achieved. It concerns both summative and formative assessment. The results of assessment are saved in the transcript of records (see *infra*).

*Competence:* a competence is a quality, ability, capacity or skill that is developed by and belongs to the student through a teaching/learning process. Competences represent a dynamic combination of cognitive and metacognitive skills, demonstration of knowledge and understanding, interpersonal, intellectual and practical skills, and ethical values. Some competences are subject-area related (=specific to a field of studies), while others are generic (= common to any degree program).

*Diploma supplement*is an official document produced by higher education institutions accompanying a higher education diploma providing a standardized description of the nature, level, content and status of the studies completed by its holder. It is designed as an aid to support the recognition of academic qualifications by ensuring that their degrees are recognized by higher education institutions, public authorities and employers in their home countries and abroad. It does, however, not represent a *curriculum vitae* or a substitute for the diploma. Graduates in all countries taking part in the Bologna Process have the right to receive the diploma supplement automatically, free of charge and in any major European language.

*ECTS*= European Credit Transfer System. It is a student centered system based on the student workload required to achieve the objectives of a study program, objectives specified in terms of learning outcomes and competences to be required. This system is used in all the universities and higher education institutions participating in the Bologna process. It aims to facilitate the mobility of students and recognition of the periods of studies completed abroad. ECTS credit means a credit inside the framework of the ECTS.

*Elective courses:* there are two different kinds of electives courses. In one case, the student chooses the course among a closed list. For instance, he/she can choose or Greek history or Roman history inside a compulsory module called “Ancient history.” In the other case, the student can choose any course, even if not relevant to the subject and taught in another program or faculty. For instance, a student in physics could chose sport, music, or foreign language for beginners. This second kind of elective course may be called “free elective course”.

*Learning agreement*: it is the official academic document that sets out the program of the studies or the traineeship to be followed abroad and **makes sure the student receives recognition for the activities successfully completed abroad.**It must be approved by the student, the sending and receiving higher education institution. See annex I. A guideline on how to use the learning agreement can be downloaded on the following link:

<https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/resources/documents/guidelines-how-use-learning-agreement-studies_en>

*Learning outcomes*:learning outcomes are statements of what a learner is expected to know, understand and be able to demonstrate after completion of a learning experience. They are in other words the specifications of the results and outcomes of a learning process. Learning outcomes lead to competences.

*Mobility:* period of studies and training that students complete abroad. Incoming mobility: mobility of students who come from a sending institution. Outgoing mobility: mobility of students who leave their home institution to go abroad. The main stake of mobility is recognition. Two types of mobility can be distinguished:

- Agreed mobility: mobility within the framework of a joint programme, Erasmus mobility, any mobility based on a learning agreement.

- “Non agreed” mobility: mobility which depends on the initiative of the students and is not based on a learning agreement. For instance a student after implementing the bachelor diploma decides to go abroad to continue with a master.

*Recognition*:a distinction may be done between recognition of academic qualification and recognition of period of studies:

Recognition of academic qualification is a procedure of identifying the equivalence of degrees, academic qualifications, mobility and exchange between higher education institutions (national and foreign) within the national qualification framework; synonymous: nostrification. This type of recognition is also concerned with prior, non-formal and informal learning. Recognition of a qualification may be also incorporated into the programme of study.

Recognition of period of studies means concretely that all the credits obtained in the host institution abroad are totally integrated in the curriculum of the home institution.

*Transcript of records*: official academic document that consists of a list of the course units taken, the exams passed and the credits gained. The transcript of records indicates:

* the course unit code (basically the code the host university gives to a specific academic course)
* the title of the courses attended at the host university
* the duration of the courses (if one semester or two)
* the local grade and the exam marks,
* the number of ECTS credits gained by passing successfully the exams

1. **Preparing (agreed) mobility**
   1. **Four basic recommendations**

In the case of bachelor programs, mobility is not recommended during the 1st year, because students have to get familiar with the academic environment.

Except in case of joint masters, mobility is not recommended during the last semester because of the discussion of the master dissertation.

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 programme. It is recommended to plan a lot of free elective courses during the mobility windows time.

It is recommended to nominate in a home higher education institution a person, who oversees the mobility period (‘mobility supervisor’). This person is typically the head of study programme or someone from a relevant chair or faculty. The main task of mobility supervisor is to help the students to elaborate the learning agreement.

* 1. **Elaborating the learning agreement (see annex I)**

The learning agreement is the only document that, **by law**, guarantees the recognition of the period of studies implemented abroad. It is strongly recommended to use the European template.

It must be signed by the student, the sending institution and the receiving institution (see the box “commitment” on the document) **before** the student leaves for mobility. Be aware that this document engages the responsibility of the signatories.

Some exceptional changes may be done during the mobility, but they must be indicated in the learning agreement and receive the approval of both sending and receiving institution. A specific box is included in the document for this eventuality.

For choosing relevant courses in the receiving institution, the easiest way to proceed is to find in the course catalogue (or syllabus) of the receiving institution (usually this document/information is accessible, in English, on the web site of all the higher education institutions of the EHEA) the courses that best match those of the home university and consequently may be easily recognized **on the base of comparison and equivalency**.

Normally it is easier to build up a learning agreement if the mobility is for one year because in this case the student can attend all the courses. If he/she leaves only for a semester, only half of the courses are available, and it may be more difficult to find the most appropriate ones. However, for economic reasons, it is quite common to observe that students can only leave for one semester. Therefore, it is important to enable flexibility to allow recognition of courses, which might not entirely match the courses in the home institution.

* 1. **The principles to be observed**

**Equivalent does not mean identical.** Each course should be described in terms of learning outcomes; **two courses may be considered as equivalent if 75% of their learning outcomes are similar.**

Two ways are possible:

1. The courses to be validated during the period of study abroad are considered as equivalent to all the courses of the semester(s) of mobility. The big advantage is that students can validate the whole semester(s) when they come back home and can implement the program in the same time as students who do not move. There is an inconvenient when the student mobility is only one semester, because it is not always easy to find all the equivalent courses in the same semester abroad. (See in annex 1 example 1)
2. The courses to be validated during the period of study abroad are considered as equivalent to courses that are disseminated in different semesters at the home university. In this case, there is no problem to find the equivalent courses abroad, even if the student mobility is only one semester ; the big inconvenient lies in the fact that students can validate only one part of semesters, not a whole semester, and consequently they need more time to complete the program.

🡺It is obvious that, **in the interest of the student**, **the first way is by far the best**. [The second solution is efficient and acceptable in the case when the study program has included several windows of mobility and admits that the credits obtained during the semester of mobility are shared between these different windows]. Consequently, higher education institutions should consider recognizing credits based on the comparability of the aims of the study program and learning outcomes, and record mobility as a whole and not component by component. The validation (or recognition) concerns the whole semester, not each element of the semester. The rule is 30 ECTS (possibly more, but not less) validate one semester.

In the case of *free* optional courses, it is recommended that student can choose subjects specific to the receiving institution, it means he/she cannot find in the home institution. It is one of the positive aspects of mobility.

The transcript of records of the receiving institution must be integrated in the transcript of records of the sending institution.

The period of studies with the list of courses completed abroad **must be clearly indicated in the diploma supplement,** item 4.3 and 6.1 (see Annex 2).

1. **Recognition principles**

Efficient recognition cannot work without a minimum or trust, flexibility, and open mindedness.

*Trust* is indispensable because it is the very prerequisite for any kind of agreement. When a university signs a framework agreement with a partner, it means that the two parties trust each other. So, when a learning agreement is signed it means that both sending and receiving institutions recognizes:

* The quality of teaching
* The quality of assessment
* The quality of academic environment
* The level of the courses are in accordance with the European national framework and the Dublin descriptors

*Flexibility* means that:

* 4 or 6 credits may be considered as equivalent of 5 credits because the estimation of the student workload may be different according to the H.E. institutions, and a gap of one point is not significant.
* Some courses may be chosen in the 1st year of the program as well as in the last year, even if the student is in 3rd year.
* 75% of common learning outcomes are sufficient to consider the courses as equivalent.
* The credits obtained during the period of mobility may be spread over several semesters

*Open mindedness* means:

* Difference and diversity are more relevant for academic training than repetition and uniformity
* Everything that student can learn abroad has an added value
* It is not a disaster if one core subject of the study program has been replaced by another core subject.

1. **The issue of the tuition fees**

Recall of the EHEA rule: in the case of half a year mobility or a whole year mobility (e.g. Erasmus) the tuitions fees are paid in the home (sending) institution and no fees are to be paid in the host (receiving) institution.

In the case of joint programs, included joint supervision of thesis, the related agreement has to deal with this aspect.

1. **The particular case of “non agreed” mobility**

It concerns:

* Students who have started a study program in one university and want to complete it in another one.
* Students who have got a bachelor diploma in one university and want to continue with a master in another one (the same for students who have a master and look for a foreign doctorate).

In the two cases the students have to submit an application composed by a cover letter in which they explain their situation and motivation, a *curriculum vitae*, all the documentation related to their previous studies (list of courses, transcripts of records, diploma and diploma supplement etc), and possibly letters of recommendation from the home academics and/or institution.

Usually the application file is examined by an *ad hoc* academic committee at the level of the faculty. The basic rule is that for admittance **no discrimination can be made between a national and a foreign student**.

In the first case, the committee has to decide in which semester the candidate can be admitted. It is possible for instance to admit him/her in the 5th semester of the curriculum but with the obligation to recuperate some core courses of previous semesters. As in the case of agreed mobility, flexibility, tolerance, open mindedness are recommended, and the examination should take in consideration the learning outcomes, not the subjects. It is recommended to apply the rule “if 75 % of the learning outcomes of two courses are similar, these courses can be considered as equivalent”. The committee should keep in mind that equivalent does not mean identical.

In the second case, what is at stake is the recognition of the foreign diploma. Inside the EHEA, the rule is that the same diplomas should be automatically recognized and no discrimination should be made between national and foreign students. Normally, inside the EHEA the notion of “foreign student” is not relevant.

1. **Recommendation to the Ministry of Education**

To encourage and improve student mobility, it should be possible for Higher Education institutions to depart from the general rule of the State standards, especially giving the possibility to indicate in the national diploma, as well as in the diploma supplement, the courses and marks obtained in the foreign higher education institution during the period of mobility, on the base of the learning agreement.