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Strategy for Internationalization of Higher Education in the Republic of Armenia

1. Introduction

Internationalization of higher education in the Republic of Armenia (RA) is one of the most important preconditions for training high quality human resources and developing research in line with contemporary requirements. This is dictated both by external and internal imperatives. It is already 15 years that Armenia has joined the Bologna Process by which the main guidelines for higher education reforms have been defined. As a result, the RA Government and the higher education institutions (hereafter HEIs) have carried out structural and content-related reforms which have created favorable conditions for ensuring the compliance of the national higher education system with European best practices in quality enhancement, recognition of qualifications, and internationalization.

In the current environment of globalization and increasing competition in the field of higher education, Armenian HEIs are facing serious challenges in terms of bringing education and research to new levels, coming up with creative pedagogies, implementing flexible human resource management mechanisms, improving infrastructures, as well as promoting the use of IT technologies and innovation. Moreover, the digitalization trends in all of the sectors of the economy bring an increased demand for qualified professionals. Today, there is a great demand for professionals with entrepreneurial and effective communicative skills, for specialists who are independent and creative thinkers capable of managing sophisticated data. Global developments and challenges require internationally competitive educational and research environment.

However, the pace of internationalization of higher education and research in Armenia is not in line with global trends. Particularly utmost attention is needed to improve the quality of teaching and research, to increase global partnerships, and to raise rankings and visibility of HEIs. At the same time, there are obstacles related to facilitation of entry visas, temporary residence and work permits in Armenia, as well as qualifications recognition processes that require priority attention.

What are the current achievements of internationalization of higher education in Armenia and what are the positive prerequisites of its development?

Today, Armenia has made considerable progress in overcoming qualifications recognition challenges through harmonizing the education system with those of the Bologna Process member countries and through joining the 2005 Lisbon Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning higher education. Strategies of HEI internationalization such as the consideration of foreign students and faculty experience, the introduction of international assessment parameters in the processes of teaching and learning, as well as the development of the universities' strategies have come to replace the previous trends of HEI internationalization mostly through faculty and student exchange. A number of programs implemented by the European Union (EU) and individual countries that boost internationalization - Erasmus+, DAAD, IREX, Fulbright in

particular and others - have made a significant contribution to the internationalization of higher education.

As a result, a group of stakeholders contributing to the internationalization agenda has been formed, which aims to define and implement the most ambitious strategic targets. The “EU-Armenia Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement” signed on 24 November, 2017 outlines new perspectives for the development of the higher education system. Moreover, the new ERASMUS+ program as well as processes aimed at the liberalization of EU visas facilitates mobility. As far as the Horizon-2020 project is concerned, it provides an opportunity to integrate Armenian HEIs in global research communities and to export research results.

In this regard, the higher education system of Armenia has certain potential. Being a small country, it is not only a safe and secure partner in terms of cooperation with HEIs abroad, but also possesses the necessary resources for effectively managing and implementing the processes. The professional potential of Armenia’s Diaspora also creates favorable premises for the internationalization of higher education, the creation of global partnerships, and the increase in the international visibility of the country.

In order to address global challenges and to change the paradigm of the internationalization of Armenian HEIs, this strategy envisages the implementation of a number of targeted strategic objectives that will contribute to the integration of Armenia into the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and assume a unique positioning for the purpose of increasing visibility through internationalization, improving education and research quality, promoting or commercializing innovation and interdisciplinary research.

2. Brief Description of the Current Internationalization Situation

Today, there are 74 state (including 14 branches of state HEIs) and private HEIs in Armenia, 10 of which are branches of transnational HEIs and HEIs abroad. The operation of state and private HEIs is regulated by the RA Laws on “Education” and “Higher and Postgraduate Professional Education”, international treaties and other laws and normative legal acts; this applies to transnational HEIs as well.

Transnational HEIs are joined endeavors with foreign governments and/or foreign HEIs, and thus have advantages over other Armenian HEIs in terms of favorable internationalization conditions, including organizing their instruction in foreign languages. The unequal conditions, in their turn, hinder the healthy competition for internationalization between national and transnational HEIs, and do not contribute to boosting the quality of higher education and that of the competitiveness of educational programs equally across all HEIs.

Therefore, the main target for improving the legal framework of the higher education and research internationalization strategy is the creation of equal conditions for internationalization and its promotion for all HEIs in Armenia.

During the 2017-2018 academic year, 90270 students were enrolled in Armenian HEIs, of which 3.8% (3395 students) were from the Armenian diaspora [non-Armenian nationals of Armenian ethnicity] and 3% (2708 students) were international students. Diasporan and international students are mostly interested in the fields of medicine, architecture and construction.

Of the 3395 Armenian diaspora students, 2383 studied in national HEIs, 1012 in transnational HEIs. The largest number of diasporan students were from the Russian Federation (1454), Georgia (1209), Syria (536) and Iran (139).

The largest number of foreign students studying at RA HEIs were from India (1142), Iran (430), Iraq (404) and Israel (118); in total 2708 students.

Today the percentage of foreign students and students from the Armenian Diaspora in some Armenian HEIs has reached 12%. From the perspective of education quality improvement, classroom discussions on diverse viewpoints and the enrollment of students from other countries are very important in mono-ethnic Armenia.

The Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sport cooperates with about 30 countries through inter-governmental agreements, contracts/treaties and memoranda of understanding (MoUs). Different programs/projects are implemented in cooperation with the People's Republic of China, the Russian Federation, the Republic of Bulgaria, Romania, the Czech Republic, the Slovak Republic, the Arab Republic of Egypt and other foreign governments. In the framework of partnership agreements, student exchange in degree granting programs is carried out. Every year, the Armenian Government announces around 60 scholarships for international students and 70 scholarships for diasporan students to study in Armenian HEIs. During the 2017-2018 academic year, only 28 students benefited from the 60 scholarships for foreign students; the remaining 32 seats were unfilled. However, the competition is high for targeted scholarships intended for diasporan students (in the fields of Armenian Studies, Arts and Pedagogy).

Through inter-governmental agreements, treaties/contracts and memoranda of understanding, 223 students from Armenia participated in competitions for studies at different levels and studied abroad (mostly in the Russian Federation) in 2015; 239 students in 2016; 206 students in 2017; and 236 students in 2018.

The total number of Erasmus Mundus students from Armenia studying in various EU countries in 2004-2013, is only 75. Starting from 2014, the EU mobility program has been renamed to "International Credit Mobility Program" in which Armenian HEIs have been participating since 2015. According to Erasmus+, in 2015, 205 students and 162 university staff members (faculty and administrative staff) participated in the Erasmus+ mobility program (from Program countries to Armenia and vice versa); 299 students and 347 university staff members in 2016; and 397/491 representatives in 2017 respectively.

In spite of the achievements and the necessity for comprehensive internationalization of HEIs, not all HEIs have a clearly defined internationalization strategy, relevant complementary infrastructures, internationally competitive education programs, faculty and administrative staff who know foreign languages, representatives from different subdivisions who are actively involved in internationalization as well as qualification enhancement activities. At the same time, collaboration and experience-exchange between universities, especially with transnational HEIs, are weak within the country itself.

As for the existing agreements between Armenian and foreign HEIs, despite their diversity, they are practically ineffective in achieving internationalization. In the frameworks of these partnership agreements, the mobility of students and faculty, the implementation of joint research and the publication of articles, as well as the exchange of scientific periodicals are prioritized. The majority of partnership agreements of Armenian HEIs are with HEIs of the Commonwealth

of Independent States (CIS); however, practical collaboration is limited because of scarce financial aid or incompatibility with wider educational systems.

In order to improve the competitiveness and attractiveness of higher education and research, it is necessary to take comprehensive measures both in terms of improving the legal framework as well as increasing financial investments and capacity building of the human resources.

3. The Process of Elaboration of the National Strategy on Higher Education Internationalization

This strategy has been elaborated in the framework of Erasmus+ “Boosting Strategy and Marketing for Internationalization of Armenian Universities”/BOOST/ program. The consortium member universities have organized numerous discussions, as a result of which the problems and the barriers to internationalization were highlighted, the best practices of internationalization of foreign HEIs were studied, and the target directions and objectives of internationalization were defined. The Ministry of Education and Science, as a full member of the Consortium, has played a leading role in analyzing the situation of higher education internationalization and defining strategic goals and objectives.

An Action Plan based on this strategy for internationalization of higher education has been developed (see attached).

4. The Strategic Directions, Goals and Objectives of the Internationalization of Higher Education and Research

The strategic directions of the internationalization of Armenian higher education and research are as follows:

- ✓ Defining the full framework of the national policy of higher education internationalization,
- ✓ Setting guidelines for institutional strategies for internationalization,
- ✓ Developing a national platform for higher education internationalization; creating corresponding tool-sets and benchmarking indicators.

The following goals have been identified to achieve the above-mentioned strategic directions:

Goal 1. Create an environment that boosts the internationalization of higher education and research

Goal 2. Boost competitiveness of higher education programs and research at the international level

Goal 3. Increase international visibility and attractiveness of Armenian higher education and research

Goal 4. Increase international mobility of students, faculty and administrative staff

Goal 1: Create an Environment that Boosts the Internationalization of Higher Education and Research

Success of the higher education and research internationalization agenda requires, first of all, the provision of relevant settings and the solution of existing problems.

Objective 1.1: To improve the legal framework of higher education and research internationalization

To fulfill the commitments that the Republic of Armenia has made through international agreements towards integrating its higher education system into EHEA, it is imperative to implement reforms in the legislative and legal frameworks at the national level. Currently, Armenian HEIs face a number of barriers due to the existing gaps in this area and the regulations that are not flexible and in-line with the current trends in internationalization.

Those barriers pertain to the implementation of academic programs in foreign languages, entry visas, residence and work permits and other issues. The RA draft law “On Higher Education and Scientific Research Activities” envisages introducing appropriate regulations that will ensure feasible solutions. However, it is also necessary to review a number of secondary legislative acts and to implement regulations in the form of guarantees with the involvement of the main stakeholders of HEIs. In particular, it is necessary to develop a unified package for the legal regulation of the international activities of HEIs, taking into account international commitments, as well as the requirements to conform to the RA necessary legal regulations. Thus, it is necessary to establish an interdepartmental commission on the internationalization of higher education.

The availability of a non-rigid legal framework offering solutions and the provision of sub-legislative regulations will contribute to the introduction of international dimensionality in educational programs and research. This will support the continuous and sustainable development of the higher education system, thereby enabling the creation of a favorable environment and a platform for intercultural communication, experience and exchange of ideas.

Objective 1.2: To include/provide public and other resources for creating an environment that boosts internationalization

The disunity of the activities of stakeholders involved in the development of higher education and their non-harmonious implementation obstruct the development of an effective system. At the same time, the insufficient skills of the professionals involved at the institutional level, as well as the misperception of internationalization processes by the key actors and the lack of funding do not ensure proper implementation of internationalization in varied forms. It is necessary to foster the dialogue between different actors in the higher education ecosystem - agencies, research organizations, think tanks, and HEIs. The solution to these problems requires a comprehensive and strategic approach both at the national and institutional levels. The establishment of the above-mentioned interdepartmental commission on the internationalization of higher education will greatly contribute to the development of an effective dialogue.

At the same time, due to the interaction between HEIs, organizations and different government bodies, the joint implementation of technological, intellectual and financial resources will improve the quality and competitiveness of academic programs.

Objective 1.3: To enhance the opportunities of international (as well as diasporan) students to study at HEIs

The fact that international students are not very interested in studying in Armenia (6.8% of the total student population) indicates that the higher education in Armenia is either not attractive or is comparatively less attractive. Among the reasons could be the following:

- the small number of educational programs in foreign languages and the barriers to their organization;
- The incompatibility of local admissions procedures of international students with the global trends (international standardized exams, online admissions) and with the developments of the education system;
- the insufficient and not targeted dissemination of information on HEIs and their educational programs;
- the lack of accommodation (student housing, dormitories);
- the absence of correlation between the monetary value of scholarships and real-life expenses;
- the deficiencies of financial aid and social support systems;
- the fact that international students do not know Armenian;
- the homogenous nature of the Armenian population.

Among the above-mentioned points, an important necessity is the introduction of academic programs in foreign languages and the diversification of existing programs. Today, the proportion of courses, programs offered in foreign languages in the total number of courses, programs offered at HEIs is very low. These courses are mainly offered by transnational universities in English, French and Russian. The development and implementation of academic programs in foreign languages will make higher education accessible to international students and will enhance the attractiveness of education for local students. Moreover, it will enable the integration of international students in the educational processes and will improve the intercultural communication skills of Armenian students.

The introduction of courses in foreign languages (English, French, Russian, Arabic, Spanish, etc.) directly entails the need for faculty fluent in the relevant foreign languages. In this regard, the implementation of systems encouraging the knowledge of foreign languages and that of professional development programs at HEIs are very important.

Objective 1.4: To improve the involvement of the HEIs' academic and administrative staff in the internationalization processes

After joining the Bologna process, universities faced uncertainties because the relevant guidelines on educational reforms were not defined at the national level. This new environment requires HEIs to have staff equipped with up-to-date skills and abilities in order to be able to solve internationalization problems at the institutional level. However, the structural changes of HEIs as well as the functional changes of individual agencies only partially respond to the challenges of internationalization and HEIs' attractiveness.

At present, the process of internationalization of HEIs is mostly perceived as the duty and responsibility of international cooperation units. Since the latter are meant to coordinate general activities aimed at internationalization, it is important that the internationalization priority be reflected in the different spheres of university operations: academic, administrative and ancillary staff support. Comprehensive internationalization and its coordination presuppose leadership and support from the management; the pairing of centralized structures with decentralized ones; the improvement of academic programs and the introduction of international dimensionality; the existence of internal policies and procedures; as well as staff and student mobility and international collaboration.

Goal 2: To Boost the Competitiveness of Higher Education Programs and Research at the International Level

It is impossible to consider HEI internationalization without high-quality and internationally competitive academic and research programs. Based on its centuries-old traditions in education, Armenia has all the qualities to become a knowledge destination. However, it is impossible to ensure this under the current weak links between education and research, lack of global partnerships and limited interest in research results.

The necessity for strengthening the link between education and research, for enhancing the quality, and for the international collaboration is also conditioned by the imperative of providing innovative solutions to local and global challenges. Therefore, in order to ensure the effectiveness of higher education-research-innovation triangle and to enhance its competitiveness at the international level, solutions are required in the following directions: training and retention of highly qualified human resources, modernization and effective management of existing infrastructures, as well as establishment of new models for evaluating and highlighting research activities. Only when the above-mentioned problems are addressed, will it be possible to enhance the competitiveness of higher education and research at the international level and to become a knowledge-building hub.

Objective 2.1: To ensure the quality of higher education and research

Since the independence of Armenia, reforms in the higher education system have mainly focused on establishing structures and infrastructures and, therefore, have not effectively reflected on knowledge development and transmission methods. Today, there is a need for reforms that would address the content aligning it with learning outcomes, using up-to-date, student-centered online delivery tools and best practices in pedagogies based on active dialogue.

In order to boost the quality of education and research and to make research an integral part of higher education, an emphasis should be placed on the recruitment and retention of highly qualified staff, on the recognition and promotion of their high-quality performance, as well as on the development of collaborative networks at the international level through the application of the potential of international organizations, RA embassies, diasporan HEIs and organizations.

A revision of the third-level higher education programs and their alignment with the PhD/doctorate programs of leading European HEIs is also important since it will ensure the development of the intellectual and research resource that will serve as a driving force for the growth of innovative, knowledge-based economy and competitiveness at the international level. Thus, it is also necessary to revise postgraduate education in accordance with the criteria defined

for integration into the European research area in line with the Salzburg principles and those for innovative doctoral education.

In order to boost reforms at the institutional level and to reinforce the outcomes of qualitative changes it is also necessary to enhance the accreditation and licensing criteria, to improve their mechanisms, and to introduce accountability mechanisms.

The implementation of joint educational programs is one of the most important prerequisites for boosting the quality of education and for creating a culture of internationalization at HEIs. Today around 50 joint educational programs are implemented at various Armenian HEIs. However, the implementation of joint educational programs faces obstacles from a legal standpoint, as well as in terms of availability of institutional capacities and resources.

Thus, it is necessary to implement comprehensive reforms to promote joint academic programs the implementation of which will ensure the modernization of teaching and learning through applying best international practices and innovative methods, and will contribute to the continuous integration of the country's higher education and research into the international education system. This will enhance the process of awarding joint qualifications and foster student and staff mobility.

The development and implementation of academic programs in foreign languages will facilitate the initiation of joint, double-diploma programs, and will expand international partnerships, thereby minimizing possible constraints.

In order to enhance the quality of education and research in Armenian HEIs and to boost internationalization it is important to involve and retain the potential of high-quality professionals. Recent developments have shown that due to low salaries, faculty and staff hold more than one job, which adversely affects the academic-scientific as well as internationalization activities. However, the lack of financial means is not the only problem in the retention of the creative and talented potential. HEIs do not have policies and procedures aimed at retaining high quality alumni and involving them in academic-scientific activities, recruiting professionals in the country and outside its borders, particularly from the Diaspora. The deficiency of the moral and financial incentives/encouragement compromises the potential of skilled specialists and hinders addressing the HEI's development issues.

Involving and retaining the creative and talented potential also assumes the existence of appropriate infrastructures, support services and research opportunities, as well as that of a change-inspiring environment. Thus, to address the problem it is important that Armenian HEIs develop policies and procedures for involving and retaining corresponding academic and scientific potential. Moreover, HEIs should create a value-based educational and research environment, which will stimulate provision of high-quality and internationally competitive education and research. In this respect, it is also important to develop a career advancement support and promotion policy which will create an attractive environment conducive to motivating the involvement of high-quality specialists.

Objective 2.2: To direct the internationalization of HEIs towards the country's high priority areas for development

Despite active efforts aimed at establishing international connections in the past decade, the implemented programs and the achieved mobility have not always aligned with the development priorities of the country.

Now that Armenia is facing radical economic and political reforms after the Velvet Revolution, the internationalization of higher education and research in all possible directions can become a constructive lever in introducing world-class experience in the reform process. Thus, the inter-institutional collaboration at the international level in information technologies, tourism, agriculture and other high priority areas of development will ensure the rapid growth of the relevant professional human potential, economic development and the boosting of competitiveness at the international level.

Goal 3: To increase the International Visibility and Attractiveness of Higher Education and Research

Despite some efforts by the HEIs, a comprehensive policy on information dissemination which would promote attractiveness and visibility of Armenian higher education at the international level has not been developed yet. The implementation of comprehensive activities aimed at enhancing the international visibility of the university system will promote the involvement of international students and faculty in Armenian HEIs, the development of international strategic partnerships, and the aspirations for becoming competitive at the international level.

This will contribute to raising the international ranking of Armenian higher education, thus promoting international mobility and implementing the ECTS-based credit system, promoting knowledge and experience exchange at the international level, further strengthening intercultural dialogue, enhancing integration into the EHEA and the ERA. Through joint programs and research with foreign HEIs, Armenia can strengthen and raise its ranking as an internationally recognized and attractive knowledge destination.

Objective 3.1: To involve the potential of alumni living abroad, Armenian graduates of foreign universities, international faculty and Diaspora representatives in the higher education and research internationalization processes

At most Armenian universities almost no targeted work is carried out with the alumni who are an important resource for information dissemination about their universities. Today, a large number of alumni of Armenian HEIs (both Armenian and international) study or work abroad, but there is no effective system of data collection for collaborating with alumni and promoting the university's visibility in other countries.

Similarly, in the last two decades, many international faculty have come to Armenia to teach in different programs. They can play a constructive role in disseminating information about Armenian universities and establishing international contacts with their home institutions.

The Armenian Diaspora is the most important resource in promoting the visibility and attractiveness of Armenian higher education. Today, though many Diaspora representatives work at leading universities abroad, the collaboration with them is not at the desired level.

Therefore, comprehensive actions aimed at maintaining connections with university alumni, establishing connections with Diaspora representatives and academic staff of universities abroad and their inclusion in scientific and educational processes are necessary.

Objective 3.2: To introduce a marketing strategy for boosting higher education and research internationally

The HEI system still does not have a comprehensive policy and programs aimed at effective marketing/communications activities (video clips, exhibits, global forums, advertisement, etc.).

The lack of financial means for marketing events at HEIs hinders their visibility on different platforms.

It is necessary to develop and implement comprehensive marketing strategies both at the national and institutional levels by involving field experts. To provide complete information on services and activities, as well as to strengthen the ties with stakeholders, the universities should expand the variety of marketing tools, ensuring dynamic development of websites and optimizing social media.

Objective 3.3: To ensure the integration of HEIs into the international/global ranking systems

The integration of Armenian HEIs into the international/global ranking systems is of vital importance for boosting the visibility of universities.

The majority of Armenian HEIs are not included in the internationally recognized ranking systems. Only recently, for the first time, two Armenian HEIs have been included in the 2018 ranking list of the “QS Emerging Europe and Central Asia University Rankings” system -- Yerevan State University has ranked in the range of 181-190, and the Russian-Armenian University in the range of 201-250.

Yet back in 2012, the development of a national university ranking system was a priority issue in Armenia. It was planned to develop transparent and easily understandable classification along with ranking indicators describing the university activities, as well as to develop methodologies and regulations. However, the 2013 ranking did not solve the issue of boosting the visibility and attractiveness of the Armenian HE system at the international level, and the ranking system was not successful due to problems in the system. One of the objectives of this strategy is to develop an action plan that will stem from the criteria set for institutional inclusion into the global ranking systems.

Goal 4: To Increase the International Mobility of Students, Faculty and Administrative Staff

Due to globalization and a number of EU programs, the international mobility of students and staff has increased in recent years. This increase is an important prerequisite for the internationalization of the Armenian HEI system, for the exchange of best practices, and for boosting the quality and competitiveness of education. On the other hand, incoming international students who have received high-quality education in Armenia can become ambassadors abroad strengthening the international, socio-economic and cultural ties between Armenia and other countries.

Objective 4.1: To increase the opportunities for experience sharing and professional development of faculty and administrative staff, to increase the student mobility in short-term and long-term educational programs

Mobility opens up numerous opportunities for personal growth, fosters international collaboration between individuals and universities and contributes to the increase in higher education and research quality. Mobility enables its participants to expand the boundaries of their knowledge/experience, as well as to develop skills for intercultural communication, orientation in unfamiliar environment and decision-making.

In the frameworks of different programs implemented in Armenia (Erasmus+, DAAD, IREX, Fulbright, etc.), the faculty and administrative staff of most universities have had various

opportunities to participate in mobility programs and get acquainted with international practices. However, the scope of current mobility is small and does not contribute to the internationalization of different units and departments of the universities. From this perspective, universities should develop strategies and procedures aimed at expanding mobility opportunities, directing them towards strategic objectives of the university, and diversifying the offerings of specializations. In order to expand mobility and to increase the number of participants, universities should also develop mechanisms for information dissemination and effective communication with staff, as well as tools for assessment and evaluation of mobility results.

Currently, the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sport and universities offer both degree mobility programs in the frameworks of inter-governmental and bilateral agreements, and short-term and long-term mobility programs mostly in the frameworks of Erasmus+ credit mobility program.

In recent years, the student mobility dynamics has registered positive trends. In the 2017-2018 academic year, the mobility involved less than one percent of the total student population. Along with the small volumes of mobility, there were also problems related to the recognition and transfer of ECTS credits. The latter is conditioned both by the incomplete implementation of the ECTS credit system and the lack of coherence in learning outcomes, as well as by the fact that the academic programs of Armenian HEIs are strictly regulated.

Therefore, comprehensive actions aimed at boosting student mobility at the national and institutional levels are necessary to strengthen the dialogue between Armenian state agencies and foreign diplomatic missions, as well as different authorities to eliminate the obstacles related to entry visas, work permits and temporary residence permits, and recognition of qualifications acquired at universities abroad.

The educational programs offered by Armenian HEIs should be structured in such a way that will enable students to participate in different types of mobility programs at least once during their studies. The mobility should be available to all students and should be worded in the strategic missions of HEIs. According to the EU “2020 mobility strategy”, the EHEA countries should strive to increase the overall national index of mobility to 20% of the total student population by the year 2025. Thus, the present strategy emphasizes the importance of the RA Government defining a similar target and introducing the necessary tools. The HEIs, at the same time, should have their strategic quantitative targets for mobility in order to reach the defined target at the national level. Activities to this end should be carried out among students in order to disseminate information about mobility opportunities and create equal opportunities for students.

This strategy aims at creating a favorable environment for mobility with the involvement and collaboration of all stakeholders. In particular, it is envisaged to strengthen the collaboration between the National Center for Academic Recognition and Mobility and HEIs for providing consultations and organizing thematic trainings. At the same time, the National Center for Professional Education Quality Assurance should consider having indicators related to recognition of mobility results, mobility participation procedures, transparency and equal opportunities in its accreditation criteria.

Since Armenia’s Independence, the enrollment of international students can be characterized by its randomness: no marketing activities targeting specific countries have been carried out. In some cases, based on specialization peculiarities, some HEIs have targeted a few countries, but that has not been a generalized practice. Based on the already shaped mobility trends on the one

hand, and the priorities of the country's foreign relations development on the other, it is necessary to identify the countries of strategic interest and to develop a relevant strategy, thus boosting and enhancing the mobility with HEIs and partners in target countries.

Today, the information on the internationalization of HEIs, mobility numbers, types and directions is not complete, and the data collection mechanism is imperfect. The absence of a reliable database hinders the implementation of an evidence-based policy on HEI internationalization and the guidance of Armenian HEIs in creating strategic targets in internationalization. The need for having a complete information database on international mobility is determined by the importance of the evaluation of mobility results and the implementation of improvement measures to foster active participation in mobility programs. The existence of the information database will serve to benefit the accreditation processes and university accountability, as well as to provide statistical data to different agencies/organizations.

Objective 4.2: To introduce a system of recognition of foreign qualifications, degrees, credits

Along with the growth of academic mobility numbers, it is necessary to develop procedures at universities for the recognition of international qualifications and prior education, based on the main principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention. The responsibilities of HEIs for assessment of education and qualifications received abroad increase along with the mobility growth. Thus, the legal framework of the education sphere, as well as the admissions requirements/procedures of HEIs should be consistent with the main principles of the Convention, respecting the autonomy and academic freedom of HEIs.

Fair recognition of qualifications will ensure the maintenance of the real value of qualifications awarded to further continue education or take up employment. The recognition procedures should also enable the recognition of credits/short-term mobility results.

To sum up, the higher education and research internationalization requires a comprehensive approach: it is necessary to have a national platform for higher education internationalization by introducing appropriate tools and benchmarking indicators, and developing monitoring and evaluation/assessment procedures for the fulfillment of strategic goals. The development of the holistic monitoring and accountability system will allow evaluating the internationalization pace and directions of HEIs and the effectiveness of implemented measures based on their impact on the higher education system.