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**ABSTRACT**

of the dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

**SYSTEM OF ORGANIZING LIFELONG LEARNING IN  
HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS**

Speciality: 5802.01 – organization and planning of education

Field of science: Pedagogy

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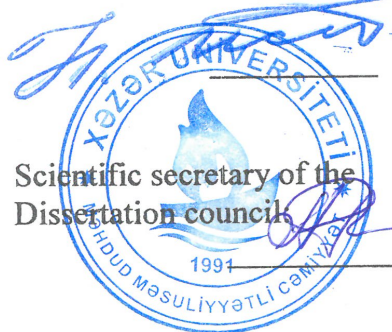
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## GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE RESEARCH

**Relevance and degree of development of research.** One of the five strategic priorities of the State Strategy for the Development of Education in the Republic of Azerbaijan, approved by the Decree of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan dated October 24, 2013, is the establishment of an education system that ensures lifelong learning. In addition to the aforementioned Strategy, the extensive inclusion of lifelong learning in various documents defining the country's development trajectory is a clear indication of this direction's growing significance. Notable among such documents are 'Azerbaijan 2030: National Priorities for Socio-Economic Development' and the subsequent 'Strategy for Socio-Economic Development of the Republic of Azerbaijan for 2022-2026,' the 'Employment Strategy of the Republic of Azerbaijan for 2019-2030,' and several Strategic Roadmaps for the national economy and its key sectors. Furthermore, making lifelong learning accessible to all has been established as a fundamental requirement for the organization of higher and vocational education; this is reflected in the 'State Standard and Program for the Higher Education Level' (approved in 2010) and the 'State Standards for Vocational Education' (approved in 2019).

Despite the recognition of the importance of organizing lifelong learning at the state level, what is specifically meant by a lifelong learning system, as well as the roles and duties of various levels of education in creating such a system, has remained unexplained. Thus, although the State Strategy for the Development of Education and the Action Plan adopted in connection with its implementation indicate measures for the creation of an educational system that will allow for lifelong learning, a clear explanation regarding the essence of such a system has not been provided. Although a definition of the concept of lifelong learning was given in the "National Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning of the Republic of Azerbaijan" (AzNQF) approved on July 18, 2018, no clarity has been brought to what is intended as an educational system

providing lifelong learning and what the roles and duties of various educational levels consist of in the organization of this system.

In this context, particularly considering that in Azerbaijan lifelong learning is largely promoted against the background of labour market challenges, a number of important issues remain insufficiently clarified. In particular, the responsibilities of higher education institutions (HEIs) – which act as the principal providers of highly qualified specialists and whose role and importance in the organization of lifelong learning are frequently emphasized – have not been clearly defined with regard to the organization of lifelong learning. Likewise, the ways in which HEIs can contribute to the development of an education system that ensures lifelong learning have not been sufficiently determined.

Taking the above into account, the following factors characterizing the relevance of the research topic should be particularly noted:

- the lack of any conceptual document or roadmap reflecting the national-level vision for the future, expectations from educational levels, and other related issues regarding lifelong education – despite numerous references to the concept of lifelong learning in normative-legal acts and various socio-economic development documents, as well as its presentation as a primary solution to labor market talent shortages – and the conceptual and practical gaps resulting from this absence;

- the fact that, in addition to the traditional teaching and research activities of the country's HEIs, the extent of their readiness for activities directed toward the organization of lifelong learning, as well as the effectiveness of the work carried out to form an educational system ensuring lifelong learning, has not been investigated through scientific methods to date;

- the transition of state policy in the field of higher education to a qualitatively new stage, the establishment of the State Agency for Science and Higher Education and the inclusion of measures for lifelong learning within its duties, and the necessity of studying the contribution of the higher education level to lifelong learning, as well as the system of work for organizing lifelong learning within HEIs;

- the findings obtained within the framework of other studies indicating that, despite the importance of lifelong learning, lifelong learning opportunities in Azerbaijan – especially for adults – remain limited.

Despite the relevance of this issue, the topic has not been widely investigated in Azerbaijan. Although the number of studies directly related to the problem is limited, it should be noted that the works of Azerbaijani pedagogical scholars such as A.N. Abbasov, A.M. Abbasov, H.H. Ahmadov, P.B. Aliyev, M.I. Ilyasov, A.O. Mehrabov, F.B. Sadiqov, N.M. Kazimov, A.A. Agayev, H.A. Alizade, and others address issues of educational management to varying degrees.

A study conducted in 2022 at the Institute of Education of the Republic of Azerbaijan (IERA) is directly related to the problem under investigation. The research entitled “Practices of Implementing the Lifelong Learning Concept in Higher Education Institutions,” which involved representatives of the Ministry of Science and Education of the Republic of Azerbaijan and 16 HEIs, provided general information on how HEIs conceptualize lifelong learning, the organizational structures established to ensure lifelong learning opportunities, the programs offered, and other relevant aspects.

From the perspective of developing a general understanding of the higher education system of Azerbaijan – including its historical development, implemented reforms, and other issues related to HEIs – the work by H. Isakhanli and A. Pashayeva, entitled “Transformation of Higher Education in Azerbaijan, Institutional Diversity and the Typology of Higher Education Institutions,” is of particular importance.

The article by I.H. Jabrayilov and N. Mammadov, titled “Coaching as a Pedagogical Tool Enhancing Personal Qualities in the Context of Lifelong Learning,” is dedicated to the subject of lifelong learning. Although the article is not directly related to higher education, it is significant in terms of broadening the perspective on the lifelong learning system and its organization.

In foreign literature, the subject of lifelong learning has been studied from various aspects. It is particularly appropriate to mention the numerous publications of the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong

Learning. Among these publications, we have utilized works such as “Making Lifelong Learning a Reality: A Handbook” (2022), “International Trends of Lifelong Learning in Higher Education,” and “Institutional Practices of Implementing Lifelong Learning in Higher Education” (2023) during the research. These sources provide a detailed analysis of the definition of lifelong learning, the elements of an educational system that ensures lifelong learning, the role of HEIs within this system, the policy environment for organizing lifelong learning in HEIs – including the favorability of the legislative framework – work to be done at the institutional level, and ways to expand access to education.

Turkish literature was also reviewed. The system ensuring lifelong learning in the HEIs of Turkey was analyzed in detail. The article “Higher Education and Lifelong Learning: A Model Proposal” by Osman Titrek, Demet Zafer Güneş, and Gözde Sezen was a focal point. The article emphasizes that necessary measures for the successful implementation of lifelong learning at the higher education level include expanding access to higher education, establishing student-centered services, improving mechanisms for the recognition of prior learning acquired through non-formal and informal education, developing national qualifications frameworks, and expanding cooperation with employers.

During the analysis of Russian-language scientific sources on the subject of lifelong learning, it was determined that one of the main subjects of those studies is the analysis of lifelong learning as a concept.

**The object of the research** is the process of organizing lifelong learning in higher education institutions. **The subject of the research** is the system of organizing work related to lifelong learning in higher education institutions.

**The aim and objectives of the research.** The aim of the research is to assess the current state of the organization of lifelong learning, to identify its strengths and weaknesses, as well as the factors that facilitate or hinder its development, and to develop a system for organizing lifelong learning. To achieve this aim, the following **research objectives** were defined:

- to clarify the essence of the concept of lifelong learning and the scientific and theoretical foundations of the problem;
- to review the historical development of lifelong learning, to identify the socio-economic context that makes lifelong learning relevant, and to conduct a comparative analysis of the experiences of Azerbaijan and foreign countries from this contextual perspective;
- to identify the methodology for organizing lifelong learning in higher education, including the principles, components, and tools of organizing lifelong learning;
- to identify the stages of development of lifelong learning organization in HEIs;
- to examine the practical aspects of organizing lifelong learning;
- to determine the factors that facilitate or hinder the organization of lifelong learning, as well as to identify the strengths and weaknesses of HEIs in this area.

**Research methods.** The following research methods were used during the study: theoretical analysis, interviews, conversations, observation, induction and deduction, and mathematical-statistical methods.

**The main provisions for the defense:**

- the absence of a comprehensive conceptual document at the state level addressing issues related to lifelong learning, the education system that enables such learning, and the roles of different levels of education in its development leads to the perception of lifelong learning as equivalent to continuing education, prevents its recognition as one of the organizing principles of the education system, and limits the scope of measures aimed at promoting lifelong learning;
- the promotion of lifelong learning becomes particularly relevant in the context of pressures and challenges emerging from socio-economic sectors, and the socio-economic context significantly influences the level of development of lifelong learning activities within HEIs;
- challenges related to the quality of education at the higher education level result in the concentration of the main activities of

HEIs on the organization of teaching at the bachelor's and master's levels, while other areas not directly associated with these core activities, including the organization of lifelong learning, do not generate substantial expectations. Consequently, although some initiatives aimed at promoting lifelong learning are observed, such activities are typically organized separately from the core functions of HEIs and are usually limited to the provision of short-term certificate programs implemented by a specific structural unit;

- the effectiveness of lifelong learning activities in HEIs depends not only on the approaches and policies adopted by the institutions themselves, but also to a considerable extent on factors beyond their direct authority, including the regulatory and legal framework governing the education sector and other related policy initiatives;

- the restrictive influence of external factors is particularly evident in limiting the transformation of HEIs into competitive lifelong learning environments.

**Scientific novelty of the research.** A comprehensive system for organizing lifelong learning in HEIs has been established. This system has been designed on the basis of internationally recognized scientific and theoretical frameworks and approaches to lifelong learning, while applying scientific research methods within the context of Azerbaijan. The framework encompasses the following components: the core essence of the problem, its goals and objectives, effective formats and pathways for implementing lifelong learning, and its governing principles and methods.

**Theoretical and practical significance of the research.** The **theoretical significance** of this research lies in its potential to enrich pedagogical theory with new conceptual ideas. Furthermore, should a decision be made to develop a national lifelong learning (LLL) concept paper or roadmap for the Republic of Azerbaijan, this study can serve as a foundational theoretical framework for its formulation."

Regarding the **practical implications** of the dissertation, the research findings identify key focus areas related to the fourth strategic priority of the State Strategy for the Development of

Education – namely, the creation of an educational infrastructure that ensures lifelong learning. By doing so, the study directly enhances the effectiveness of efforts directed toward the implementation of this strategic goal.

Additionally, the research outlines critical areas for the institutionalization of lifelong learning within HEIs, facilitating its integration into traditional academic functions and elevating it to a qualitatively superior stage. This carries particular practical weight at a time when state policy in higher education is entering a new phase, and the State Agency for Science and Higher Education has been mandated to implement measures for the application of the AzNQF (National Qualifications Framework).

Furthermore, the results offer practical benefits for implementing evidence-based policies aimed at expanding lifelong learning opportunities, increasing the contribution of HEIs to this process, mitigating labor shortages, and developing highly competitive human capital. Finally, the findings of this research can be utilized as instructional material in the teaching of relevant subjects within institutions offering programs in educational management.

**Approbation and result.** The main results and scientific provisions of the dissertation have been disseminated through six scientific articles (including one published abroad) and six conference papers (including three presented at international scientific conferences) published in the proceedings of scientific conferences.

**Name of the organization where the dissertation was performed.** The dissertation research was conducted at the department of Economics and Management of Education of the Institute of Education of the Republic of Azerbaijan.

**The total volume of the dissertation in characters, indicating the volume of the structural sections of the dissertation separately.** The dissertation is composed of an introduction, two chapters comprising six sections, a conclusion, a list of references, appendices, and a list of abbreviations and symbols. The total length of the dissertation, excluding the title page, table of contents, spacing within the text, figures, graphs, tables, the list of references, appendices, and

the list of abbreviations and symbols, comprises 123 pages or 251,625 characters. The Introduction covers 12 pages (22,441 characters), Chapter I – 52 pages (108,045 characters), Chapter II – 51 pages (104,875 characters), and the Conclusion – 8 pages (16,264 characters). The list of references consists of 23 pages, the appendices comprise 3 pages, and the list of abbreviations and symbols comprises a page.

## MAIN CONTENT OF THE RESEARCH

In the “**Introduction**”, the relevance of the research topic is substantiated and an overview of the degree to which the problem has been examined in the scientific literature is provided. The Introduction also outlines the object and subject of the research, its aim and objectives, the research methods employed, the main scientific provisions submitted for defense, as well as the scientific novelty and the theoretical and practical significance of the study.

Chapter I of the dissertation, entitled “**Scientific and Theoretical Foundations of the Problem**”, consists of three paragraphs. The first paragraph, titled “*The Essence, Content, and Historical Development of the Concept of Lifelong Learning*”, examines the historical evolution of the concept of lifelong learning and explores its scientific and theoretical foundations. In this section, the definition and key characteristics of the concept of lifelong learning are analyzed, and the differences between lifelong learning and continuing education are clarified.

The paradigm of lifelong learning, while rooted in mid-twentieth-century scientific and theoretical discourse, achieved formal conceptual consolidation through the landmark 1972 UNESCO publication, *Learning to Be: The World of Education Today and Tomorrow* – frequently cited as the Faure Report<sup>1</sup>. According to the authors of the report, every individual should have opportunities to continue learning throughout their entire life, and the education system should create the conditions necessary for this process.

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<sup>1</sup> Learning to be: the world of education today and tomorrow / E.Faure [et al]. – Paris: UNESCO, – 1972. – 313 p.

Another seminal work that made a significant contribution to the development of the theoretical foundations of lifelong learning is the publication entitled *Learning: The Treasure Within* (1996), widely known as the Delors Report<sup>2</sup>. According to the authors of the report, one of the fundamental objectives of education should be to equip individuals with the ability to learn independently – that is, to develop the skills necessary for autonomous learning.

In this context, the report proposes four fundamental pillars of lifelong learning, which later came to be recognized as the key principles underlying the concept of lifelong learning: learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together, and learning to be.

Regarding the distinctions between lifelong learning and additional education, the dissertation asserts that while these terms may appear synonymous at first glance, they possess fundamentally different conceptual meanings. Lifelong learning aims to enhance the knowledge and skills of individuals through formal, non-formal, and informal education, regardless of age, prior educational background, or employment status. Its objectives include making education accessible to all, recognizing learning outcomes achieved through diverse pathways, and creating alternative educational trajectories for individuals based on such recognition. Crucially, this type of learning can occur in any setting. In contrast, additional education refers to a more delimited educational experience compared to the overarching concept of lifelong learning. According to the Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan 'On Education' and the AzNQF, the primary goal of additional education is to create opportunities for individuals who have already completed vocational, sub-bachelor, or higher education levels to further refine and update their competencies. Additional education programs have defined start and end points, and individuals who successfully complete them are issued an educational credential in a manner prescribed by the relevant executive authority. Furthermore, such education can only be

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<sup>2</sup> *Learning: the treasure within: report to UNESCO of the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-First Century / J. Delors [et al.]*. – Paris: UNESCO Publishing, 1996. – 266 p

organized within institutions that meet specific regulatory requirements and is categorized into six established directions.

The second paragraph of Chapter I, entitled ***“The Socio-Economic Context Shaping the Relevance of Lifelong Learning in the World and in Azerbaijan and Its Impact on the Organization of Lifelong Learning in Higher Education”***, presents a comparative analysis of the socio-economic conditions in the countries where the concept of lifelong learning initially emerged and the socio-economic context of Azerbaijan.

The analysis indicates that the concept of lifelong learning gained particular prominence in the developed countries of the Global North, where rapid economic growth, the transition toward a knowledge-based economy, increasing demand for highly qualified human capital, and negative demographic trends contributed to the growing importance of lifelong learning policies. In these countries, the massification of higher education further intensified expectations placed on HEIs to function as key providers of lifelong learning opportunities.

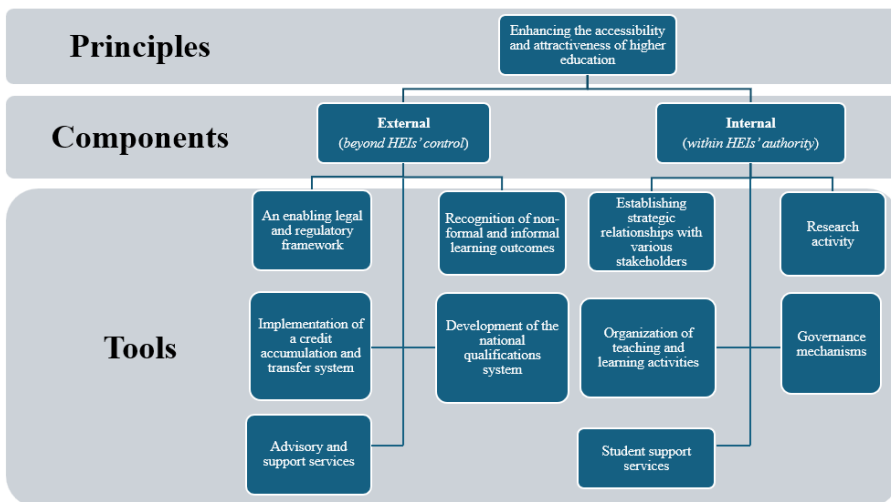
In Azerbaijan, however, lifelong learning has largely been promoted in response to the insufficient alignment between the existing workforce and the evolving requirements of the labour market. At the same time, in contrast to the developed countries of the Global North, several structural characteristics of the national labour market have limited the demand for a comprehensive lifelong learning system. These characteristics include the predominance of low-skilled workers and the concentration of employment opportunities in labour-intensive sectors characterized by relatively low productivity.

In addition, the relatively recent process of higher education massification in Azerbaijan, together with the need to address fundamental issues such as ensuring the quality of education within HEIs, has contributed to comparatively lower expectations regarding the role of HEIs in the provision of lifelong learning opportunities.

The final paragraph of Chapter I, entitled ***“Scientific and Methodological Foundations of Organizing Lifelong Learning in Higher Education Institutions”***, examines the role of HEIs in an

education system that ensures lifelong learning. The section also analyzes the methodology for organizing lifelong learning within HEIs, which encompasses the principles and components that constitute the foundation for organizing lifelong learning activities, as well as the instruments and mechanisms employed to ensure their effective implementation.

Given that this methodological framework serves as the conceptual basis for the analysis conducted in the subsequent chapter of the dissertation, a figure illustrating the key elements of the methodology has been included in the section in order to facilitate a clearer understanding of the proposed framework.



**Figure 1.3.1 – Principles, Components, and Tools for Organizing Lifelong Learning in Higher Education**

As illustrated in the figure, the fundamental principles underlying the organization of lifelong learning in higher education include, as in other levels of formal education, the enhancement of accessibility to higher education and the increased attractiveness of HEIs. In this context, attractiveness refers to the creation of conditions that stimulate individuals' motivation to pursue education in HEIs.

Before proceeding to the specific instruments used for organizing lifelong learning, it should be noted that the academic literature typically classifies such instruments into two broad categories. The first category, referred to as the external component, encompasses instruments that lie beyond the direct decision-making authority of HEIs.

The significance of external instruments stems from the fact that, as in other policy areas, the ability of HEIs to organize and promote lifelong learning largely depends on the scope of authority granted to them, as well as on the existence and effectiveness of national-level measures aimed at supporting lifelong learning. Within this component are included the relevant legal and regulatory framework, mechanisms for the recognition of non-formal and informal learning outcomes, the credit accumulation and transfer system, the national qualifications system, and advisory and support services, all of which directly or indirectly influence the organization of lifelong learning.

The internal component, in contrast, comprises institutional instruments that depend primarily on the initiatives and capacities of HEIs themselves in organizing and promoting lifelong learning. This component includes the development of strategic partnerships with various stakeholders, the research activities of HEIs, the organization of teaching and learning processes, governance mechanisms, and student support services.

The section further examines how these elements interact with one another and contribute collectively to the promotion of lifelong learning. It is emphasized that each instrument within the lifelong learning system complements the others, and that the effectiveness of any single instrument largely depends on the functionality and effectiveness of the others.

The section further provides an analysis of the three developmental stages in the organization of lifelong learning, identified as the “adaptation” stage, the “organizational integration” stage, and the “integration into organizational culture” stage, and examines their distinguishing characteristics.

HEIs operating at the “adaptation stage” typically demonstrate a limited conceptual understanding of lifelong learning and frequently equate it with continuing education. Consequently, their activities related to lifelong learning tend to be confined to the provision of short-term certification courses and similar programs. The implementation of such programs is generally delegated to institutional units responsible for the organization of continuing education. Due to the absence of a long-term strategic vision or institutional policy regarding lifelong learning, activities in this area are often fragmented and lack coherence. As a result, these initiatives remain largely detached from the core academic and institutional functions of HEIs and are not effectively integrated into their primary areas of activity.

In contrast, HEIs characterized by the “organizational integration” stage begin to formulate institutional objectives related to lifelong learning based on the experience accumulated through continuing education initiatives. These objectives are typically reflected in the institution’s strategic development plans or other formal policy documents. The formulation of an institutional strategy for lifelong learning constitutes one of the defining features of this stage. At this level of development, institutional leadership and internal stakeholders recognize that lifelong learning represents a broader educational paradigm that extends beyond the scope of continuing education. Consequently, efforts are undertaken to align various institutional activities with the overarching objective of promoting lifelong learning.

The “integration into organizational culture” stage represents the most advanced form of organizing lifelong learning within HEIs. At this stage, the promotion of lifelong learning becomes embedded as a guiding principle within institutional decision-making processes. A learner-centered orientation is prioritized not only in teaching and learning activities but also in student support services and other administrative and managerial processes. One of the central objectives at this stage is to create an institutional environment that enables learners to fully realize their academic and professional potential.

Another characteristic feature of this stage is the willingness of institutions to introduce alternative admission pathways, including mechanisms based on the recognition of prior learning. It should also be emphasized that HEIs that have reached this stage are often described in the academic literature as lifelong learning institutions, as openness to innovation, continuous improvement, and institutional learning becomes embedded within their organizational culture.

Chapter II of the dissertation, entitled **“The System of Organizing Lifelong Learning in Higher Education Institutions of Azerbaijan”**, consists of three paragraphs. This chapter is devoted to the analysis of the data obtained within the framework of the research and to the interpretation of the research findings.

The first paragraph of the chapter, entitled ***“The Current Stage of Development of Lifelong Learning Organization in Higher Education Institutions of Azerbaijan”***, focuses on the results of the SWOT analysis conducted to identify the strengths and weaknesses of HEIs in organizing lifelong learning, as well as the opportunities available to them and the barriers they encounter. At the same time, attention is drawn to how lifelong learning is conceptualized by HEIs and what measures are implemented in this area.

The findings indicate that HEIs in Azerbaijan tend to equate lifelong learning with continuing education, and their activities in this field are largely limited to the provision of additional education services, primarily in the form of short-term certification and professional development programs. The research also reveals that these activities are frequently implemented in isolation from the core functions of HEIs and are not integrated into institutional strategic development plans. Based on these observations, several recommendations have been proposed.

When these findings are considered in relation to the three developmental stages of organizing lifelong learning identified in the dissertation, a clear similarity can be observed between the current situation in Azerbaijani HEIs and the characteristics of the adaptation stage. In particular, the incomplete understanding of the concept of lifelong learning, its frequent identification with continuing education, the absence of long-term strategic planning in this area,

and the fragmented nature of related activities correspond closely to the defining features of the adaptation stage.

The second paragraph of Chapter II, entitled *“Analysis of the External Instruments for Organizing Lifelong Learning in Higher Education Institutions”*, examines the current situation regarding external factors influencing the organization of lifelong learning. To this end, the study analyzes the impact of the relevant legal and regulatory framework, the mechanisms for the recognition of competencies acquired through non-formal and informal learning, the implementation of the credit accumulation and transfer system, the development of the national qualifications system, and the organization of advisory and support services on the organization of lifelong learning in HEIs.

The results suggest that the insufficient development of the regulatory framework governing modular educational programs such as micro-credentials, as well as distance education, constitutes one of the main factors limiting the capacity of HEIs to organize lifelong learning activities. In addition, the centralized system of student admission for first-time higher education in Azerbaijan prevents HEIs from using admission mechanisms as a tool for promoting lifelong learning.

With regard to other external instruments for organizing lifelong learning, the paragraph notes that although significant efforts have been undertaken separately in the areas of recognition of competencies acquired through non-formal and informal learning, implementation of the credit accumulation and transfer system, and development of the national qualifications system, the integration of these measures remains insufficient for ensuring the systematic organization of lifelong learning. In particular, the recognition of prior learning is currently applied only at the level of initial vocational education, and the outcome of the recognition process results in the awarding of certificates or diplomas rather than academic credits. One of the main reasons for this is that the first two levels of vocational education are not delivered on a credit-based system.

Furthermore, the absence of unified credit registries in the form of an academic credit bank, as well as the lack of regulatory

provisions for short-term modular educational programs such as micro-credentials, limits individuals' ability to design flexible and personalized educational pathways. Although important steps have been taken in the development of the national qualifications system – such as the development of occupational and qualification standards, the establishment of their registry, and the approval of the National Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning of the Republic of Azerbaijan – the integration of these measures with the other instruments mentioned above remains weak. In this regard, it should be particularly emphasized that although the establishment of a National Qualifications Register is envisaged within the framework of the national qualifications system, it has not yet been put into operation and therefore currently does not play a role in the recognition of competencies acquired through non-formal and informal learning.

With respect to advisory services for learners, the paragraph notes that the limited opportunities for transitions between different qualification levels within the education system have so far prevented the emergence of a strong demand for the institutionalized provision of such services.

The third paragraph of Chapter II, entitled “*Analysis of Internal Instruments for Organizing Lifelong Learning in Higher Education Institutions*”, focuses on the measures undertaken by HEIs, as well as the outcomes and shortcomings associated with internal instruments for organizing lifelong learning.

Particular emphasis is placed on the fact that the internal instruments of lifelong learning organization primarily serve two purposes: first, they contribute to ensuring that individuals remain within the education system until they successfully complete their studies; and second, they support the second principle of lifelong learning organization – namely, enhancing the attractiveness of higher education – by ensuring that the educational experience within HEIs remains meaningful and beneficial for individuals belonging to different age groups.

The paragraph further examines the extent to which strategic partnerships, research activities, organization of teaching and

learning processes, governance mechanisms, and student support services within HEIs create favorable conditions for the promotion and organization of lifelong learning. The results of the analysis indicate that, with the exception of research activities, HEIs have undertaken significant efforts in each of the areas presented in Figure 1.3.1.

However, at the current stage of development, HEIs tend to equate lifelong learning with continuing education. As a result, they do not perceive the directions presented in Figure 1.3.1 as tools for organizing lifelong learning and therefore do not fully utilize the potential of these activities for promoting and developing lifelong learning.

**The main findings** of the dissertation, devoted to the study of the system for organizing lifelong learning in HEIs, are summarized in the following conclusions.

1. The study shows that, unlike the concept of continuing education, lifelong learning refers to all forms of learning that lead to the improvement of knowledge, skills, competencies, or qualifications, and is not restricted by the form of education, the place where learning occurs, or the purposes it serves. Continuing education, by contrast, is regarded as a specific type of formal education and is subject to a number of institutional requirements governing its organization. In particular, participation in continuing education programs requires individuals to possess a state-recognized diploma certifying the completion of one of the following levels of formal education: vocational education, secondary specialized education, or higher education. In addition, continuing education programs may only be provided by educational institutions or other organizations that have obtained a license to offer such programs and must be implemented in accordance with approved educational curricula. In contrast, the concept of lifelong learning encompasses all forms of learning and promotes the accessibility of education for all members of society, encouraging education systems to be organized in a manner that supports this objective.

2. As a result of the analysis of the socio-economic context that makes lifelong learning relevant and that significantly influences its

organization in HEIs, as well as the situation in Azerbaijan in this regard, it has been revealed that the concept of lifelong learning emerged and gradually gained prominence in developed Global North countries against the backdrop of rapid economic growth, the transition to a knowledge-based economy, increasing demand for highly qualified human capital, and negative demographic trends. The massification of higher education observed in these countries further strengthened expectations placed on HEIs as key providers of lifelong learning opportunities and shaped perceptions of their role in this area. In Azerbaijan, however, the promotion of lifelong learning has largely been driven by the insufficient alignment between the existing workforce and the evolving requirements of the labour market. Nevertheless, in contrast to the developed countries of the Global North, structural characteristics of the national labour market – such as the predominance of low-skilled labour and the concentration of employment opportunities in labour-intensive sectors characterized by relatively low productivity—have limited the demand for an education system that fully supports lifelong learning. Furthermore, the gradual process of the massification of higher education in the country and the continuing challenges associated with ensuring the quality of education in HEIs have resulted in relatively limited expectations regarding the role of HEIs in providing lifelong learning opportunities.

3. The principles, components, and instruments for organizing lifelong learning in higher education have been identified. The fundamental principles include increasing the accessibility of higher education and enhancing the attractiveness of HEIs for all segments of the population. The measures implemented to achieve these objectives are divided into two main components: external instruments, which fall outside the decision-making authority of HEIs, and internal instruments, which depend directly on the initiatives and capacities of the institutions themselves. External factors influencing the organization of lifelong learning include the existence of a supportive legal and regulatory framework, the establishment and effective functioning of mechanisms for the recognition of learning outcomes acquired through non-formal and

informal learning, the implementation of a credit accumulation and transfer system, the development of the national qualifications system, and the provision of advisory and support services for individuals seeking educational opportunities. Internal factors include the development of strategic partnerships with various stakeholders, the expansion and commercialization of research activities, innovations in the organization of teaching and learning processes, governance approaches that encourage the transformation of HEIs into attractive learning environments, and the provision of student support services. In addition, the paragraph identifies three stages in the development of lifelong learning activities within HEIs, which are described in the literature as the “adaptation” stage, the “organizational integration” stage, and the “integration into organizational culture” stage.

4. The findings obtained from the analysis of how HEIs conceptualize lifelong learning and what measures they undertake in this field, indicate that the organization of lifelong learning in Azerbaijani HEIs currently corresponds to the initial stage of development, referred to in the international literature as the “adaptation” stage. This conclusion is supported by several observations: HEIs tend to equate lifelong learning with continuing education; their activities in this area are generally limited to the provision of short-term certification and professional development programs; long-term institutional strategies for lifelong learning are largely absent; and initiatives related to lifelong learning are typically developed in isolation from the traditional core functions of HEIs.

5. With regard to the legal and regulatory framework, it was established that although this framework creates certain opportunities for HEIs to organize lifelong learning activities, it also generates significant constraints. At present, the restrictive aspects of regulatory provisions appear to have a more pronounced impact on the organization of lifelong learning. This is particularly evident in the case of student admission procedures, which directly influence the accessibility of higher education. The centralized organization of admissions for first-time entry into higher education prevents HEIs from using admission mechanisms as instruments for promoting

lifelong learning. In other words, since HEIs do not directly participate in the admission process, they cannot utilize it as a tool for expanding access to higher education.

Although granting HEIs the authority to admit students to second higher education programs may be regarded as a positive step, it should be noted that obtaining a second higher education degree is not possible without first completing an initial higher education program. Under the current conditions, the only alternative pathway to first-time higher education available to HEIs involves the admission of individuals holding a sub-bachelor professional qualification, who may be admitted through a competitive selection process without participating in the centralized entrance examination. However, concerns related to quality assurance in the educational levels awarding sub-bachelor professional qualifications, as well as the insufficient level of cooperation between HEIs and the institutions that award such qualifications, have contributed to increased resistance among HEIs toward admitting sub-bachelor graduates without entrance examinations.

Issues related to the regulatory framework are not limited solely to student admissions. The research also indicates that the insufficient development of regulatory provisions governing distance education and micro-credential or micro-credit programs, which are increasingly recognized internationally as important instruments for transforming HEIs into flexible learning environments, limits the ability of local HEIs to systematically organize such programs.

At the same time, the study identified certain positive developments within the regulatory framework. For instance, the requirement to exempt sub-bachelor graduates from courses corresponding to subjects previously studied when they are admitted to HEIs in related fields may be considered a mechanism that promotes lifelong learning, as it enables individuals to complete higher education within a shorter period of time. A similar mechanism has also been introduced with regard to second higher education programs.

The analysis of other external instruments supporting lifelong learning revealed that although important measures have been

initiated separately in areas such as the recognition of competencies acquired through non-formal and informal learning, the implementation of the credit accumulation and transfer system, and the development of the national qualifications system, the integration of these measures remains insufficient. For example, the recognition of prior learning is currently applied only at the level of initial vocational education, and the outcomes of the recognition process result in the awarding of certificates or diplomas rather than academic credits. One of the principal reasons for this limitation is that the first two levels of vocational education are not delivered on a credit-based system. Furthermore, the absence of unified credit registries in the form of an academic credit bank, as well as the lack of modular micro-credit programs, prevents individuals from constructing flexible educational trajectories and gradually obtaining higher-level formal qualifications.

Although important steps have been taken in the development of the national qualifications system – such as the development of occupational and qualification standards, the establishment of their registry, and the approval of the National Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning of the Republic of Azerbaijan – the integration of these measures with other elements of the lifelong learning system remains limited. In particular, despite being envisaged within the framework of the national qualifications system, the National Qualifications Register has not yet been put into operation and therefore does not currently play a role in the recognition of competencies acquired through non-formal and informal learning.

With regard to advisory services for learners, the study indicates that the limited opportunities for transitions between qualification levels within the education system have so far prevented the emergence of a strong demand for the institutionalized provision of such services.

Overall, the findings suggest that the formation of an education system capable of supporting lifelong learning in Azerbaijan remains at an early stage of development, which in turn limits the scope of activities that HEIs are able to undertake in organizing lifelong learning.

6. The analysis of the internal instruments of the lifelong learning system indicates that HEIs have undertaken a number of important initiatives in several areas. With the exception of the institutionalization and commercialization of research activities, progress has been observed in establishing strategic partnerships with stakeholders, introducing innovations in the organization of teaching and learning processes, applying new governance approaches aimed at transforming HEIs into attractive learning environments, and developing student support services.

However, since HEIs currently tend to equate lifelong learning with continuing education and approach this field from a relatively narrow perspective, the activities undertaken in the areas mentioned above are not perceived as instruments that contribute to the organization of lifelong learning. As a result, these initiatives are not implemented within a comprehensive and integrated framework. Consequently, although such activities indirectly contribute to transforming HEIs into attractive centers for lifelong learning, their effectiveness could be significantly enhanced through better coordination and by recognizing them as integral components of a coherent lifelong learning system.

Based on the research findings, **recommendations** have been formulated to develop the system for organizing lifelong learning in HEIs.

**In relation to the external instruments for organizing lifelong learning in HEIs:**

1. It is recommended to explore the possibilities of applying mechanisms for the recognition of competencies acquired through non-formal and informal learning at other levels of vocational education and at the level of secondary specialized education, to examine international best practices in this field, and to establish an appropriate legal and regulatory framework supporting such mechanisms.

2. It would be advisable to introduce a credit-based system of instruction at the levels of initial vocational education and technical vocational education.

3. Consideration may be given to awarding academic credits, in addition to certificates and diplomas, on the basis of the recognition

of competencies acquired through non-formal and informal learning (provided that the relevant level of education operates under a credit-based system). This would enable individuals to accumulate academic credits and gradually obtain higher-level qualifications. The awarding of academic credits would also enhance the value of partial recognition of learning outcomes (for example, the recognition of specific modules within a given specialization), as individuals would be able to accumulate credits that could later be applied toward the completion of a full qualification.

4. In order to encourage the use of recognition mechanisms for non-formal and informal learning, it is recommended to increase public awareness of their existence and advantages through targeted information and awareness-raising initiatives, as well as to consider the possibility of implementing these mechanisms free of charge.

5. It is considered necessary to establish an appropriate legal and regulatory framework enabling HEIs to implement short-term, modular educational programs awarding academic credits, commonly referred to as micro-credentials.

6. It would be advisable to pilot mechanisms such as an academic credit bank that would allow for the unified registration of credits accumulated by individuals through different forms of education (provided that a regulatory framework is established for awarding academic credits through the recognition of non-formal and informal learning and for offering micro-credential programs). In this context, it would also be beneficial to study the experiences of countries with extensive expertise in the implementation of such systems.

7. It is necessary to finalize the work related to the establishment and launch of the National Qualifications Register, which would contain comprehensive information on all nationally recognized educational programs and qualifications, as well as the institutions authorized to award them. The Register would also serve as a reference point for individuals who have acquired competencies through non-formal and informal learning and wish to have them recognized, thereby strengthening the role of the National Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning of the Republic of Azerbaijan (AzNQF) in recognition processes.

8. In order for the National Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning of the Republic of Azerbaijan to function as an effective instrument for organizing lifelong learning, it would be appropriate to further refine its content, including the introduction of provisions regulating transitions between qualification levels and improving the clarity of distinctions between level descriptors.

9. To encourage the use of occupational and qualification standards in the development of educational programs at the levels of vocational, secondary specialized, and higher education, it would be beneficial to increase awareness among educational institutions regarding these standards and the Register of Occupational and Qualification Standards. In addition, the reasons for the currently limited use of these standards and the Register should be investigated.

10. The development of a legal and regulatory framework governing the organization and recognition of distance education would create favorable conditions for HEIs to expand their distance learning opportunities.

11. While maintaining the centralized system of admissions for first-time entry into higher education, it would be advisable to conduct research on potential forms of institutional participation by HEIs at the stage of assigning applicants to academic programs corresponding to their interests and academic profiles. The primary objective of such measures should be to reduce cases in which students enroll in programs that do not align with their interests or educational background.

12. It is necessary to strengthen the linkages between different levels and stages of formal education, ensuring that expected learning outcomes and curricula in related fields complement one another and that credits accumulated at earlier levels of education can be seamlessly recognized at subsequent levels.

13. As observed in higher education, greater attention should also be devoted to quality assurance in vocational and secondary specialized education. This would help reduce resistance among HEIs toward the admission of sub-bachelor graduates without entrance examinations and toward the recognition of the academic credits they have previously earned.

## **In relation to the internal instruments for organizing lifelong learning in HEIs:**

1. In order to broaden the organizational perspectives and approaches of HEIs toward the organization of lifelong learning, it is recommended to involve institutional leadership, academic staff, and administrative personnel in relevant training and professional development programs.

2. It is considered necessary to develop a long-term institutional development plan for lifelong learning, which would address issues related to integrating lifelong learning into the traditional core functions of HEIs. Alternatively, greater emphasis could be placed on lifelong learning in the strategic development plans of HEIs.

3. It would be advisable to assess the possibility of establishing mechanisms whereby individuals who have successfully completed short-term courses offered by HEIs may be exempted from certain courses—provided that the course content corresponds – if they later enroll in related bachelor’s or master’s degree programs at the same institution. Such a mechanism would increase the value of short-term educational programs offered by HEIs and facilitate the closer integration of lifelong learning courses and the structural units responsible for their organization with the traditional academic activities of the institution.

4. Greater attention should be given to applying the practice of consulting employers during the development of educational programs across all faculties, and to institutionalizing this practice within the program development process.

5. HEIs should conduct regular studies and surveys aimed at identifying labour market needs, assessing employers’ satisfaction with the competencies of graduates, and determining the factors that contribute to dissatisfaction among employers regarding workforce preparation. Such activities should be treated as a core element of institutional quality assurance systems.

6. It would be beneficial to increase attention to the development of internal quality assurance systems within HEIs and to ensure that quality assurance instruments are established and

effectively implemented across all institutional activities. At the same time, it is important to raise awareness among academic and administrative staff regarding the role and importance of quality assurance functions.

7. It is advisable for institutional leadership to place greater emphasis on enhancing the professional competence of academic staff, including the development of their didactic skills, digital literacy, research capacity, and other areas of professional and personal development.

**The content of the dissertation, its main scientific ideas, and research findings are reflected in the following publications by the author:**

1. The Role of Higher Education Institutions in Strengthening the Lifelong Learning System // Proceedings of the 25th Republican Scientific Conference of Doctoral Students and Young Researchers, – Baku: Azerbaijan Institute of Education, – November 23–24, – 2022, – pp. 166–170.
2. Contextual Factors Influencing the Organization of Lifelong Learning Activities in Azerbaijan // Proceedings of the 26th Republican Scientific Conference of Doctoral Students and Young Researchers, – Baku: Azerbaijan Institute of Education, – November 17–18, – 2023, – pp. 185–187.
3. Increasing the Accessibility of Higher Education as a Tool for Developing Lifelong Learning Infrastructure // Scientific Works of the Azerbaijan Institute of Education, – Baku, – 2024, Vol. 91, No. 6, – pp. 107–110.
4. Current Issues in Establishing a Lifelong Learning System in Higher Education Institutions // Scientific News of Azerbaijan University of Languages (Humanities and Social Sciences), – Baku, – 2024, No. 4, – pp. 86–91.
5. Considering Climate Change Issues in the Development and Organization of Lifelong Learning Infrastructure // Proceedings of the 27th Republican Scientific Conference of Doctoral Students and Young Researchers, – Sumgait: Sumgait State University, – December 10–11, – 2024, – pp. 554–559.

6. Higher Pedagogical Education as a Tool for Developing Lifelong Learning Citizens // Proceedings of the 2nd International Scientific Conference “Content and Quality Issues in Modern Higher Education: Global Experience and Azerbaijan”, – Nakhchivan: Nakhchivan Teachers’ Institute, – December 13–14, – 2024, – pp. 415–416.
7. Studying International Experience for the Development of Lifelong Learning Infrastructure // Proceedings of the 2nd International Scientific Conference “Education and Research Activities in the New Era: Realities and Challenges”, – Mingachevir: Mingachevir State University, – December 13–14, – 2024, – pp. 334–337.
8. The Importance of the Credit Accumulation and Transfer System in Organizing Educational Infrastructure Supporting Lifelong Learning // Scientific Works of the Azerbaijan Institute of Education, – Baku, – 2025, Vol. 92, No. 1, – pp. 117–120.
9. Key Elements of Lifelong Learning Educational Infrastructure and the Situation of Their Implementation in Azerbaijan // Scientific Works of Baku Girls University, – Baku, – 2025, Vol. 22, No. 1, – pp. 59–63.
10. Factors Facilitating the Institutionalization of Lifelong Learning Activities in Higher Education Institutions // Pedagogy and Psychology: Scientific-Theoretical and Methodological Journal, – Baku, – 2025, No. 1, – pp. 12–22.
11. Lifelong Learning Institutions of Higher Education in Azerbaijan // Universidad y Sociedad, Scientific Journal of the University of Cienfuegos, – 2025, Vol. 17, No. 2, – pp. 1–7.
12. Governing Lifelong Learning Education Infrastructure: Key Challenges and Considerations // Proceedings of the 54th International Scientific and Practical Conference “Modern Aspects of the Modernization of Science: State, Problems, Development Trends”, – Klagenfurt, – March 7, – 2025, – pp. 80–82.





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