

# TRANSFORMATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN AZERBAIJAN: REFORMS, POLICIES AND CURRENT TRENDS

**Turan Suleymanov**

Azerbaijan State University of Economics (UNEC), Baku, Azerbaijan, e-mail:  
turan.suleymanov@unec.edu.az

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## **ABSTRACT:**

The higher education system in Azerbaijan has gone through tremendous changes during the last three decades. Since regaining its independence from the USSR, Azerbaijan has had to abolish the Soviet approach to higher education and establish a new institutional system and legal framework in order to address the needs and demands of the country for human capital during the transition period from a planned economy to a free market economy. The transition process has taken more than two decades. Despite such a long period, there have been limited studies conducted on the higher education reforms and the transformation of the higher education system in Azerbaijan. This article aims to examine reforms within the Azerbaijani higher education system. The article is divided into two sections. The first reviews reforms and government policies within the higher education system of Azerbaijan. The second section discusses the current trends in the higher education market and system of Azerbaijan.

**Key Words:** Azerbaijan; Higher Education System; Higher Education Reforms; Higher Education Trends; Higher Education Policies.

**Jel classification:** I22, I23, I25

## **INTRODUCTION**

The higher education system in Azerbaijan has gone through tremendous changes during the last three decades. Since regaining its independence from the USSR, Azerbaijan had to abolish the Soviet approach to its higher education system and establish a new institutional system and legal framework in order to address the needs and demands of the country for human capital during the transition period from a planned economy to a free market economy. This transition period was realised amid multiple challenges. Some of these challenges are very like those encountered in other former Soviet republics. These challenges and issues can be

attributed to the introduction of a new market economy, the consolidation of a new nation state, economic decline, political instability and a decline in public funding, resulting in a brain drain (Huisman et al., 2018). In addition, armed conflict with Armenia and Armenian separatists in Nagorno-Karabakh during the first decade of independence had plunged the country into a severe economic and social crisis.

The newly established Azerbaijani government has had to overcome all of the above difficulties while building a higher education system which is completely different from the Soviet system and with the removal of communist ideology. The Soviet system of higher education was characterised by tight state control, organisational integration, and policy coordination. Therefore, higher education and academic research in this period was impacted by destructive political and ideological interventions from certain factions within the Communist Party and Soviet State (Vucinich, 1984; Graham, 1993). The existence of parallelism, inefficient use of human and financial resources and artificial barriers were also key components of the higher education system. The organisational structure of higher education was divided among the different sectors of the national economy. Students were presented with a rigid and narrow vocational and professional curriculum (Ushakov & Shuruev, 1980). And lastly, like the Soviet system of higher education, research was impeded by inescapable militarisation, which resulted in state financing which was slanted toward specific military needs, with the result that the entire system of postsecondary research institutions were closed off from all external contact, frequently within "shut" urban communities (Dezhina and Graham, 2002).

In addition to the national and regional challenges, Azerbaijani higher education also has had to respond to the global trends and changes within higher education systems. Academic systems in both developed and developing countries have been facing uniquely different challenges and forces of fierce competition and social demand. (Clark, 1983; Goedegebuure et al., 1994). Therefore, the focus of public policy mainly required finding an appropriate balance between social demands, governmental regulation, and university autonomy. In this regard, competition and competitive markets has been playing a central role on the policy debates instruments. (Dill and Sporn, 1995). Competitive markets would require support of government policies as they relate to the protection of property rights, the fight against monopoly behaviour and enforcement of contract. In the case of higher education, it has mainly resulted in public good. However, privatisation of higher education also increases the perception of higher education as a private privilege and in many cases the higher education system is considered a government monopoly. This forces the national government to ensure policy reforms including the introduction of a competitive market structure within the higher education market.

(Thurow, 1996). Another challenge that universities have been facing is related to the changing nature of customer behaviour and requirement for higher education. Under pressure by students, potential students and education seekers, universities have had to change their strategies and adapt to new conditions in order to survive. Therefore, universities have also begun seeking more favourable government policies in order to be successful.

Against the background of a destructive Soviet legacy, the Azerbaijani government has had to ensure transformation into a new academic system and deal with local and international forces and factors that have been shaping the nature of and demands for higher education. This transformation process has taken more than two decades. Despite such a long period, there have been limited studies conducted on the higher education reforms and the transformation of higher education in Azerbaijan. There has been a particular lack of studies on this topic in English literature. Therefore, this study proposes a review of the transformation process in the Azerbaijani higher education system. This paper is divided into two sections. The first reviews reforms and government policies in higher education in Azerbaijan. The second section discusses the current trends in the higher education marketplace.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The principal research questions are: how have higher education reforms and policies evolved in Post-Soviet Azerbaijan? And what are the current conditions and trends in higher education in Azerbaijan, especially how have government programmes and market demands shaped it?

In order to address these questions, qualitative content analyses have been conducted in this research. Key data for research and qualitative analyses was obtained from the Azerbaijan's government policy documents, state programmes, the official statistics and webpages of the Ministry of Education and universities, as well as from the State Statistics Committee. Academic articles written in both English and Azerbaijani have also been accessed during the research and data was gathered from interviews, speeches, articles by government workers, journalist and academics.

## **OVERVIEW OF REFORMS AND GOVERNMENT POLICIES ON HIGHER EDUCATION IN AZERBAIJAN**

Although the roots of the Azerbaijani education system go back to old times, the development of higher education in the country can be divided into three phases. The first phase took place during the time of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic (ADR) between 1918-1920. Azerbaijan's higher education system entered its second phase of development during the Soviet era, in 1920-1990. The third phase of the development of higher education in Azerbaijan began after independence (Xəlilova, 2015). Newly

independent Azerbaijan had to completely rebuild the education system away from the ideology of the former Soviet Union and carry out major reforms. There was a need to direct these reforms toward the creation of an independent education system, the formation of management mechanisms, staff training, improving the quality of education, and the internationalisation of education.

During the transition from the Soviet education system to the modern education system, one of the most important reforms in the Azerbaijani higher education system was the introduction of a two-tier higher education system in the country in 1993, with bachelor's and master's degrees. The introduction of the transition to a master's degree, which is the second tier of higher education, began in 1997 after the first graduation with the bachelor's degree.

However, the systemic nature of the reforms in the higher education system of Azerbaijan began in 1999 with the approval of the "Education Reform Program of the Republic of Azerbaijan". Major structural reforms in the education system, including the higher education system, began in 1999 with the "Education Reform Programmes of the Republic of Azerbaijan" and the transition to a modern education system was carried out through this programme. Through this programme, structural changes have been made in higher education, new specialties have been added to the education structure, and the network of institutions has been optimised. Educational institutions have been given additional powers and increased their independence. Under this programme, they gained independence in determining the composition of state attestation commissions and their internal structure in higher education institutions, as well as the development of curricula for specialties in accordance with relevant state standards. The programme also included the granting of certain independence and self-government mechanisms to 6 higher education institutions in the country. Financing of the state budget of the mentioned higher education institutions was carried out since 2001 by a separate item (E-qanun, 1999).

One of the main partners in the implementation of education reforms in Azerbaijan was the World Bank. In 1998, there was a loan agreement between the Government of Azerbaijan and the World Bank's International Development Association for the implementation of education reforms. A special State Commission was set up to implement the reforms. The reforms implemented in cooperation with the World Bank were divided into several stages. The first stage lasted until 2003. The post-2003 phase was called the second phase, in which the essence and content of the reforms were further expanded. The Education Sector Development Project, implemented in 2004-2009, played a major role in the 2003 loan agreement between the World Bank and the Ministry of Education. Under this programme, funded by the Government of Azerbaijan and the World Bank, significant reforms were

implemented in the higher education system to join the Bologna process. These guidelines covered teacher training, management improvement, curriculum development and other important areas. Although preparations for joining the Bologna system began in 1999, the country only joined the system in 2005. In order to implement the provisions of the Bologna Declaration, an Action Plan was approved and covered the years 2006-2010. Also, the “State Programme on Education of Azerbaijani Youth Abroad” for 2007-2015 was adopted and played a great role in training highly qualified and competent professionals with world experience in various fields for the development of the highly educated and knowledgeable human capital of the country (Ministry of Education, 2007).

The second programme, covering 2009-2013, aimed to accelerate the process of integration of the higher education system into the European system, to establish the content of higher education in accordance with the Bologna process, to train highly qualified personnel and ensure an education system that meets modern standards. The normative-legal base of reforms in the field of education in Azerbaijan was further improved on the basis of the Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan for “On Education” adopted in 2009.

As a result of the implemented reforms, the amount of the state budget allocated for education has increased. In 2006, education expenditures amounted to 480 million manat, while in 2011 these expenditures amounted to \$ 1.27 billion. This accounted for 8.2 percent of budget expenditures for that year. It should be noted that most of these funds were spent on infrastructure, especially the construction and repair of schools (Azerbaijan, 2020).

The foundation of modern strategic development of the higher education system of Azerbaijan was laid in the development concept of "Azerbaijan 2020: Vision for the Future" approved in 2012 by the decree of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan. In accordance with the main theme of this development strategy related to education, in 2013 the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan approved the “State Strategy for the Development of Education in the Republic of Azerbaijan” (President.az, 2013). This strategy envisaged large-scale measures in 5 strategic directions to create a system with infrastructure based on experienced teachers and education managers, modern technologies, leading in the international rankings in terms of quality and coverage:

- The first direction covered important goals such as enriching the content of education and developing curricula at all levels of education
- The second direction included the training of professionals who could meet modern standards, aiming to modernise human resources in education, the

establishment of new systems for assessing educational achievements, as well as the creation of an inclusive training methodology for those with special needs.

- The third strategic direction aimed to create a transparent, accountable and effective management mechanism in education

- The fourth strategic direction was the creation of an educational infrastructure that met modern requirements and provides lifelong learning. This area also covers important areas such as the creation of an appropriate infrastructure for the application of information and communication technology-based learning methodologies and distance education.

- The fifth direction was aimed at building an economically sustainable model of financing the education system in the country in accordance with the standards of the world's leading education systems. This included the use of various sources to improve the mechanism of financing education, the introduction of per capita funding in the education system, support for the provision of paid educational services, etc (Ibid.).

The Strategic Roadmap adopted in 2016 stated that Azerbaijan ranked 78th in 2016 in terms of the quality of higher education and training and 94th in terms of involvement in higher education in the Global Competitiveness Report of the World Economic Forum. This state document envisages further improvement of quality in the process of human capital development, which is the most important factor for the transition to a productivity-based development model (Strategic Roadmap, 2016). It was also reflected that a more efficient and innovative economic system will be achieved by improving the quality of education. It is emphasised that increasing the share of higher education in the country, the teaching of IT skills from primary to higher education will be a major part of modern curricula after 2025 and will be integrated into the international education system. The document also states that the level of coverage of higher education will be increased in order to protect young people entering the labour market from the risk of unemployment (Ibid).

The strategic roadmap (point 3.1.4) envisages the promotion of development in higher education institutions in the format of "education-research-innovation", which in turn will have an impact on the formation and development of human capital (Strategic Roadmap, 2016). This item mentions the creation of clusters in universities to increase the effectiveness of the "education-research-innovation" chain. The establishment of such clusters will be encouraged, first of all, in specialised universities, and as a result, along with the increase in labour productivity, the formation of higher quality human capital and intellectual potential will be achieved. These clusters will be important for

the development of human capital in the regions, as well as stimulating the application of scientific results in industry.

Specialists with high knowledge and skills will be trained through higher education institutions, private training centres, regulators and market participants to achieve the goals set for 2025 and beyond. The activities of these specialists will be evaluated and necessary changes will be made in the programmes at the relevant training centres.

In paragraph 3.1.7 of the Strategic Roadmap, it is mentioned that the establishment of modern schools and universities, research and development, production and service enterprises related to ICT technologies to some extent related to the improvement of physical and technological infrastructure involved in the development of human capital. It is noted that activities related to the establishment of regional and functional universities and production clusters will be encouraged to establish a flexible mechanism of "Education-Science-Industry" infrastructure. The development of a multi-level continuing education system, university complexes, research institutions and production and service sectors that increase the economic efficiency of their activities will be supported.

The above-mentioned measures and items, along with indicating the future direction of education in Azerbaijan, are important factors in determining the strategic direction of development of Azerbaijani higher education institutions. Subsequent reforms in the Azerbaijani education system continued in the above areas. Some of these reforms include the restructuring of the higher education system. On June 21, 2017, President of the Republic of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev signed a decree on the reorganisation of Baku State University and Azerbaijan State Economic University, which reflected the reorganisation of both universities into public legal entities under the Ministry of Education. Respectively, the charters of Baku State University (BSU, 2015) on April 16, 2019 and the Azerbaijan State University of Economics on August 22, 2019 were approved by the order of the Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Azerbaijan (UNEC, 2015).

In order to increase the international competitiveness of Azerbaijani higher education institutions after the strategic road map, the "State Programme on Increasing the International Competitiveness of the Higher Education System in the Republic of Azerbaijan for 2019-2023" was approved by the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan on November 16, 2018. This state programme shows the strategic direction of development of higher education institutions in the mentioned areas. The action plan for the implementation of the state programme consists of two parts. One area is the establishment of international dual degree programmes in local universities and the involvement of foreign teachers in the universities where the two degree

programmes will be established, increasing the scientific potential of those universities, the number of articles in prestigious journals and other related areas.

The second main direction is related to strengthening the academic capacity of higher education institutions of the Republic of Azerbaijan. For this purpose, it covers the solution of legal, financial and practical issues related to the education of citizens of the Republic of Azerbaijan at the doctoral level in prestigious foreign universities (E-qanun, 2018).

### **CURRENT CONDITION AND MAIN TRENDS IN THE HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM OF AZERBAIJAN**

There are 52 higher education institutions in the Republic of Azerbaijan, 40 state and 12 non-state (The State Statistics Committee, 2020). In order to receive higher education in the Republic of Azerbaijan, it is necessary to complete a full secondary education. The Azerbaijani education system underwent significant changes in terms of content with the approval of the Bologna Process in 2005 and the Law on Education of the Republic of Azerbaijan in 2009 and the introduction of the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) for three levels of higher education.

Higher education at the bachelor's level lasts 4-5 years and requires 240-300 ECTS credits. For medicine the requirement is 300-360 ECTS credits. To complete education at the master's level requires 90-120 ECTS credits, and the duration of education is 1.5-2 years. The doctoral degree, which is the third level of higher education, is carried out in two directions: Doctor of Science and Doctor of Philosophy. The duration of study for a Doctor of Sciences is 4-5 years, and for a Doctor of Philosophy - 3-4 years. The full adaptation of the students to the Bologna process has made the Azerbaijani higher education system a full member of the European Higher Education Area (Ministry of Education, 2019).

According to the official statistics dates to the beginning of the 2018/2019 academic year, a total of 176,723 students study in Azerbaijan in Azerbaijani, Russian, English and Turkish languages. 161,326 of these students are studying in state higher education institutions and 15,397 in non-state higher education institutions. Enrolment in higher education institutions in Azerbaijan continues to grow every year. Thus, the number of students in higher education institutions per 10,000 populations was 169 in 2017, it raised to 171 in 2018 and 179 in 2010. The vast majority of higher education requirements in Azerbaijan are from undergraduate students. Thus, at the beginning of 2018/2019 academic year, 42,102 students were admitted to the bachelor's degree. The vast majority of these students (37,302) were admitted to state higher education institutions and 4,800 to non-state higher education institutions (The State Statistics Committee, 2020).

**Table 1:** State and non-state higher education institutions (at the beginning of the academic year)

	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19
Number of higher education institutions	53	54	51	51	52
Number of students	158212	161234	163779	167677	176723
Including forms of education:					
Full-time	137909	144539	150656	154927	164119
Part-time	20303	16695	13123	12750	12604
Number of students per 10,000 population	167	168	169	171	179
Number of students admitted to higher education institutions:					
bachelor's degree - total,	35801	33645	36126	38546	42102
including forms of education:					
Full-time	33746	32181	34334	36356	39900
Part-time	2055	1464	1792	2190	2202
to master's degree - total,	4913	4953	5098	6515	6937
including forms of education:					
Full-time	4913	4953	5098	6515	6916
Part-time	-	-	-	-	21

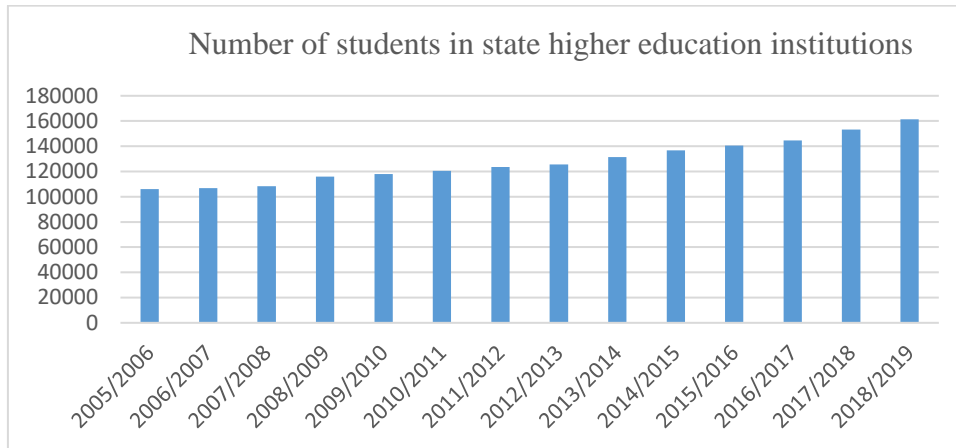
Source: The State Statistical Committee of the Republic of Azerbaijan

In the same year, 6,937 students were admitted to the master's degree of higher education, of which 6,460 chose to study at state and 477 at non-state higher education institutions.

The programme of training Doctor of Philosophy in Azerbaijan is implemented by 119 institutions and the number of students at this level of education is 2,064. In 2018, 665 people were admitted to the PhD programme. The programme of training Doctor of Sciences is implemented by 89 institutions, and the number of students studying at this level is 562. In 2018, the number of those admitted to the programme of training Doctor of Sciences was 165 people (The State Statistics Committee, 2020).

The analysis of the Azerbaijani higher education market in recent years shows that a number of trends have been observed. One of them is the increase in the number of students in recent years. There is an increase on demand for higher education in Azerbaijan. There seems to be a huge increase in the number of students in public higher education institutions between 2005/2006 and 2018/2019 academic years.

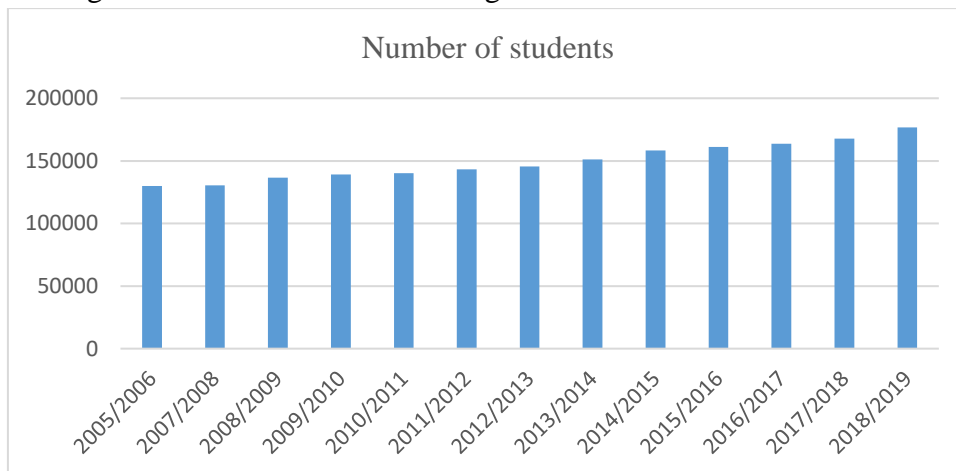
**Table 2:** Number of students in state higher education institutions



Source: Statistical Committee of the Republic of Azerbaijan

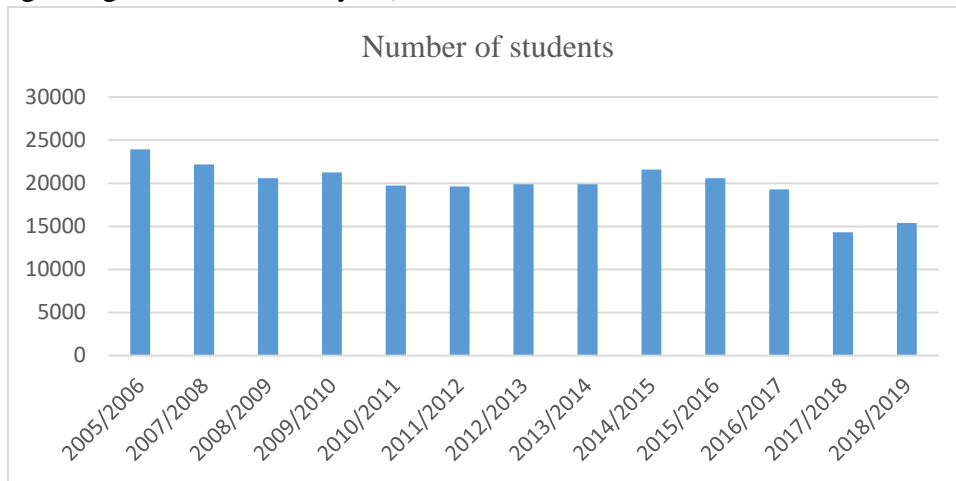
The number of students studying in Azerbaijani higher education institutions has increased by about 29% over the past 13 years. The number of students studying at state universities in Azerbaijan is about 17 times higher than the number of students studying at private universities. Given that the number of public universities in Azerbaijan is three times higher than the number of private universities, this figure can be understood.

**Table 3:** Number of students studying in specialty groups and directions in state and non-state higher education institutions during the 2005/2006-2018/ 2019 academic years



Source: Statistical Committee of the Republic of Azerbaijan

However, the number of students studying in private higher education institutions has been decreasing since 2005. The number of students in private school decreased more than 33% between 2005 and 2019.

**Table 4:** Number of students studying in non-state higher education institutions (at the beginning of the academic year)

Source: Statistical Committee of the Republic of Azerbaijan

### **INCREASE IN COST OF UNIVERSITY DEGREE**

One of the trends observed in the Azerbaijani higher education market is related to cost of education, particularly to tuition fees in higher education institutions. There has been an increase in tuition fees over the past years.

There are a number of reasons for changes in tuition fees. Examples include the improvement in the quality of education offered, the completeness of the admissions plan, and other factors. Tuition fees in public higher education institutions are applied on the basis of two criteria. Tuition fees for students studying on the basis of the state order are paid to the relevant state universities in the state budget. Tuition fees for students studying on a fee basis are determined by the universities and agreed with the Ministry of Education (Ministry of Education, 2020). In general, a comparison of the last 10-13 academic years shows that tuition fees have doubled and, in some cases, even more in certain degree programmes.

For example, as of July 2017, the tuition fee at the Law Faculty of Baku State University (BSU) was increased by AZN 500 compared to the previous year. Tuition fees at Khazar University, a private university, were AZN 4,500-5,000, and at Azerbaijan University, AZN 3,000, which is represented an increase compared to previous years. However, according to 2017 data, some universities, which could not fill the planned places in the previous year, reduced tuition fees. Such practices took place at Odlar Yurdu University and Western Caspian Universities (Moderator.az, 2017).

## **REGIONAL COMPETITION IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

One of the changes observed in the higher education system of Azerbaijan in recent years is the strengthening of regional competition in higher education. For a long time, there was a short list of options for students to pursue higher education in the regions. For example, state universities, mainly located in Ganja and Lankaran were often the only option for students to study in the relevant regions. However, a number of large public universities have also been increasing their presence in the regional higher education market by opening new branches in the regions. For example, the Zagatala branch of the Azerbaijan State University of Economics (UNEC) and the Agjabadi, Jalillabad, Guba, Shamakhi and Sheki branches of the Azerbaijan State Pedagogical University (ASPU) created new opportunities for applicants located in and around these districts and regions. Entrance of such big state universities to these regions provides a new competitive environment for regional universities.

## **INCREASING IMPORTANCE OF INTERNATIONAL RANKINGS**

Under the influence of the increase in the quality of education and internationalisation in the higher education system of Azerbaijan, the interest in international rating agencies, which determine the ranking of world and regional universities, has also increased. International rankings can also be seen as a unit of measurement of university scientific activity, the quality of education and internationalisation. In recent years, several regional directors of world-renowned rating companies such as QS and Times Higher Education have visited Azerbaijan and organised trainings and seminars in this field in Azerbaijan (UNEC, 2019).

Azerbaijani universities have been taking a number of steps to participate in international rankings, and some universities are even implementing action plans in this direction. Many Azerbaijani universities view their results in international rankings as an indicator of the quality of education at the university and an expression of the university's strong image. It should also be noted that 2 indicators of the QS rating organisation, which is included in the regional and world rankings of many Azerbaijani universities, with a weight of 50%, are calculated on the basis of a survey of academics and employers (QS, 2020). In order to score high on these questionnaires, universities need to be recognised by relevant stakeholders in the local and international higher education, research and job markets. In this regard, branding plays a very important role and helps to achieve high results. Also, the steps taken by universities to improve results on other criteria, such as the number of articles and citations to them, the ratio of international teachers and students to

teachers and students, are characterised by a number of changes in the higher education system in Azerbaijan.

Azerbaijani universities are presented in the prestigious international rankings organized by QS, THE, RUR, Webometrics, U-MultiRank and etc. In 2020, there were 5 universities in the QS regional ranking for Emerging European and Central Asia and 2 Azerbaijani universities made to the “Impact Rankings 2020” of The Times Higher Education. (QS EECA, 2020; THE Impact Rankings, 2020)

### **INCREASED INTERNATIONALIZATION, NUMBER OF EXCHANGE STUDENTS AND JOINT DEGREE PROGRAMMES**

Some of the changes in the higher education system in Azerbaijan have also been characterized by the expansion of internationalization and, in particular, number of increases in exchange programs and joint degrees. Erasmus+ of the European Union and Mevlana of the Republic of Turkey has become the most prestigious exchange programs in Azerbaijan. Universities in Azerbaijan have been increasing number of agreements within these both exchange programs. A review of number of agreements within both Erasmus+ and Mevlana at UNEC have demonstrated a more than 100% increase just in the last 6 years.

Adaptation of the state program on increasing competitiveness of universities in Azerbaijan has also led to an increase in the number of offerings on joint degree programs. However, universities such as ADA University, UNEC, and ASOIU have already been offering joint degree programs before the adaption of this government program. Both ADA and [ASPU](#) launched dual degree programs with the George Washington University of USA. UNEC has signed more than 4 dual degree programs with European and US universities (ADA University, 2020; APDU, 2020; UNEC, 2020).

### **INCREASE IN NUMBER OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROGRAMMES**

In recent years, there is a tremendous shift in study programmes in English. Azerbaijan State University of Economics (UNEC) and Khazar University were some of the first universities that started offering study programs in English. There is the International School of Economics at UNEC that offers entire study programmes in English (UNEC, 2020).

ADA University is the first state university that offers all the degree programmes in English (ADA University, 2020). In addition, the majority of universities in the capital city of Baku, such as Azerbaijan State Oil and Industry University (ASOIU), Azerbaijan University, Baku Engineering University, and others have been increasing the number of their English language degree programmes during the last 10 years.

## **IMPLEMENTATION OF VERTICAL AND HORIZONTAL INTEGRATION STRATEGIES BY HE INSTITUTIONS**

The recent reforms have also led to Azerbaijan's higher education institutions to pursue vertical and horizontal business strategies. One of such strategies was directed to the vocational education market. Financial and Economics College under UNEC and Azerbaijan Pedagogical College under ASPU are very good examples. Establishment of both of these colleges were realised by decree of the Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Azerbaijan in 2015 and 2016 (UNEC, 2020; ADPKU, 2020). In addition, private universities have also received licenses from government in regard to offering vocational education. Odlar Yurdu University, which offers vocational education under the Secondary Vocational Education College, is another good example.

One of the business strategies of higher education universities is related to their primary and secondary education sectors. There are schools under both Khazar University (Dunya School) and Odlar Yurdu Universiteis (Baku British School). ADA university established a secondary school, ADA school in 2019. (ADA School, 2020)

In addition, higher education institutions have recently been focusing their efforts to professional trainings to business and consultation for the private and government sectors.

## **IMPLEMENTATION OF MARKETING AND BRANDING CONCEPTS IN HE INSTITUTIONS**

Fierce local and international competition has also led to the application of marketing and branding concepts in higher education institutions of Azerbaijan (Suleymanov, 2019). UNEC, ASPU, ASOIU and ADA University have recently conducted corporate rebranding campaigns and strategy development plans. Universities often refer to branding and marketing concept for positioning purposes and aim to become a first choice of students.

## **INCREASE IN NUMBER OF FOREIGN STUDENTS**

The number of foreign students studying in Azerbaijani universities continues to grow. In the 2017/2018 academic year, the number of foreign students studying in Azerbaijan increased by 17 percent and reached 5,871. These students came from 76 countries. (Ministry of Education, 2019) Today, almost every higher education institution develops strategies and plans to increase the number of foreign students in the economy. Attracting foreign students means more funding. In order to attract more foreign students, some Azerbaijani universities develop branding and marketing tools.

### **INCREASING IMPORTANCE OF INTERNATIONAL ACCREDITATION**

Internationalisation and a competitive market have also been putting pressure on Azerbaijani higher education institutions on accreditation of their study programmes by international organisations. UNEC and ADA University are currently working on accreditation of their study programmes. ASOIU has already got a five study programmes accredited by FIBA (ASOIU, 2020).

### **SHIFT FROM SPECIALISED UNIVERSITIES TO MULTI-FACULTY UNIVERSITIES**

Traditionally, the majority of higher education institutions of Azerbaijan were specialised in one or two disciplines. Such specialisations have been divided into economics (UNEC), polytechnic (Technical University), medicine (University of Medicine), pedagogy (ASPU) or other area specific higher education institutions. However, there is a tendency towards multi-faculty universities. For instance, ASOIU has started to offer study programmes in business and managements. UNEC has recently established two new faculties – “Digital Economy” and “Engineering” and in 2020 UNEC has started to offer 9 new study programmes in engineering and IT disciplines (UNEC, 2020). ADA University started as a diplomatic academy, but currently offers business and engineering programmes at Business School and Engineering Schools (ADA University, 2020). Despite initial objectives since their establishment and their traditional specialisation, universities have been expanding their study programmes to new areas and disciplines.

### **SHIFT FROM TEACHING UNIVERSITIES TO RESEARCH UNIVERSITIES**

Since independence, Azerbaijani universities have been characterised by low research activities. A review of the top five universities profiles on QS EECA rankings also confirms their low research output. However, there has been a tendency towards increasing the research at higher education universities. The Ministry of Economy has recently facilitated a contract between a consortium of Azerbaijani Universities and both Elsevier (Ministry of Education, 2020) and Clarivate companies (Ministry of Education, 2017) The government has also adapted a new bill to provide research university status to higher education that would provide certain privileges and advantages. This is another motivation for Azerbaijani universities to follow further steps.

### **SHIFT TO ONLINE LEARNING AND ICT APPLICATION IN LEARNING, TEACHING AND ADMINISTRATION**

The Azerbaijani government has been investing in the formulation of a strategy concerning application of ICT in the education sector. National Strategy on

Information and Communication Technologies for Development of Azerbaijan Republic between 2003-2012 was one of the preliminary state programmes on this issue. The development of educational infrastructure based on the latest information and communication technologies was one of the objectives of State Strategy for Development of Education in the Republic of Azerbaijan dated to 2013 (Rzayev and Suleymanov, 2019). These and other government programmes and strategies have provided a ground for the application of ICT in teaching, learning and administration by universities. As a result, most of the universities have started to shift totally or partially some components of teaching, learning and administrative management to digital platforms. ADA University was the first state university and national university that purchased “Blackboard Learn” system software and moved all the relevant activities to this platform. In 2020, ADA University shifted totally to online due to the Covid-19 pandemic. UNEC has been using and developing its own version of software systems that allow it to conduct the entire teaching, learning and administrative management activities digitally. ASOIU has developed its in-house software to facilitate transformation of most of the component of university administration and teaching processes. In the recent years, ASPU and Technical University have also expressed their intention of moving to ICT application in both teaching and learning. The Covid-19 pandemic has posed a tremendous challenge to all the universities in Azerbaijan, so this process has been accelerated. So far, ADA University and UNEC have managed to move both education and administration to online.

### **INCREASING ROLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS ON DEVELOPMENT OF EDUCATION POLICIES AND PROGRAMMES**

Universities in Azerbaijan have also contributed to the development of education in the country (Muradov *et al.*, 2019). This contribution has been in the form of initiatives, new practices, and strategies implemented by them. For instance, ADA University, ASOIU, and UNEC started to offer joint degree programs even before state programs in this direction were adopted. Universities such as ADA University, Khazar University, UNEC, and BSU have been working with international rating agencies before the government policies and programs underlined the importance of activities in this direction. A review of universities' webpages and their activities supports the argument of the increasing role of some universities as an initiator in the development of higher education policies and programs in the country. Some of the direction of university policies and programs are already included in the state programs and policies. However, some others are yet to be covered by government policies. For instance, ADA University Foundation, and the extension of ADA University is the first-ever such foundation under the state universities in Azerbaijan.

## CONCLUSION

The higher education system in Azerbaijan has evolved through the implementation of government policies, programs, and reforms, as well as under the pressure of global and national market trends. The changes and government policies led to the establishment of a new legal framework and higher education environment that brought new forces, players, and components onto the stage. These changes have also created both challenges and opportunities for higher education institutions in Azerbaijan. A review of the transformation of higher education system in Azerbaijan demonstrates that the country managed to build a new higher education system that is mainly based on European standards. The current aim of higher education policy is to improve efficiency and effectiveness in higher education and increase the competitiveness of higher education intuitions in Azerbaijan. At the same time, government documents and strategic development policies have given us hints on the need for further incoming reforms and the development of higher education in Azerbaijan.

The current trends in the higher education system of Azerbaijan can be identified as the following:

- Increase in cost of university degree
- Regional competition in higher education
- Increasing Importance of International rankings
- Increased Internationalism, Number of Exchange Students and Joint Degree Programs
- Increase in number of English language programs
- Implementation of vertical and horizontal integration strategies by HE institutions
- Implementation of marketing and branding concepts in HE institutions
- Increase in number of foreign students
- Increasing importance of international accreditation
- Shift from specialized universities to multi-faculty universities
- Shift from teaching universities to research universities
- Shift to online learning and ICT application in learning, teaching and administration
- Increasing Role of Higher Education Institutions on Development of Education Policies and Programs.

To conclude, the higher education system in a dynamic country like Azerbaijan can be expected to undergo further changes in order to ensure greater effectiveness and

efficiency, as well as an increase in its relevance to the needs and aspirations of Azerbaijani society.

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