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REFORMING UNDERGRADUATE ADMISSION: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS AND POLICY PROPOSAL FOR AZERBAIJAN

Abstract

This research proposes different admission ways to higher education in Azerbaijan. Over 25 years, Azerbaijan's SEC has reformed to address bribery and corruption and promote inclusivity in higher education. Recent advancements integrate exams and align with international standards. However, a decline in admissions persists. This study compares Azerbaijan's admission process with global practices, identifying areas for improvement. The article proposes varied assessment criteria to reflect applicants' cognitive and intellectual skills better.

Keywords: *undergraduate admission, university exams, Azerbaijan education, SEC, holistic assessment*

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Bakalavr qəbulunda islahatlar: Azərbaycan təhsilində müqayisəli təhlil və təklif

Xülasə

Bu araşdırma Azərbaycanda ali təhsilə müxtəlif qəbul yollarını təklif edir. 25 il ərzində Azərbaycanda DİM rüşvətxorluq və korrupsiyaya qarşı mübarizə aparmaq və ali təhsildə inklüzivliyi təşviq etmək üçün islahatlar aparıb. Son nailiyyətlər imtahanları beynəlxalq standartlara uyğun etməkdədir. Bununla belə, universitetə qəbul alan məktəb məzunlarının sayı azalmağa davam edir. Bu araşdırma Azərbaycanın qəbul prosesini qlobal təcrübə ilə müqayisə edir və təkmilləşdirilməsi lazım olan sahələri müəyyənləşdirir. Məqalə abituriyentlərin kognitiv və intellektual bacarıqlarını daha yaxşı əks etdirmək üçün müxtəlif qiymətləndirmə meyarlarını təklif edir.

Açar sözlər: *bakalavr pilləsinə qəbul, universitet imtahanları, Azərbaycan təhsili, DİM, vahid qiymətləndirmə*

Introduction

During the Soviet Union era, the process of university admissions in Azerbaijan was characterized by the utilization of question cards, representing examinations conducted by experts, alongside the consideration of average marks from school diplomas, occasionally inclusive of portfolios of works. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Azerbaijani government embraced a policy that mirrored the Turkish admission model, incorporating multiple-choice tests to establish a foundation for equality in the admissions process. Over the past 25 years, the criteria for admission to higher education institutions in Azerbaijan have continuously evolved, adapting international practices and experiences. In recent years, all have witnessed pivotal reforms and regulatory adjustments; however, university admissions rules lack sustained stability, and the number of admitted applicants continues to decline.

The predominant requirement introduced in these reforms involves amalgamating scores from school-leaving exams and university admission exams, focusing primarily on assessing the applicant's knowledge level. This research thoroughly analyzes the principal pathways for all applicants to Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Azerbaijan, examines its post-colonial characteristics, and presents recent data on the outcomes of undergraduate degree admissions worldwide. In conclusion, this study advances a policy briefing that proposes three potential admission models, addressing the need for securing increased admission rates and stability within the university admission framework in Azerbaijan.

Literature Review.

Azerbaijan promptly identified education as a key national priority upon achieving historical independence. The period coinciding with the Azerbaijan-Armenia war (1988-1994) posed significant challenges, necessitating concerted efforts by the government to reestablish, enhance, and globalize higher education. Despite UNESCO's acknowledgment of substantial challenges faced by Azerbaijan's education, economic, social, and political sectors in the 1990s due to the war (Huseynov, 2012), the nation revitalized its education system.

During the initial phase of his presidency, Abulfaz Elchibay, the first president of the Azerbaijan Republic, played a pivotal role in instituting crucial educational policy measures. These decisions included the facilitation of private educational institutions, the revival of academic exchange programs, and the seminal introduction of a centralized test format for university admissions. The adoption of Centralized Testing Admission was underscored by incorporating the "Turkish model of centralized university entrance examinations" (Kazimzade, Silova, 2009: 256), a strategic move aimed at eradicating the pervasive issues of bribery and protectionism within the admissions process.

In response to these imperatives, the State Student Admission Committee (SSAC) was established in 1992, charged with implementing country-wide exams at the undergraduate (baccalaureate) level. The committee garnered substantial recognition, fostering public confidence in the perceived elimination of corruption from the university admission process (Abbaszade, Aliyev, Shelaginov, 2021: 11-17). Since 1995, the examination procedure, culminating in a three-hour test requiring students in the 11th grade to respond to 120 multiple-choice questions across four subjects, has been the cornerstone of university admissions.

Over time, the SSAC's purview expanded to encompass graduate, residency, and vocational education admissions responsibilities. Commencing in 2012, the SSAC was granted the authority to administer a centralized graduation exam (i.e., school leaving) independently from the Ministry of Science and Education (MSE). In summary, the crux of Azerbaijan's education examination system revolves around the administration of centralized tests by the State Examination Center (SEC).

Azerbaijan's involvement in the Bologna Process in 2005 marked a transformative juncture for the nation's education landscape, ushering in groundbreaking changes within the K-11 sector. This participation in the Bologna Process reflects Azerbaijan's commitment to aligning its educational system with European standards and fostering greater integration and collaboration within the global academic community.

Subsequently, in 2016, the State Student Admission Committee (SSAC) underwent a transformation and assumed the State Examination Center (SEC) designation through a presidential decree issued by the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev. The mandate of the State Examination Center encompasses the organization of final assessments for students in secondary schools, centralized admission examinations for medical education residencies, as well as undergraduate and graduate levels of higher education at universities, including the Azerbaijan National Academy of Sciences (4).

The committee instituted significant alterations to the school-leaving and university admission exams in 2019, referring to the curriculum program established by the Ministry of Science and Education in 2016. The chairman of the committee emphasized that these changes aimed to enhance the form and content of the exams, underscoring an "objective and transparent assessment of

applicants' knowledge" (5). Since 2009, a two-staged examination process has been in place for all graduates from comprehensive secondary education (XI grade), involving a school-leaving examination in the period between March and April (Round 1) and a university admission examination for Groups (1-4) of degree programs held between June and July (Round 2). This dual-stage examination structure has been operating for five years, starting in 2019.

The inception of higher education in Azerbaijan can be traced back to the establishment of Baku State University in 1919, a landmark development during the Democratic Republic of Azerbaijan, also known as "Azərbaycan Xalq Cümhuriyyəti". This establishment marked the emergence of Azerbaijan Higher Education, a significant initiative led by the Azerbaijani elite, who, having received education in Europe, recognized the imperative of constructing a national higher education system (Isakhanli, Pashayeva, 2018: 97-121.). The creation of the new democratic republic was informed by the collective understanding among the Azerbaijani elite of the critical role a higher education system plays in a nation's societal and intellectual advancement.

In the wake of Azerbaijan's declaration of independence in 1990, a noteworthy surge in higher education institutions ensued, with more than thirty public and private universities being founded. This diverse array of institutions exhibits a variety of educational approaches, including multilingual, dual program offerings (e.g., ADA, BEU, APU), and the establishment of regional branches (e.g., BSU, UNEC). This expansion underscores the dynamism and adaptability of Azerbaijan's higher education sector, catering to diverse educational needs and reflecting the evolving landscape of academic offerings within the country.

According to the State Statistical Committee (SSC, 2021), the higher education landscape in Azerbaijan comprises 51 universities, with forty being public institutions and 11 private ones as of 2023 (7). Among these, 20 are State Higher Educational Institutions under the purview of the Ministry of Science and Education (MSE), 13 fall under the oversight of other ministries and committees, and seven are designated as Special Purpose Higher Education Institutions. A comprehensive overview of the student population reveals that the total number of students in both state and non-state higher educational institutions at the commencement of the school year is 222,809 (SSC, 2023).

In terms of admission criteria, all universities, based on the State Examination Center (SEC) exam results, admit students at both undergraduate and graduate levels, with some institutions offering admission to Ph.D. programs. ADA University admits around a hundred students based on SAT results. Each Higher Education Institution (HEI) determines the number of enrollment places, beginning with the institution's capacity and subsequently adjusting following a government-conducted examination by the SEC. However, admission scores vary among universities, ranging, for example, from 684.8 to 200.2 (SEC, 2023).

Over the past five years, notable achievements have been recorded, with several Azerbaijani universities securing positions in global university rankings (European Commission, 2017). According to The World University Ranking (n.d.), Azerbaijan boasts five universities included in the overall Times Higher Education World University Rankings, with Baku State University securing the highest position at number 1201+. However, despite these accomplishments, G.Ibadoglu's article, 2021, highlights a concerning trend of declining higher education expenditures. Universities have shifted toward a self-financing model, reducing resources allocated to crucial areas such as research, library facilities, scholarships, and professional development. This shift potentially threatens the overall quality and competitiveness of higher education institutions in Azerbaijan.

Purpose/ Statement of the Problem.

Despite more than three decades of autonomous governance, Azerbaijan's Higher Education system retains numerous policies and programs rooted in the Soviet era, diverging from global education standards. This paper seeks to elucidate the persistent influences of post-colonialism in higher education through document analysis. The study scrutinizes and juxtaposes international

practices in higher education admissions against the Azerbaijani admission system. I aim to propose alternative models conducive to future social development.

Notably, a pervasive uniformity characterizes the admission criteria employed by most universities in Azerbaijan, wherein the evaluation predominantly relies on a test-based examination assessing knowledge skills. The study aims to discern the crucial attributes essential for admission to undergraduate programs at four-year universities in Azerbaijan and illuminate the similarities and distinctions compared to neighboring countries. In this vein, the research endeavors to enhance the accessibility and applicability of the admission process for all potential Azerbaijani applicants, thereby contributing to the refinement of the higher education landscape in the country.

Significance of the Study.

The significance of this study lies in its endeavor to offer comprehensive insights into the university admission process, adopting a global perspective on best practices. By delving into the significance of admission criteria, encompassing both hard and soft skills, this research can unlock novel opportunities for school graduates and contribute to heightened literacy levels, particularly in underserved rural and low-income areas. The anticipated changes can foster increased success, enhancing diversity and inclusivity by facilitating access to higher education for graduates from diverse geographical and socioeconomic backgrounds throughout the nation. Therefore, this study promises to refine the university admission process and contribute positively to educational equity and social inclusiveness.

Research Questions.

This study sought to explore three questions:

1. What insights can be gleaned from recent data on Azerbaijan undergraduate degree admission outcomes?
2. In the context of Azerbaijan, what are the mechanisms and criteria for admitting applicants into undergraduate degree programs?
3. How can alternative admission requirements be formulated and implemented for the ongoing undergraduate admission processes across Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Azerbaijan?

Analysis of Decision Methods of Discovered Problem.

Instrument/Materials.

The State Examination Center (SEC) meticulously curated an extensive database comprising trial exam results, school exit exams, and admissions data for both undergraduate (i.e., bachelor's) and graduate (i.e., master's) programs at universities. Therefore, for this study, a secondary analysis was conducted utilizing data extracted from the SEC's 2023 school exit exam, focusing specifically on the 2023 graduation cohort. Additionally, the study drew upon the SEC's comprehensive scientific-statistical annual reports for 2018-2022. Supplementary information was garnered from reports issued by the State Statistical Committee (SSC) and the Ministry of Science and Education of 2021 (MSE).

The dataset employed encompasses the admission plans of higher educational institutions, spanning 1992 to 2023, along with dynamic trends in the number of applications received. Furthermore, numerical characteristics about the distribution of points acquired in the admission test, particularly within the Azerbaijan sector and Groups 1-4, were considered. The dataset also encapsulates the distribution of applicants categorized by school grades and scores in the admission exams. This comprehensive dataset amalgamates MSE, SEC, and SSC information, providing a robust foundation for examining higher education admission practices. Finally, the study analyzed admission procedures in neighboring and developed countries in tandem with national data.

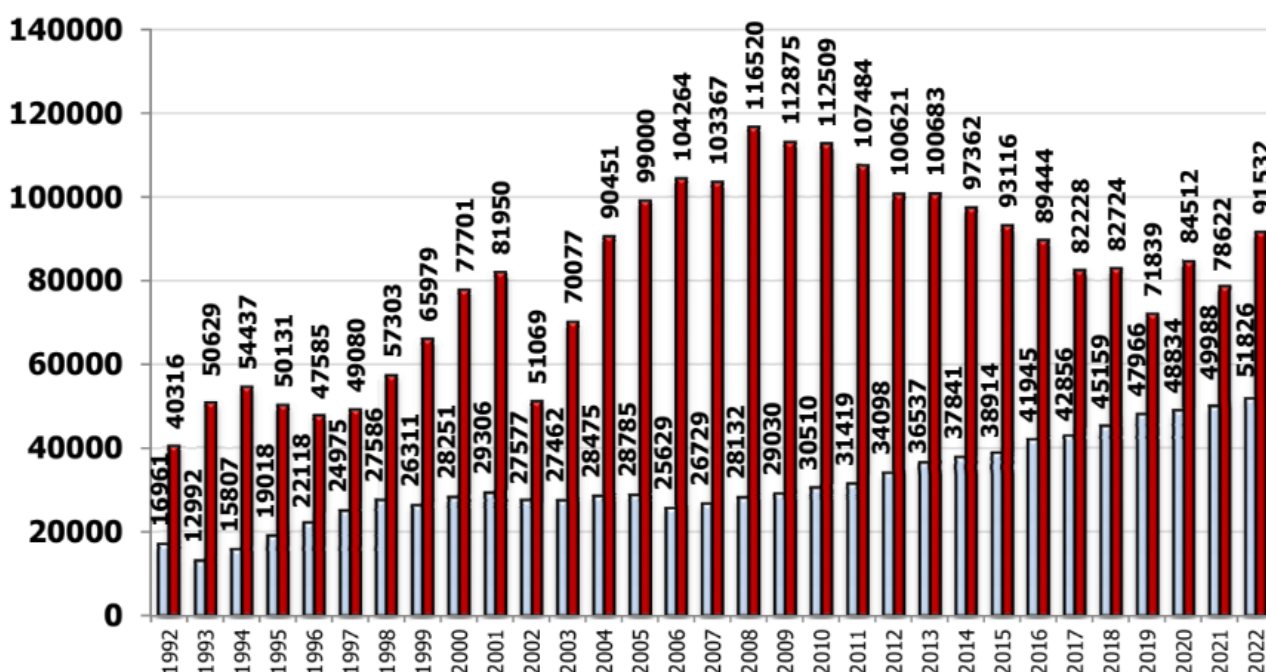
Findings from Document Analysis.

Since implementing a standardized testing policy, gaining admission to higher education has evolved into a protracted and rigorous undertaking, necessitating thorough and sustained preparation. Following the initial stage of additional access and registration for available undergraduate positions, the admissions for the year 2023 (there were 91,532 applicants) culminated in the acceptance of 46,897 students, achieving a 91.43% completion of the admission

plan. As detailed in the State Examination Center’s (SEC) 2023 annual report, a substantial proportion of applicants, comprising 51.24 % or 44,635 individuals, were unsuccessful in securing admission to higher education institutions. The presented statistics underscore the intense competition and unfulfilled aspirations inherent in the admission process, portraying it as a formidable and conscientious endeavor (SEC, 2023).

Administrative perspectives contend that this form of admission, characterized by its selective nature, mitigates issues of overcrowding and high dropout rates within university programs at later stages. Figure 1 visually represents the persistent challenge, revealing that despite an increase in available places, approximately half of the yearly applicants fail to secure access to undergraduate programs. This scenario underscores the magnitude of the competition and the discernible difficulties encountered in the higher education admission process. Hence, over the course of the past two decades, the admission failure rate for prospective undergraduate degree candidates has consistently exceeded 50 percent.

Figure 1.
Admission plan of Higher Educational Institutions and dynamics of the number of applicant applications for 1992-2022 (SEC, 2023: 30).



*Red columns of applicants

*Blue columns for admission plans

Based on an analysis of data provided by the State Examination Center (SEC), it is evident that high school graduates across Azerbaijan have acquired school programs at a rate ranging from 27% to 57% as of the year 2023. A noteworthy observation is made by Aliyev, 2011, who underscores the prevalence of high schools, particularly in rural and remote areas, where many graduates exhibit minimal to zero transition to higher education (Aliyev, 2011: 20-37).

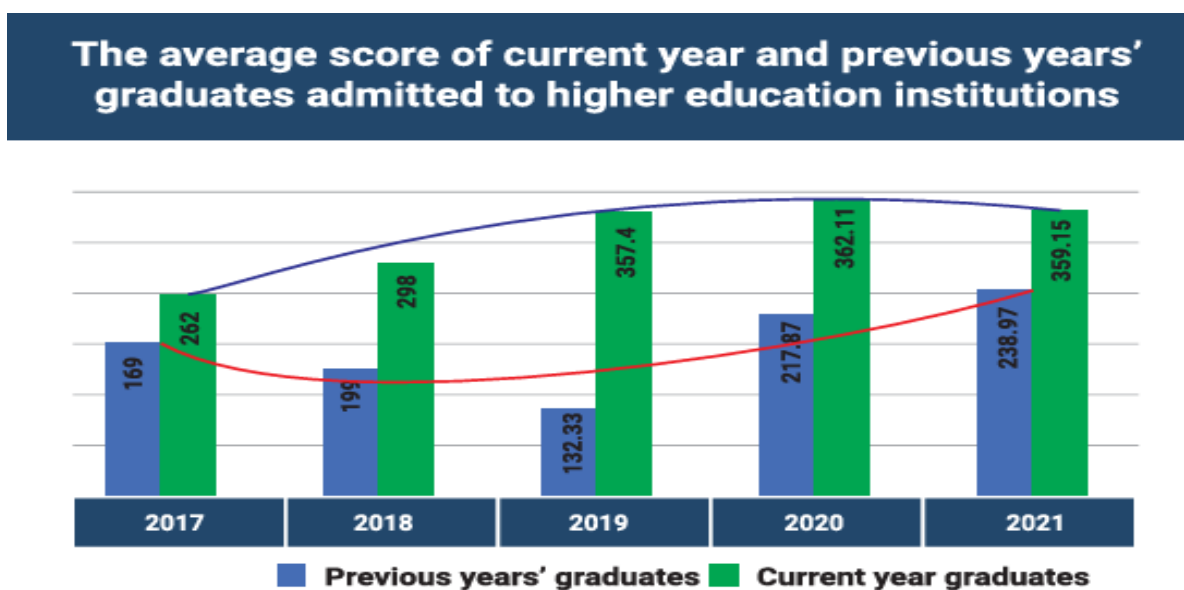
Further examination of the university admission exam results, disaggregated by regions across the country, reveals a distinct pattern. Notably, the highest performance is consistently observed in private lyceums and schools located in big cities under the purview of the Ministry of Science and Education. According to the Ministry of Science and Education’s (MSE) report for the year 2023, a comparative analysis of XI grade graduation exams indicates that lyceums, specifically those under the Ministry of Science and Education and private lyceums, occupy the foremost positions (MSE, 2023) which widens the gap between urban and rural.

School graduates provide their grades for each subject for the undergraduate admission application. Later, the SEC analyses the data and compares the school-leaving and university admission exam results. Results of admission exams of 94.51% of high school graduates with grade “3” (i.e., satisfaction) in all school subjects were very poor - in the range of 0–200 points, which is a high correlation. However, only 35.21% of the graduates with grades “5” (i.e., excellent) were able to justify their high school grades. This shows that the low grades given in schools are objective, while the high grades are relatively inflated (SEC, 2023). The SEC announced that they could add school grades as an additional assessment source only after getting a high correlation (i.e., $r > 0.9$) between school grades and exam points. Otherwise, the “excellent” grade owners who do not justify excellent grades can oust those who score at their knowledge and surpass them in admission to higher education institutions. It can bring bribery and corruption again as it was before 1992. This empirical observation substantiates the contention that assessments conducted by schoolteachers continue to exhibit both inaccuracy and ambiguity.

Despite the SEC’s overwhelming reports, we can see positive results from MSE in the 2021 report. According to the last report published by the Ministry of Science and Education (MSE), there has been an augmentation in the average scores attained by both current applicants and those from the preceding year. The report highlights that, historically, the results of graduates from the previous year have been lower than those of the current year, as depicted in Figure 3. Despite this, the average point indicator in the prior year’s graduates among individuals admitted to higher education institutions in the 2020 entrance exam was 266 points, with the current year’s graduates exhibiting an average point indicator 100 points higher. Notwithstanding these variations, a discernible upward trend characterizes the academic performance of both cohorts (MSE, 2020).

Additionally, there has been a noteworthy decline in the percentage of matriculants scoring below 200 points in the centralized exam, decreasing from 49% in 2017 to 39% in 2021. The report emphasizes that, compared to 2020, an improvement is evident in the results of XI grade final exams in 2021, thereby substantiating the Ministry of Science and Education’s assertion of ongoing progress (MSE, 2020: 109).

Figure 3.
The previous and current years’ average scores of graduates from centralized exams in admission to HEIs (MSE, 2020: 115).



It can be deduced that over 90% of secondary school graduates opt for the State Examination Center (SEC) exams to secure university admission. Yet, nearly half of them face unsuccessful outcomes. This outcome may be attributed to either intense competition or a scarcity of available

admission slots. However, more than four thousand undergraduate seats remain unoccupied annually, even after the second round of enrollment. This non-utilization of open slots can be attributed to various factors, including prohibitively high annual fees, the absence of relevant faculties, and inaccuracies in faculty coding.

Within the scope of this research, alternative admission models are proposed to alleviate the reliance on SEC exams and broaden opportunities for all adolescents. In the subsequent discussion section, alternative admission criteria for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are recommended to enhance diversity and elevate admission percentages.

Discussion.

Admission Options and Facts.

The ensuing enumeration delineates various options and pertinent information regarding undergraduate degree admission for both Azerbaijani and international applicants:

1. State Examination Center Exams:

The school-leaving and university admission exams administered by the State Examination Center (SEC) are characterized by their competitive and challenging nature, necessitating several years of additional preparation. Annually, over 45 thousand students secure admission to undergraduate degree programs, some with state scholarships. However, around 55% fail to attain the requisite scores for admission, precluding them from subsequent attempts.

2. Admission of Sub-Bachelors to Undergraduate Degree Programs:

In a groundbreaking development initiated in 2019, graduates from vocational colleges were granted a “sub-bachelor” qualification, allowing them to partake in program selection rounds without undergoing university admission exams. The eligibility of degree programs for sub-bachelors was determined through collaboration between the State Examination Center and the Ministry of Science and Education. In this initiative’s inaugural year, 3,592 sub-bachelors out of 14918 were admitted to various undergraduate programs (SEC, 2021).

3. Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT)

Exclusively, ADA University acknowledges SAT results, aligning with the global practice embraced by numerous colleges and universities. In 2023, 190 applicants achieved student status through the ADA University committee’s approval based on SAT scores and interviews.

4. Admission to Degree Programs with Aptitude Assessment (Group 5 only):

Certain programs, such as “Fine Arts,” “Music,” “Architecture,” “Theater, Cinema, and Choreography,” “Physical Education, and Sports,” among others, mandate only aptitude assessments after the school-leaving exam.

5. Completion of Internationally Accredited Certificates:

Candidates possessing certificates from internationally accredited programs, including the International Baccalaureate (IB) diploma program, advanced levels of the general certificate of education, and advanced placement, can secure admission to some undergraduate programs without facing competition upon successfully passing the Azerbaijani language exam. There is no data on how many high school students could get undergraduate admission through this way.

6. Winners of International and National Subject Olympiads:

A category of candidates, namely winners of international and national subject Olympiads, international competitions, and contests, enjoy the privilege of admission to higher education institutions without the requirement of formal exams. For example, Azerbaijani schoolchildren garnered 63 medals across 19 different International Olympiads and contests in 2020.

7. International Students:

International students can apply to Azerbaijani universities by presenting their high school diploma or attestation. The 2022-2023 academic year witnessed approximately 6,223 foreign and non-citizen students from 89 countries studying in higher and sub-bachelor institutions within the Republic of Azerbaijan, with a predominant representation from countries such as Turkey, Iran, Georgia, Russia, Iraq, Nigeria, Turkmenistan, India, Pakistan, and others (SSC, 2023).

8. *ADA University Admission Criteria for ADA School Graduates:*

In the last three years (2020, 2021, and 2022) (12; 13; 14). ADA University has instituted unique criteria for the admission of ADA school graduates. The criteria include achieving a minimum 2.00 Cumulative GPA at the time of graduation, with 85% of the Cumulative GPA derived from final grades across all terms studied at ADA School and 15% comprising results from the Attestation Exam conducted by the State Examination Center, encompassing Azerbaijani language, English, and Mathematics. This application process is exclusively tailored for ADA school graduates and is characterized by a highly competitive and privileged admission process (20).

As previously highlighted, the predominant recourse for most secondary school graduates is the reliance on State Examination Center (SEC) exams, and a significant proportion—more than half—find themselves unable to navigate the intricacies of undergraduate admission successfully. Alternative pathways to admission appear to be both limited and highly specific, presenting a fragmented landscape. It is worth noting that no distinct provision exists for special admission considerations based on societal demographics. Nevertheless, particular quotas are allocated for state-funded positions designated for applicants from families affected by internal displacement, those with low-income backgrounds, refugees, or orphans (Abbaszade, Aliyev, Shelaginov, 2021: 11-14).

The SEC exams emerge as the predominant and virtually exclusive avenue for gaining admission to higher education institutions. This method is characterized by its competitive, challenging, centralized nature and is only accessible to those graduates who have diligently prepared for this rigorous evaluative process.

The Global Landscape of Undergraduate Admissions.

The global landscape of undergraduate university admission procedures is richly diverse, with approaches varying across countries. Notably, some nations, including China, Japan, Brazil, and France, have adopted centralized systems akin to Azerbaijan. Conversely, others, such as the United States, Canada, and Iceland, have vested autonomy in universities, while some, like Australia, the UK, and India, have blended elements of both centralization and university admission autonomy. On the other hand, Austria, Switzerland, and Belgium have embraced a highly liberal approach to undergraduate admission, allowing all high school diploma holders to apply to public universities without stringent criteria (Rigol, 2003).

In the context of neighboring countries, Russia is undergoing a transition from individual university application forms to the Unified State Examination (USE) program. Similarly, Iran (Konkour), Turkey (ÖSS), and Georgia (Unified National Examinations) exhibit a comparable undergraduate admission policy to that of Azerbaijan. However, the increasing critique of standardized tests used in student selection for higher education has prompted experts to advocate for alternative admission options, urging universities to consider alternative criteria beyond numerical scores (Cole, 2016; Koljatic, Silva, Sireci, 2021; Sternberg, Bonney, Gabora, Merrifield, 2012: 30-41).

This study aims to shift the focus toward potential undergraduate admission options distinct from the State Examination Center (SEC) exams. These alternative criteria transcend mere numerical assessments and allow universities to evaluate applicants' personal qualities and skills. High school students can concentrate on their academic programs and curricula by adopting qualitative criteria while enhancing their abilities and skills. The subsequent section outlines qualitative criteria widely employed for undergraduate admissions globally, exploring potential options for Azerbaijan within this framework:

1. *School Achievement (High School GPA):*

Despite the earlier acknowledgment of the limited correlation between students' high grades and examination results, the high school GPA remains a primary option for particular school graduates. Notably, ADA University already accepts ADA school graduates based on their GPA, demonstrating positive outcomes. As such, graduates from lyceums, international schools, and

institutions overseen by the Education Ministry, exhibiting consistently high performance, should be allowed to apply for undergraduate admission utilizing their high GPAs.

2. *Extracurricular Activities:*

Extracurricular activities, known for fostering the development of social, academic, and intellectual skills (Lawhorn, 2008), are unfortunately not emphasized as essential requirements in Azerbaijani high schools. However, many developed countries advocate for students' engagement in extracurricular activities alongside their core subjects. For instance, students applying for Group 5 must undergo an aptitude assessment as a form of extracurricular preparation. Leveraging the SEC's experience with this type of admission, extending such criteria to other admission groups is imperative and can bring applicants some chance for admission.

3. *Personal Essays:*

In contrast to the prevailing practice in Azerbaijan, personal essays play a significant role in the admission processes of many world universities. These essays, often accompanied by GPA requirements in online applications, allow high school graduates to showcase their interests, personal goals, and academic aspirations. "Admission officers utilize these essays as evidence of creativity, intellect, and writing proficiency" (Tessler, 2018). Proposing a departure from the conventional undergraduate admission practices in Azerbaijan, I suggest that students who fail the SEC exams should be allowed to submit a personal statement, if desired, for unoccupied faculties even after the second admission round. This innovative approach would enable universities to consider students during a third-round admission process.

4. *Letters of Recommendation:*

Letters of recommendation, integral components of admission applications, constitute written endorsements from individuals capable of providing insights into the student's experiences. These letters serve to evaluate a student's performance in academic settings, professional environments, or extracurricular activities through the perspective of someone other than the student (Tessler, 2018). This practice aligns with the global norm in university admission applications. Integrating the aforementioned personal essay option with letters of recommendation could offer an alternative pathway for applicants from rural areas who may face challenges adequately preparing for the SEC exams. Such a model of undergraduate admission could be seamlessly conducted and supervised by the SEC in an online format.

5. *Interview:*

While interviews are conventionally associated with graduate or doctoral levels, considering them as an additional option for undergraduate admission remains viable. Research on undergraduate admission interviews emphasizes the assessment of a student's motivation and oral communication skills during the interview process (Tessler, 2018). Drawing from the successful experience of ADA University with SAT applicants, universities could be granted the authority to utilize SAT scores – an effective predictor of academic performance – and conduct interviews with their experts, as practiced by ADA University for many years (21).

6. *College Credit Plus:*

In the latter half of the 20th century, select states within the United States implemented the Post Secondary Enrollment Options (PSEO), subsequently succeeded by the College Credit Plus initiative in 2015. This program facilitates high school student enrollment in college courses, enabling the simultaneous accrual of college and secondary school credits. Aside from logistical considerations such as transportation, the government assumes financial responsibility for tuition and textbooks. The fundamental objective of this initiative is to afford students, particularly those hailing from underrepresented familial backgrounds, unrestricted access to college-level courses without incurring financial burdens. Given the prevalent structure of global education systems emphasizing the acquisition of requisite credits, this program is pivotal as a transitional conduit linking the realms of secondary education and tertiary studies. In effect, it optimizes resource allocation and temporal efficiency for participating students.

7. Other Community Service Endeavors:

In several developed countries, high school students actively engage in community service and volunteer activities: a novel and underdeveloped expectation for Azerbaijani youth that warrants adaptation. Encouraging high school students to participate in social and community endeavors and emphasizing the potential benefits for their future and university admission is imperative. I propose that students involved in community service receive additional credits during the admission process, promoting an active lifestyle among teenagers.

8. Athletic Participation:

In certain countries, athletic achievements are considered in admission exams due to the positive correlation between sports involvement and academic success (Yildirim, Bayrak, 2019). This principle is already applied in the aptitude assessment for those seeking admission to the Azerbaijan Sports Academy. Recognizing athletic achievements is crucial and should be acknowledged positively, fostering students' physical performance and contributing to the development of self-motivation, leadership skills, time management, and a sense of responsibility among undergraduates.

9. Awards and Scholarships:

As previously mentioned, international Olympiad winners are eligible to apply for undergraduate admission, providing a distinctive edge over other applicants. Acknowledging and rewarding awards and scholarships contribute significantly to positive social development, fostering increased community involvement and participation in international competitions. I suggest that students with achievements in regional competitions or international programs such as FLEX and the Benjamin Franklin Transatlantic Fellowship be granted additional consideration in the admission process. This proposal, however, warrants thorough investigation and careful evaluation before implementation.

10. Military-Friendly Bachelors:

In certain nations, such as the United States, individuals affiliated with the military are entitled to specific benefits, including discounted tuition, flexible course arrangements, and exemption from application fees. These concessions extend to the admission process, wherein military-affiliated applicants receive preferential treatment to recognize their service. Such a framework facilitates the initiation or resumption of undergraduate education for veterans, enabling them to pursue degrees in fields of personal interest. Considering the current demographic landscape in Azerbaijan, marked by a significant number of veterans resulting from the 2020 conflict, there exists an opportunity for universities to adopt a veteran-friendly approach to college admissions. Institutions can acknowledge and leverage these individuals' unique experiences and backgrounds, streamlining their acceptance into undergraduate degree programs.

Implications / Recommendations.

The State Examination Center (SEC) stands as a pivotal specialized central entity responsible for both international and national examinations in Azerbaijan. Throughout its existence, the SEC has achieved remarkable milestones, with recent accomplishments over the last 3-4 years earning acclaim from educational experts, applicants, and parents alike. The commendable strides, particularly in the admission processes for sub-bachelor's and international diplomas without exams, signify significant steps towards enhanced transparency and increased opportunities for the youth. Based on a comprehensive examination, comparison, and scrutiny of global practices, I propose three admission models:

1. Autonomy for Universities:

Grant universities the autonomy to admit undergraduate students based on SAT or school-leaving exam results in the initial round while employing interviews or online applications involving personal essays and recommendations for the second round. ADA University's successful implementation of this approach can serve as a model for other institutions. This model could be applied to universities with high admission percentages or top scores, with a limited quota assigned

to monitor outcomes. This implementation should be carefully strategized to mitigate potential challenges such as high dropout rates and exam failures in subsequent years.

2. Merit-Based Extra Points:

Award additional points to students who have actively participated in extracurricular activities and community endeavors, completed military service (e.g., participated in the 2020 war), and succeeded in global or athletic competitions. Each distinct achievement could contribute an extra point (e.g., 50) to be added to the cumulative points from school-leaving and university admission exams. Rigorous planning and preparation, including the requirement for officially sealed documents, are essential to ensure the integrity of the process and guard against fraud and corruption. This model aims to incentivize students from urban areas and those with exceptional skills to pursue undergraduate education.

3. Selective Admission from Top Schools:

Implement a system that admits applicants with a high average GPA from the top twenty schools, as delineated in the SEC annual report. ADA University's recent adoption of this method, where admission is exclusively granted to students from ADA School, serves as a precedent. This approach should be extended to all universities, allowing students from distinguished schools, such as Sumgayit City Gymnasium of Natural Sciences or Sumgayit City "Talent" Lyceum, to apply with their average GPA, leveraging the recognized quality of education provided by these institutions.

The temporal demands and financial burdens associated with the protracted duration of each round of conventional admission exams, spanning nearly a year, pose considerable challenges for applicants who dedicate 1-3 years to preparatory endeavors. While the State Examination Center (SEC) exams stand as widely employed and esteemed standardized tests, acknowledged for their predictive validity in forecasting academic success at both undergraduate and graduate levels, the proposed admission models present decentralized alternatives. Certain universities and schools may benefit from incorporating these models into their admission policies, introducing flexibility and diversification. Contrary to the considerable costs incurred in preparing for SEC exams, despite being fee-free, the suggested models offer cost-effective alternatives, with the creation of portfolios facilitated by school counselors.

A paramount concern pertains to the absence of high school guidance counselors, a deficiency that mandates intervention from the Ministry of Science and Education (MSE). Embedding counseling services within every high school is imperative, with the role of school counselors extending to guiding tutors, faculty selection, portfolio preparation, recommendations, and undergraduate admissions. Recognized as intermediaries between students and college admission processes, guidance counselors, according to Tessler (2018), are instrumental in bridging critical informational gaps. The present shortage of such services in schools, coupled with the limited capacity of parents and paid tutors, exacerbates the challenges high school graduates face preparing for exams and navigating the intricacies of the admission process.

Conclusion

In summation, Azerbaijan is accepted as having low enrollment levels compared to neighboring countries (World Bank, 2018). Therefore, the three proposed alternative models offer a viable departure from the conventional university admission paradigm, potentially alleviating the physical and mental stressors confronting students, parents, and educators (Chetin, Unsal, 2019). These models hold promise in fostering a more equitable and accessible admission system, wherein students with exceptional GPAs can secure admission sans the traditional university admission exam. Furthermore, candidates from rural areas, constrained by limited opportunities, can benefit from additional incentives linked to extracurricular activities and community services. These alternatives towards decentralization aim to enhance competition among schools, afford autonomy to select premier universities, and holistically elevate overall admission percentages.

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