

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.36719/2706-6185/36/38-41>

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## **THE INTERNATIONALIZATION OF THE HIGHER EDUCATION POLICY IN AZERBAIJAN: SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAMS AND RANKINGS**

### **Abstract**

This article examines the internationalization of higher education in Azerbaijan – with a particular focus on scholarship programs and university rankings. It explores how Azerbaijan's educational policies aim to enhance global competitiveness and attract international students. The study highlights key scholarship programs initiated by the state and private institutions, emphasizing their role in fostering academic mobility and cross-cultural exchange. Additionally, the article analyzes the impact of these programs on the rankings of Azerbaijani universities in global higher education indices. Through a comprehensive review of current policies, statistical data, and case studies, the article identifies both achievements and challenges in Azerbaijan's journey towards educational internationalization. The findings suggest that while significant progress has been made in increasing the visibility and attractiveness of Azerbaijani higher education institutions, further efforts are required to address systemic issues and enhance the quality and accessibility of education. This analysis provides valuable insights for policymakers, educators, and researchers interested in the dynamics of educational internationalization and its implications for Azerbaijan's academic landscape.

**Keywords:** *higher education, education policy, internationalization, scholarship programs, rankings*

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### **Azərbaycanda ali təhsil siyasətinin beynəlmilləşməsi: təqaüd proqramları və reytinglər**

#### **Xülasə**

Bu məqalədə Azərbaycan ali təhsilin beynəlmilləşməsi – təqaüd proqramlarına və universitetlərin reytinglərinə xüsusi diqqət yetirilir. Məqalə Azərbaycanın təhsil siyasətinin qlobal rəqabət qabiliyyətini artırmaq və beynəlxalq tələbələri cəlb etmək məqsədi daşdığını araşdırır. Tədqiqat dövlət və özəl qurumlar tərəfindən həyata keçirilən əsas təqaüd proqramlarını vurğulayaraq, onların akademik mobilliyin və mədəniyyətlərarası mübadilənin təşviqində rolunu vurğulayır. Bundan əlavə, məqalədə bu proqramların Azərbaycan universitetlərinin qlobal ali təhsil indekslərindəki reytinglərinə təsiri təhlil edilir. Məqalə mövcud siyasətlərin, statistik məlumatların və nümunə araşdırmaların hərtərəfli təhlili vasitəsilə Azərbaycanın təhsilin beynəlmilləşməsi yolunda həm nailiyyətləri, həm də çətinliklərini müəyyən edir. Nəticələr onu deməyə əsas verir ki, Azərbaycan ali təhsil müəssisələrinin görmə qabiliyyətinin və cəlbediciliyinin artırılmasında əhəmiyyətli irəliləyişlər əldə olunsada, sistemli problemlərin həlli, təhsilin keyfiyyətinin və əlçatanlığının artırılması üçün əlavə səylər tələb olunur. Bu təhlil təhsilin beynəlmilləşməsinin dinamikası və onun Azərbaycanın akademik mənzərəsi üçün təsirləri ilə maraqlanan siyasətçilər, pedaqoqlar və tədqiqatçılar üçün dəyərli fikirlər təqdim edir.

**Açar sözlər:** *ali təhsil, təhsil siyasəti, beynəlmilləşmə, təqaüd proqramları, reytinglər*

## Introduction

The history of Azerbaijan's higher education system dates to the early 20th century and is characterized by complexity and richness. A major milestone in the advancement of higher education in Azerbaijan was the establishment of Baku State University in 1919 (1). During the Soviet era, there was a rapid expansion and transformation of education, particularly in the technical and professional fields, resulting in the creation of specialized institutions across the country.

The following are the higher education institutions established in Azerbaijan after Baku State University:

- Azerbaijan State Oil and Industry University – on November 16, 1920, the Azerbaijan Revolutionary Committee announced the decree "On the establishment of a Polytechnic Institute in Baku" at the base of the polytechnic, which is a technical school. Not long after, on December 12, 1920, the People's Education Commissariat issued a decree on the opening of the institute (2);

- Baku Music Academy – started operating under the name of Azerbaijan State Conservatory in October 1920 (3);

- Azerbaijan State Pedagogical University – was founded on the basis of the decree dated August 26, 1921, with 6 students to train highly educated teachers (4);

- Azerbaijan State University of Culture and Arts – took its foundation from the Baku Theater School established in 1923 by the decision of the Azerbaijan Education Commissariat (5).

Various pivotal moments have shaped the history of Azerbaijan's higher education system. The establishment of the Azerbaijan National Academy of Sciences in 1945 played a crucial role in promoting scientific exploration and innovation (6). Following independence in 1991, Azerbaijan embarked on a journey of educational reform, aiming to align its system with global standards and promote quality education. One significant reform implemented was the adoption of the Bologna Process, which aimed to standardize higher education systems and increase student and academic staff mobility across Europe.

In 2009, the country introduced a groundbreaking Law on Education, which aimed to modernize and enhance the quality of higher education. This law introduced innovative standards for curriculum design, pedagogical methods, and evaluation practices, with a strong emphasis on fostering critical thinking, problem-solving capabilities, and creativity. The remnants of the Soviet era still influence Azerbaijan's higher education landscape. The emphasis on technical and vocational training during that time has had a lasting impact on the structure and priorities of educational institutions in the country. Russian language, widely used during the Soviet era, continues to hold significant influence in academia, with many universities offering programs and courses in Russian.

Additionally, Russian culture finds its place within Azerbaijan's higher education system. Overall, Azerbaijan's system of higher education has experienced significant transformations throughout its history. From its origins in the early 20th century to the present-day reforms, the country has continuously strived to meet global standards and provide quality education to its citizens. While the echoes of the Soviet era are still evident, Azerbaijan continues to adapt and evolve to meet the challenges of the modern world.

Adapting to the challenges of the modern world, applying new approaches, abandoning long-standing traditions and setting sail for new systems is a difficult and painful process not only in the field of education, but in all fields.

Internationalization in education is one of the main directions for development facing all higher education institutions today. Of course, in addition to higher education institutions, the attention paid to this field by the state is very important. The "State Program" financed by the Government of Azerbaijan is one of the biggest steps taken in this field (7).

The main goal of the "State Program on Education of Azerbaijani Youth Abroad" is to promote the education of young people in prestigious foreign educational institutions in the required specialties in priority areas in order to ensure the formation and sustainable development of a competitive economic system.

The "State Program on Increasing the International Competitiveness of the Higher Education System in the Republic of Azerbaijan for 2019-2023" was created for a different purpose than before. Thus, the creation of dual diploma programs with prestigious universities of the world, as well as the promotion of doctoral education abroad were the main priority directions.

"State Program on Increasing the International Competitiveness of the Higher Education System in the Republic of Azerbaijan for 2019-2023" supports the education of up to 2,000 Azerbaijani students in prestigious higher education institutions.

In addition, the Inter-Governmental Scholarship Program is one of the most important projects implemented for the expansion of study abroad opportunities for young people. Thus, Azerbaijani youth have the chance to study with a scholarship in countries such as China, Latvia, Hungary, Kazakhstan, Romania, Russia, and Tajikistan, according to the places allocated or mutually assigned. The scope of the scholarship program is expanded every year. From this year, it will be possible to study with a scholarship in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. Intergovernmental Scholarship Programs are implemented by the State Agency for Science and Higher Education (8).

On the other side to the educational experience of Azerbaijani citizens abroad, the involvement of foreign students is one of the most important issues in the direction of internationalization. There is also a plan for increasing the number of foreign students, teachers, and researchers.

The director of the State Agency for Science and Higher Education Ms. Ulkar Sattarova stated that the number of foreign students has already reached 10,000 in the form of "International Education Opportunities in Azerbaijan" held on December 26, 2023. Looking at the statistics, it can be seen that this is a record indicator for Azerbaijan. However, to attract the number of foreign students, it is important to solve a number of problems and introduce innovations.

The presentation of the Heydar Aliyev international scholarship grant for foreign citizens was also held at this event. Starting from the 2024-2025 academic year, a total of 500 foreign citizens will have the chance to benefit from this scholarship for a period of 5 years (9).

One of the main problems of higher education institutions operating in Azerbaijan today is the dormitory. If we look at all the scholarship programs funded by the government, we see that each of them provides students with accommodation. However, we cannot create the same conditions for students who will come to our country.

In foreign experience, it is possible to see that the university campus is located in a large area, and all the necessary buildings for students are located inside the campus. However, it is impossible to expect the same guarantee from higher education institutions operating in a dense area of Baku.

The lack of internal scholarship programs of universities also affects the small number of foreign students, and therefore the number of researchers and academic staff. Let's look at the information provided on the website of the "Study in Azerbaijan" portal. We can see that only Khazar University, ADA University and Western Caspian University offer such scholarship programs (10).

Another thing to talk about is rankings. There are dozens of rating agencies around the world. They publish university rankings in various categories. The most famous rankings agencies in Azerbaijan are "QS Quacquarelli Symonds" and "Times Higher Education" international rankings agencies. The methodology employed in these international rankings significantly influences the positioning of Azerbaijani universities. Variables such as research output, international cooperation, reputation, and student satisfaction may be considered. It's paramount for Azerbaijani institutions to grasp the criteria and indicators used in these rankings to strategically boost their performance.

The representation of Azerbaijani higher education institutions in the lists of "QS Quacquarelli Symonds" rankings agency is as follows (11):

- QS World University Rankings (WUR) 2024 – 3 HEIs,
- QS Sustainability 2023 – 2 HEIs,
- QS Region (Europe) – 8 HEIs,
- QS Subject – 1 HEI.

The representation of Azerbaijani higher education institutions in the lists of "Times Higher Education" rankings agency is as follows (12):

- THE World University Rankings (WUR) 2024 – 1 HEI,
- THE Impact – 7 HEIs,
- THE Subject – 1 HEI.

Among the universities of Azerbaijan, Baku State University is the only university that participates in the all mentioned rankings tables.

### Conclusion

Our analysis spotlighted the Azerbaijani government's dedication to education, evident in their scholarship schemes and academic programs geared towards increasing local students' accessibility to international education. Our critical assessment extended to the standing of Azerbaijani universities on the international academic stage, juxtaposing them against global benchmarks and dissecting the methodologies employed for these rankings. However, even as we acknowledged the strides taken, we identified several areas that call for enhancement. Key concerns like quality assurance, accreditation, funding, resource allocation, and the obstructions to student mobility and cultural exchange must be addressed to further elevate the Azerbaijani higher education system's standing.

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Received: 11.04.2024

Accepted: 31.05.2024