**AZERBAIJAN AND EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION AREA: STUDENTS’ INVOLVEMENT IN BOLOGNA REFORMS**

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**ABSTRACT**

*This study explores the progress of the 14-year old Bologna reform in major Azerbaijani public universities. The focus of the study was to investigate the level of student involvement in the transformation process of the European Higher Education Area. The data for the research were collected from a survey conducted among 2,400 bachelor’s and master’s students, as well as through semi-structured interviews with university administrators and experts. The study mainly examines the key elements of Bologna process – degree structure, quality assurance, mobility, and social dimension. The study found that despite the remarkable progress in the development of higher education system in the country, much work still needs to be done at the institutional level to involve students in all stages of the reform process. Huge discrepancies and shortages are observed with respect to the role of students in the quality assurance process both at the external and internal level. In terms of the internationalization of institutions, formal strategies and targets, as well as sufficient funding, are not yet fully existent in higher education institutions. Meanwhile, students in the chosen universities are either unaware of student support services or unsatisfied with the provision of those services.*

**Key words:** *Bologna process in Azerbaijan, student involvement, degree structure, quality assurance, internationalization, social dimension*

**Introduction**

Immediately after gaining independence in 1991, improving the education sector and enhancing its quality has become one of the top priorities in Azerbaijan. As every other country in post-Soviet Eurasia, Azerbaijan inherited the Soviet educational system that had long faced problems. “Higher education (at that period) reflected the ideological and industrial aims of the Soviet regime and functioned to meet its socio-economic needs” (Ahn, E.S., 2016, p.8). Beyond of the use of teaching materials, textbooks or pedagogy leftover from former times, Azerbaijan had also been left with thousands of instructors, faculty and researchers trained in the old system. For the last 27 years, however, the country has made numerous attempts to transform the system and make it compatible with the development and experiences of other post-Soviet countries (Demographic and Health Survey, 2011).

Approximating the system of education to the European one had been one of the strategies of Azerbaijani government since the mid-1990s, culminating in its joining the Bologna Process Reform in May of 2005. Like many societies, Azerbaijan also “had a need for greater numbers of graduates with more relevant skills for the new global labor market. At a time when countries were facing these common trends and challenges, the idea of a European process was attractive, corresponding to the spirit of the times” (Crosier & Parveva, 2013, p. 21). Despite the positive sides and impacts of such a movement, joining the process has also created many challenges, especially in higher education. This fundamental transformation within Higher Educational Institutions (HEI) had a significant effect on teaching and learning processes, thereby triggering conflicts between policy makers and faculty members as well as students and university administrators (Bargel, 2011). The National Report on Azerbaijan’s progress in integration to the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) reveals that although the country has made a significant step forward in the higher education sphere, several gaps in the implementation of Bologna Process Reforms cannot be denied (BFUG, Azerbaijan Report, 2012-2015).

So far, the main gap related to the examination of the reform, however, is that there have been no empirical studies conducted which analyze the process through the students’ perspective. It is necessary to learn how this reform has affected Azerbaijani students. The purpose of this study is to explore the implications of 14-year old Bologna process in selected public universities with particular emphasis on degree structure, quality assurance, mobility, and social dimension. Moreover, the researchers are trying to find out how students perceive and understand this process, how they are able to benefit from it as well as to see the consistency of reforms in the country. This is also necessary for seeing how compatible the Azerbaijani higher education institutions are to European Higher Education Standards.

**Data collection and methods**

This article primarily employs data with the help of mixed method design, since we agree with the idea that “mixed methods design is that the combination of both forms of data provides a better understanding of a research problem than either quantitative or qualitative data by itself.” (Creswell, 2012. P.45). The data collection involved the survey of students and interviews with experts.

*Student Surveys*

The first data collection method is the survey that was conducted October-November of 2018 over a four-week period. The researchers first selected six major state universities based on their positions in the national ranking and number of students. All the selected universities—Azerbaijan State University of Economics, ADA University, Azerbaijan State Pedagogical University, Azerbaijan University of Languages, Azerbaijan Technical University, and Baku State University—implement Bologna principles. Surveys were mostly conducted among students of third and fourth years, as well as master’s students, since they are the most competent respondents with several years of experience being a student. First and second year students of the bachelor’s level were excluded from the survey on the grounds that they might not have enough knowledge about the reform process. surveys were distributed in the Azerbaijani language.

*Expert Interviews*

Beyond the surveys, the researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with experts from different areas of the education sector. Data were also collected via semi-structured interviews, which took place at the venues the respondents had chosen and ranged in length from 45-60 minutes. The interview questions were related to the main elements of Bologna process – degree structure, recognition, mobility, quality assurance, and social dimension. Each interview was recorded and transcribed to be used in the analysis of the data. The interview was held based on 11 open-ended questions, the answers to which could shed some light into the issues of the Bologna process implementation in Azerbaijani universities. Confidentiality of the respondents was ensured.

**Results**

The collected data were analyzed in several main steps. Initially, descriptive statistics was used to show the demographic information for all participants (See Table 1). Mean age of the respondents was 20.

**Table 1. Demographic data of respondents**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Demographic Variables** | | | |
| **HEIs** | **Total # of respondents** | **Male** | **Female** | **BA** | **MA** |
| ADA University | 645 | 12.79% | 14.08% | 25.83% | 1.00% |
| Pedagogical University | 506 | 7.46% | 13.63% | 21.08% | 0.00% |
| University of Languages | 371 | 1.13% | 14.33% | 15.46% | 0.00% |
| Technical University | 140 | 4.54% | 1.29% | 3.50% | 2.33% |
| Baku State University | 157 | 0.92% | 5.63% | 6.54% | 0.00% |
| University of Economics | 581 | 16.71% | 7.50% | 22.88% | 1.29% |
| **Grand Total** | **2400** | **43.54%** | **56.46%** | **95.29%** | **4.63%** |

Furthermore, we asked questions about the number of credits earned during the first and second degrees to see if the process was understood by students. As a rule, first-cycle programs fall under the category of 180-240 ECTS model and second cycle under 90-120 ECTS. However, the alarming issue is that nearly half of the respondents have absolutely no idea about the number of credits earned during the studies. (See Table 2).

The survey also shows that the participation of students in the designing of the curricula of study programs is not active enough to influence the reform process. To be more specific, more than half of the respondents claim that they did not participate at all in the process of redesigning the curricula, and twenty-eight percent of students state that they did not have any idea about the curriculum design or reform (See Table 2).

**Table 2.**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **% of Students’ Participation in Curriculum Design** | | | |  | **% of Students who are informed about credit hours** | |  |
| **Participated** | **Partially Participated** | **Did Not Participate** | **No Idea** | **TOTAL** | **Students who know** | **Students who don’t know** | **TOTAL** |
| **3%** | **12%** | **57%** | **28%** | **100%** | **55%** | **45%** | **100%** |

Another debated issue regarding degree structure is the employability of graduates. The researchers wanted to know if the respondents see themselves as ready to start out in employment when graduating from the first cycle. The results of the survey show that 34 percent of the respondents strongly disagree and 25 percent disagree that it is possible to enter the labor market without finishing the second cycle whereas 25 percent agree and just 7 percent strongly agree with this statement. Overall, 55 percent of students think that even if you can start employment life without a master’s degree, job opportunities will be very limited, and only 34 percent sees the situation more optimistically. 11 percent however, stay undecided regarding this issue.

One more crucial element of Bologna reform is the student involvement in quality assurance. The researchers wanted to know if students from sample universities were involved at all levels of internal reviews, such as evaluation of the institution, faculty, program, and courses. Hence, the results display that the students are mainly asked for their opinions related to faculty and courses in their HEIs. The students are rarely involved in the evaluation of the institution and are mainly excluded from the program evaluation (See table 3).

**Table 3. Student involvement in internal evaluation**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Evaluation**  **of** | **% of students participated** | **% of students partially participated** | **% of students did not participate** | **TOTAL**  **%** |
| **University** | **42%** | **30%** | **28%** | **100%** |
| **Instructor** | **40%** | **33%** | **27%** | **100%** |
| **Course** | **18%** | **31%** | **51%** | **100%** |
| **Program** | **38%** | **30%** | **32%** | **100%** |

When it comes to student mobility, which is one of the significant aspects of Bologna process, the majority of the students claim that (more than 90 percent of respondents) they have never been abroad in any training, exchange, or internship programs. It was also interesting for the researchers to discover how well Azerbaijani universities, which strive to be a part of EHEA, have succeeded in the offering financial support to the students to study abroad or start and continue their study at home. As a result of the survey, students (36%) state that they do not receive any type of support to study abroad or they (36%) simply do not have any information about any kind of financial support. Regarding studying in the home country, the most popular types of support are scholarships and tuition waivers.

It is also significant to note that different services provided by the HEIs can help students with further employability, mobility, and overall achievement during the years of study. Thus, the researchers asked relevant questions to see how the Azerbaijani students evaluate the existence or implementation of necessary services. To the question of whether career guidance services, psychological consultancy, or additional foreign language courses exist in the sample universities, overall answers were “no”. The only support service that the majority of students answered positively is the awareness of activities about opportunities to study in foreign countries. The distribution of the answers among the universities is clearly shown in the table below:

**Table 4. Existence of the student support services in the sample universities**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Career Guidance Service** | | **Psychological Support** | | **Foreign Language Courses** | | **Study Abroad Awareness** | |
| **University** | **No** | **Yes** | **No** | **Yes** | **No** | **Yes** | **No** | **Yes** |
| ADA University | 1.04% | 25.83% | 23.58% | 3.29% | 4.04% | 22.83% | 3.42% | 23.46% |
| Pedagogical University | 16.96% | 4.13% | 16.58% | 4.50% | 13.79% | 7.29% | 13.04% | 8.04% |
| University of Languages | 14.29% | 1.17% | 12.50% | 2.96% | 6.96% | 8.50% | 6.21% | 9.25% |
| Technical University | 4.88% | 0.96% | 5.71% | 0.13% | 5.13% | 0.71% | 4.42% | 1.42% |
| Baku State University | 6.17% | 0.38% | 5.88% | 0.67% | 5.00% | 1.54% | 5.54% | 1.00% |
| University of Economics | 14.75% | 9.46% | 20.96% | 3.25% | 19.67% | 4.54% | 11.79% | 12.42% |
| **Grand Total** | **58.08%** | **41.92%** | **85.21%** | **14.79%** | **54.58%** | **45.42%** | **44.42%** | **55.58%** |

**Conclusion**

In the present study, we explored how students in Azerbaijani key public universities are involved in the reform process based on the main Bologna principles, such as degree structure, quality assurance, mobility, and social dimension. The analysis of the comprehensive survey results provided insights into how knowledgeable students are and what their experience is with regard to the transformation in HEIs in Azerbaijan. Quantitative and qualitative results allow us to claim that significant changes prompted by Bologna process have occurred in the Azerbaijani higher education system overall. A closer look however, demonstrates that some major areas still require more thorough attention and examination to align the Azerbaijani higher education system with European practices. Although the reform in degree structure can be accepted as successful in terms of using ECTS, more flexibility within studies should be provided to make the overall system more student-oriented and provide freedom to students to determine their study path. Also, active student participation within HEIs with more focus on student involvement in decision-making bodies with the aim to have their opinions on topics such as evaluation and curriculum reform should be one of the priorities in the process of development. Within the dynamic practice of transformation in Azerbaijani universities, there still remain problems that need to be tackled in order to ensure the meaningful transition of Azerbaijani HEIs into EHEA. Employability of students after finishing the first cycle must be a central concern of authorities and institutional leaders while restructuring the study programs, since the research shows that our students are doubtful about their chances to find a job after receiving a bachelor’s degree. Closely related to this issue is the gap existing in the student support services in Azerbaijani universities. Based on the present research findings, it can be concluded that we have yet to convincingly address this gap, at least in the eyes of 2400 Azerbaijani students. We suggest that our institutions devote more attention to the development of career guidance services, introduction of additional language courses, as well as opportunities of study flexibility. As we can see from the results, merely switching to a new structure in study programs is not enough to develop high quality professionals meeting the demands of the modern labor market. Identifying the gaps in the programs and integrating top competences into curriculum of the study programs should be the focus of HEIs. A paramount stress should also be put on the role of students in the governing bodies to hear their suggestions and opinions with regard to workload, curriculum, and concerns related not only to faculty and institution but also to program or course in general. In brief, the students’ role in various stages of Bologna reform cannot be underestimated because, “since the Prague summit in 2001 student involvement is one of the action lines in the Bologna Process. However, current developments may give the impression that it is rather not the case” (Bologna with students’ eyes, 2005, p. 6).

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