

LEARNING IN INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION OF AZERBAIJAN

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ABSTRACT

Over the years, lifelong learning has been widely recognized as a key strategy to address skills shortages in the labor market and therefore to support socio-economic development. In countries like Azerbaijan, it has been specifically highlighted as a way to build a more competitive workforce. However, despite its importance, there is limited research about how higher education institutions (HEIs)—the primary sources of skilled professionals—can effectively promote lifelong learning, especially in developing countries. Because of that, this study dives into the potential of Azerbaijani HEIs to enhance lifelong learning and identifies institutional strategies that could help them adopt a more comprehensive approach. Through a qualitative research approach, including semi-structured interviews with university representatives, experts, and policymakers, as well as document analysis, the study reveals that while Azerbaijani universities have made progress in laying the groundwork for lifelong learning, they still face significant challenges in aligning with global standards and implementing a holistic approach. The research highlights two key tools that university leaders can leverage: offering flexible study program delivery methods and investing in continuous staff development. As one of the first studies to explore lifelong learning within Azerbaijan's formal education system, this work not only sets the stage for further research but also provides practical insights to help shape actionable strategies for promoting lifelong learning in higher education.

Keywords: Labor market, Azerbaijan, Institutional instruments, Workforce development, Lifelong learning.

RESUMEN

A lo largo de los años, el aprendizaje permanente ha sido ampliamente reconocido como una estrategia clave para abordar la escasez de habilidades en el mercado laboral y, por lo tanto, para apoyar el desarrollo socioeconómico. En países como Azerbaiyán, se ha destacado específicamente como una forma de construir una fuerza laboral más competitiva. Sin embargo, a pesar de su importancia, existe una investigación limitada sobre cómo las instituciones de educación superior (IES) -las principales fuentes de profesionales capacitados- pueden promover eficazmente el aprendizaje permanente, especialmente en los países en desarrollo. Por eso, este estudio profundiza en el potencial de las IES azerbaiyanas para mejorar el aprendizaje permanente e identifica estrategias institucionales que podrían ayudarlas a adoptar un enfoque más integral. A través de un enfoque de investigación cualitativo, que incluye entrevistas semiestructuradas con representantes universitarios, expertos y formuladores de políticas, así como análisis de documentos, el estudio revela que, si bien las universidades azerbaiyanas han avanzado en sentar las bases para el aprendizaje permanente, aún enfrentan desafíos significativos para alinearse con los estándares globales e implementar un enfoque holístico. La investigación destaca dos herramientas clave que los líderes universitarios pueden aprovechar: ofrecer métodos flexibles de impartición de programas de estudio e invertir en el desarrollo continuo del personal. Como uno de los primeros estudios que explora el aprendizaje permanente dentro del sistema de educación formal de Azerbaiyán, este trabajo no solo sienta las bases para futuras investigaciones, sino que también proporciona conocimientos prácticos para ayudar a diseñar estrategias viables para promover el aprendizaje permanente en la educación superior.

Palabras clave: Mercado laboral, Azerbaiyán, Instrumentos institucionales, Desarrollo de la fuerza laboral, Aprendizaje permanente

INTRODUCTION

Lifelong learning has evolved into an integral part of contemporary education, initiated by the ongoing demand for individuals to periodically upgrade their skills and knowledge in response to dynamic technological, economic, and social transformations (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning & Shanghai Open University, 2023). Higher education institutions (HEIs) are essential for facilitating lifelong learning by granting access to continuous education and skills development, and their role in this direction has been recognized globally throughout the last 30 years (Yang et al., 2015). For instance, the Hamburg Declaration underlines the significance of opening universities and other formal education institutions to adult learners (UNESCO Institute for Education, 1997). The subsequent World Declaration adopted at the World Conference on Higher Education in the Twenty-First Century highlighted the importance of developing HEIs to include lifelong learning approaches, specifically “giving learners an optimal range of choice and flexibility” in entering and exiting HEIs (UNESCO, 1998). Similarly, the Cape Town Statement on Characteristic Elements of a Lifelong Learning Higher Education Institution, adopted in 2000, advocates for adopting a holistic approach to transforming HEIs into lifelong learning institutions, where people can “learn at different times, in different ways, for different purposes at various stages of their lives and careers” (University of the Western Cape & UNESCO Institute for Education, 2001).

The Azerbaijani government has demonstrated its commitment to advancing lifelong learning through numerous normative and policy frameworks. The “Program on provision of general education schools of the Republic of Azerbaijan with information and communication technologies” (2005-2007), approved by the Decree of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan dated August 21, 2004, aims at creating a single educational information environment that serves to improve education quality through the application of new information technologies in the country and stimulates integration into the world education system, while preparing the population for the information society (Ahmadov, 2014).

The Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan on Education (2009) identifies ensuring access to lifelong learning as one of the requirements in the organization of education. The State Strategy on Development of Education (2013) names the establishment of modern education infrastructure

that ensures lifelong education as one of its five strategic directions. The importance of lifelong learning has also been recognized among the national priorities for the country’s socio-economic development for the period spanning from 2021 to 2030 (Aliyev, 2021, 2022). The document highlights the importance of lifelong learning in forming highly competitive human capital for building a steadily growing and sustainable economy. It should be noted that at the current stage, the development of human potential, socio-economic trends, society, and the labor market depend on the development of education based on economic requirements. When parties share both the risks of investing in education and the responsibility for efficient use of economic resources in the educational activity system, a healthy environment is formed for both educational development and the creation of free business competition (Ahmadov, 2022b).

Currently, the real challenge for Azerbaijan, as for most countries described in various studies, is to ensure that government commitments to lifelong learning are effectively translated into measurable results through feasible strategies and policy tools, as well as stronger institutional endorsement (Nesbit et al., 2007; UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning & Shanghai Open University, 2023; World Bank, 2018). In light of the foregoing considerations, this article explores how effective Azerbaijan’s HEIs are, as the primary suppliers of the qualified workforce, in enhancing lifelong learning provision.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The data for the research was collected via semi-structured interviews with representatives of sixteen local HEIs and twelve independent experts, including foreign experts and policymakers, as well as through the analysis of various documents such as academic articles, reports, and other publications about lifelong learning in Azerbaijan and worldwide. While the depth of interviews provided valuable insights into the dynamics of lifelong learning in Azerbaijan’s higher education sector, it is necessary to acknowledge certain limitations inherent in the research process. One of the key limitations was that the research covered only sixteen HEIs out of fifty-one higher education institutions, including private institutions and those with special purposes such as HEIs of law enforcement agencies. The sample’s relatively limited size has been compensated by the use of an in-depth, semi-structured interview format, coverage of the largest HEIs operating in the country, and the diverse nature of the sample that included private and public HEIs as well as those serving special purposes. Another limitation related to data collection was that the interviews were conducted only with the

administrative staff of the HEIs, which may not fully capture the views of different stakeholders within institutions, such as faculty members, students, and others. This limitation has been compensated mainly through interviews with local and foreign independent experts who were aware of the country's higher education sector dynamics.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Overview of current institutional practices and challenges in Azerbaijan

Before moving to the analysis of current practices, it is worth noting that in Azerbaijan, lifelong learning is prioritized, particularly in light of serious skill shortage problems observed in the country's labor market (Valiyev, 2020). The STEP Employer Skill Survey showed a gap between the skills provided by the country's educational institutions and those sought by employers, especially in significant areas such as information technology and engineering (Rutkowski, 2015). The shortage of skilled workforce is also a relevant issue for non-STEM positions (World Bank, 2022). According to the World Bank's report on Azerbaijan, while more than a third of total workers were employed in occupations not matching their qualifications, high-quality reskilling and upskilling opportunities are relatively scarce in the country (World Bank, 2022). All of these factors contribute to an increase in unemployment rates among graduates and slow economic growth, since most job opportunities are generated in low-productivity sectors. In this context, as evidenced by national policy documents and various reports from international organizations, lifelong learning is regarded as one of the potential solutions to the country's persistent labor market problems (Aliyev, 2021, 2022; Valiyev, 2020).

HEIs, as the major suppliers of qualified workforce in Azerbaijan, are expected to be at the forefront of the movement promoting lifelong learning in the country (World Bank, 2022). However, analysis of local universities' actions toward the promotion of lifelong learning shows that despite noticeable activity in this direction, they encounter challenges in institutionalizing their approach. Many universities participating in the research mentioned that they had established specialized units within their institutions to promote lifelong learning. While certain arrangements for establishing dedicated units have been undertaken, concerns arise regarding the activities of such units and HEIs' approaches to lifelong learning. During interviews with HEI representatives, it was observed that there is no uniform understanding of the concept of lifelong learning, and many universities associate it solely with further education (Institute of Education of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2022). According to Article 24 of the Law of

the Republic of Azerbaijan on Education, further education is "a part of continuous education and professional training," and people holding either higher education, secondary specialized, or vocational education qualifications are eligible to participate in it (Milli Mejlis of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2009). As seen from the definition above, although the concepts are related, they differ in scope since lifelong learning applies to all learning experiences regardless of learners' age, level of education, learning modalities (i.e., formal, non-formal, and informal education), learning spaces, and purposes (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2022). Consequently, by equating lifelong learning with further education, local universities constrain their initiatives on promoting lifelong learning to non-degree certificate courses, workforce training, and other similar programs (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning & Shanghai Open University, 2023; Yang et al., 2015).

The above observations regarding the activities of specialized units within universities to promote lifelong learning and institutional approaches to lifelong learning are not unique to Azerbaijan. For instance, a study of Turkish universities' experiences with lifelong learning activities found that while many universities established specialized units like Continuous Education Centers or renamed existing units as Lifelong Learning Centers, such units have not yet become fully operational (Titrek et al., 2013). As a result, according to the researchers, these centers have essentially become short-term course centers.

Another consequence of approaching lifelong learning through specialized units is the isolation of lifelong learning programs from other university activities. International policy frameworks, some of which were mentioned above, advocate for a holistic approach to promoting lifelong learning that covers areas ranging from developing strategic partnerships with various stakeholders to modernizing teaching and learning processes and student support systems (University of the Western Cape & UNESCO Institute for Education, 2001). The core idea behind these frameworks is opening HEIs' doors to non-traditional learners through establishing alternative admission pathways, connecting lifelong learning programs with traditional learning programs through credit recognition and other mechanisms, and offering flexible delivery models such as online or hybrid learning, evening and weekend classes, and other instruments that would make higher education accessible and attractive to various population segments beyond working professionals requiring upskilling and reskilling (Yang et al., 2015).

Several factors, discussed in detail in the following section of this article, are necessary to move from isolated lifelong

learning units toward integrating lifelong learning into all aspects of university life.

Main findings

The review of literature on lifelong learning activities in universities provides helpful insights that allow us to draw parallels between the experiences of Azerbaijani HEIs and foreign institutions in fostering lifelong learning. According to a study evaluating institutional lifelong learning strategies in 29 European universities, there are three stages in the progression of HEIs toward developing a holistic approach to lifelong learning (Smidt & Sursock, 2011). These stages are identified as the adaptation, organizational, and cultural stages. Comparing the experience of Azerbaijani universities with the findings of this study reveals parallels between the practices of Azerbaijani institutions and universities going through the adaptation stage. This stage occurs when universities develop lifelong learning programs on an ad hoc basis in response to external opportunities, and their lifelong learning activities are separated from the university's traditional activities and programs (Yang et al., 2015). Furthermore, according to the study's findings, universities in the adaptation stage do not attempt to understand or define the concept of lifelong learning.

To progress beyond the adaptation stage into more advanced ones, where lifelong learning "is fixed within the universities' DNA," several requirements and commitments are expected from both university leadership and policy-makers. At this point, it is important to highlight that universities, like all institutions, function within certain national contexts, and there are constraints on the range of options available to university management. In other words, HEIs have more and better opportunities to contribute to promoting lifelong learning if they operate in a conducive policy and legislative environment. The factors affecting universities in formulating lifelong learning strategies include, but are not limited to, the country's existing admission regulations and procedures, autonomy in decision-making, and government spending on higher education (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning & Shanghai Open University, 2023).

When it comes to fostering lifelong learning in higher education, one of the fundamental aspirations, as mentioned above, is opening university doors to diverse groups of learners. One of the essential policy instruments proposed for this purpose is granting access to formal education, including higher education, based on the recognition of non-formal and informal learning, also known as the recognition of prior learning (RPL) (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2022). In Azerbaijan, RPL mechanisms

are slowly evolving, and currently, they are applied only to initial vocational education (Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2020). There is no legal and normative framework regarding RPL in higher education. Developing such mechanisms for higher education can be a crucial step in making higher education more inclusive in Azerbaijan by granting access to individuals who would otherwise have difficulties accessing it. This issue is especially pertinent to Azerbaijan, considering the high level of informal employment in the country, where people have amassed skills through on-the-job training and other forms of non-formal and informal learning without formal qualifications (Valiyev, 2020). In the absence of alternative mechanisms, the centralized examination system, administered by the independent State Examination Center, constitutes the predominant admission mechanism for HEIs in the country (Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2017). This situation confines routes to higher education mainly to traditional pathways, that is, to individuals completing full secondary, secondary specialized, high technical-vocational, and higher education (those seeking additional degrees, in other words, repeated higher education).

Given this context, HEIs have limited, almost nonexistent options to promote flexible learning pathways and accessibility of higher education. While gaps remain in building a conducive policy environment to promote lifelong learning in Azerbaijan's higher education system, universities have a set of institutional-level tools at their disposal for applying an integrated approach to lifelong learning (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning & Shanghai Open University, 2023).

One prerequisite for integrating lifelong learning into all aspects of university operations is the commitment of institutional leaders, including rectors, vice-rectors, deans, and other senior managers, to lifelong learning. This commitment from senior management is essential for formulating a shared understanding of and vision for lifelong learning promotion within a university, developing and, most importantly, executing a lifelong learning strategy (Yang et al., 2015). For Azerbaijani universities, such commitment would be of paramount importance, especially for operationalizing established units that aim to promote lifelong learning and linking their activities with the university's traditional activities. These units can be transformed into research hubs where collaborative research projects on lifelong learning and other topics are implemented with civil society, businesses, and other stakeholders, and where the needs of client groups such as employers are analyzed and the results are translated into modernizing study programs to close the skills gap in the labor market

(UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning & Shanghai Open University, 2023; Yang et al., 2015). Both building research capacity and forming strategic partnerships with various client groups have been recognized as crucial elements in transforming universities into lifelong learning providers (University of the Western Cape & UNESCO Institute for Education, 2001).

While creating flexible learning pathways is beyond the control of universities due to legislative constraints, these institutions still have instruments at their disposal to provide a certain degree of flexibility to learners regarding the delivery modes of study programs. Examples of such flexibility, already utilized by certain national universities, include evening classes, weekend study options, and hybrid learning opportunities (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning & Shanghai Open University, 2023). The introduction of such innovations is not restricted by normative legal acts, and, according to the experts interviewed within the framework of this study, their application depends on the will of the university leadership.

Another instrument available at the institutional level to senior leadership in higher education institutions (HEIs) is the continuous investment in staff development. The training component is considered essential for teaching staff to upgrade their pedagogical skills and ensure the regular modernization of curricula, as well as for administrative staff involved in the provision of student services and other operations, to make them more learner-oriented (UNESCO, 1998). The fundamental aim of staff development programs should be to make service to learners the top priority of university staff (University of the Western Cape & UNESCO Institute for Education, 2001). In this regard, it is also worth highlighting that the involvement in the implementation of staff development programs for fostering lifelong education can be another area where dedicated lifelong learning units of universities can be utilized (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning & Shanghai Open University, 2023).

Stemming from the senior leadership's commitment to fostering lifelong learning in universities, the actions discussed above are more easily accessible to HEIs than other instruments serving that purpose. Another rationale for highlighting the above-mentioned directions is the emphasis placed on them in the Cape Town Statement discussed earlier, which identifies six key features to be possessed by institutions for applying a university-wide approach to the promotion of lifelong learning (University of the Western Cape & UNESCO Institute for Education, 2001). It is also worth mentioning that while issues such as the financing of higher education and the quality assurance of lifelong learning provision are frequently

underlined in discussions about building lifelong learning infrastructure in HEIs, the primary reasons for excluding them in this article are that the reforms in those areas do not solely depend on the senior leadership of institutions (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning & Shanghai Open University, 2023). This argument is especially relevant concerning financing mechanisms, where the role of the state is crucial because universities, especially public universities in Azerbaijan, are heavily dependent on government funding (World Bank, 2018, 2022). The creation of the Education Development Fund is one of the important projects included in the Azerbaijan model of education financing by Decision No. 68 of the Republic of Azerbaijan, dated March 1, 2020. In addition to the most important funds included in the Fund's income, budget funds of educational institutions under the Ministry of Science and Education of the Republic of Azerbaijan, deductions from the income obtained in connection with the provision of paid educational services, donations, grants, and investments, as well as the income obtained from the activities of the Fund, are intended to be directed toward the development of education (Ahmadov, 2022a). When it comes to quality assurance procedures in higher education, the government has taken the lead in this area recently by reorganizing the Accreditation and Nostrification Department of the Ministry of Education into the Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (Decree of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2019). However, these mechanisms are slowly evolving in universities and are not yet streamlined into their operations (World Bank, 2022).

CONCLUSIONS

The provision of lifelong learning is a very important subject in education since it allows people to adapt to constant changes in the labour market, to acquire new skills and remain competitive in a rapidly changing world. It has been found it may foster social inclusion by offering continuing education opportunities to people of all ages and backgrounds, thereby promoting equity and personal development. For educational institutions, especially universities, integrating this approach not only broadens their social impact, but also positions them as key players in building more resilient societies prepared for the challenges of the future.

This article explored how effective Azerbaijani local universities are in enhancing lifelong learning provision. As one of the first academic studies on lifelong learning provision in the higher education system of Azerbaijan, it highlights the need for further research on the topic in the national context. On the other hand, it was found that while the Azerbaijani government has demonstrated its

commitment to promoting lifelong learning in light of the skills shortage problems observed in the labor market, and local higher education institutions (HEIs) have made strides in establishing lifelong learning infrastructure—especially by creating dedicated units for lifelong learning—these units' functions are mainly confined to short-term training programs. Additionally, universities encounter challenges in scaling up the operations of these units and adopting a holistic approach to lifelong learning. In response to these observations, the article was further focused on the policy instruments available at the institutional level to the senior management of universities, which are capable of generating an impact on promoting a holistic approach to lifelong learning in a relatively short time. By highlighting the crucial role of institutional leaders' commitment to integrating the activities of the established lifelong learning units with the traditional functions of the university, the article further emphasizes the importance of providing flexible delivery modes for study programs and continuous investment in staff development.

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