IQRO JURNALI , IQRO JOURNAL, ИКРО ЖУРНАЛИ
ISSN:2181-4341| wordlyknowledge.uz/index.php/iqro
Volume 21 Issue 2 May 2026

EDUCATIONAL REFORM AND INTERNATIONALISATION IN AZERBAIJAN: TRANSFORMING SCHOOL EDUCATION IN A GLOBAL CONTEXT

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Doi: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20427237
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Abstract

The education system of Azerbaijan has come a long way, reflecting both historical transformations and modern challenges of globalization. After gaining independence in 1991, the republic faced the need for a profound reform of the Soviet educational model. Legislative and institutional measures were taken to modernize the system, integrate it into the international educational space and adapt it to market demands. Modern reforms focus on such priorities as ensuring the quality, accessibility and competitiveness of education. Particular attention is paid to the digitalization of the educational process, updating the content of programs, introducing a modular and credit system in line with the Bologna process. New pedagogical technologies are being applied, inclusive education is actively developing and the connection between education and the needs of the national economy is strengthening (Guliyeva 2025).

Key words: Global Competence, Internationalisation of Education, Quality Assurance in International Education, Student-Centered Learning, International Curriculum, International Assessment and Evaluation, International Bachelor, Multilingual Education, Intercultural Competence, etc.

Methodology of the report:

This study employs a mixed-methods, both qualitative and quantitative research approaches design to explore the development and implementation of international education in schools in Azerbaijan. A descriptive and analytical approach is also adopted to examine how international educational practices are integrated into the national school system and to identify key influencing factors.

Data collection is based on a combination of primary and secondary sources. Here we mean Data collection methods – survey, i.e., to learn the opinions of teachers and students about international education. Interview - Semi-structured interviews with school principals and teachers. Observation - Monitoring the application of international methods in the teaching process. Document analysis- Curricula, program documents, official reports.

Primary data include semi-structured interviews with school administrators, teachers, and education experts working in both public and private institutions that implement international programs. In addition, classroom observations are conducted to analyze teaching methods, language use, and the application of international curricula. Secondary data consist of official policy documents issued by the Ministry of Science and Education of Azerbaijan, reports from international organizations such as UNESCO, and academic publications related to international education and educational reform.

Using purposive sampling, focusing on schools that actively implement international components, such as English-medium instruction or globally recognized programs like International Baccalaureate. This includes a mix of urban public schools, private international schools, and specialized institutions in order to ensure diversity and representativeness.

Data analysis is conducted through thematic analysis, allowing for the identification of recurring patterns and key themes, such as curriculum integration, teacher preparedness, intercultural competence, and challenges in implementation. The study also applies a comparative perspective, examining similarities and differences between national and international educational approaches within the Azerbaijani context.

To ensure validity and reliability, triangulation is used by cross-checking data from interviews, observations, and document analysis. Ethical considerations are observed throughout the research process, including informed consent, confidentiality of participants, and the responsible use of data.

Overall, this methodology provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the role and impact of international education in Azerbaijani schools, while capturing both policy-level developments and classroom-level practices.

1. The national context of international education in schools in Azerbaijan.

1.1. The background of international education in schools.

The background of international education in schools in Azerbaijan is rooted in the country's complex historical and political transformations, as well as its post-independence orientation toward global integration.

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Republic of Azerbaijan has prioritized the modernization and internationalization of its education system as part of its integration into the global community.

During the Soviet period, the education system was highly centralized and standardized, primarily focused on ideological instruction, technical training, and the development of a unified Soviet identity, while still preserving elements of national culture. This legacy significantly influenced the structure and content of education in Azerbaijan following independence in 1991. The adoption of new educational policies in the late 1990s and early 2000s marked a turning point, encouraging cooperation with international organizations and fostering openness to global educational practices.

On 24 August, 2005, in the context of the Conference "UNESCO-Azerbaijan: Bridge to the Future", Memorandum of Understanding on Cooperation in the field of education was signed between the Organization and Azerbaijan. This Memorandum envisages equal access to education and information technologies, update of a curriculum at all levels of education, enhancement of teachers' professional qualifications, overall improvement of quality of education, establishment of an international network of cooperation and other priority areas.

An international conference dedicated to the completion of the"Development of Inclusive Education in Azerbaijan" projectwas organized by the Ministry of Education with financial support of UNESCO on June 12-13, 2006. The main goal of this project, which lasted for a year, was to enablehandicapped children to go to regular schools and preschools. At the end of the project, 22 handicapped children were enrolled to Kindergarden N.80 in Baku, School N.43, as well as Kindergarden N.66 and School N.4 in Sumgayit.

On December 18-21, 2006, the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Azerbaijan, with financial support of UNESCO, held an international seminar dedicated to the "Development of the Vocational Training in Azerbaijan", and a national seminar on the "Implementation of the Credit System in universities and colleges of Azerbaijan".

On June 18, 2007, the Heydar Aliyev Foundation, the Government of the Republic of Azerbaijan and UNESCO signed an agreement on implementation of the project on development of vocational education in Azerbaijan.

On 14-16 May, 2008, "Addressing Literacy Challenges in Europe with a Sub-regional Focus: Building Partnerships and Promoting Innovative Approaches" Conference was held in Baku by the Ministry of Education at the initiative of the President of the Heydar Aliyev Foundation, UNESCO Goodwill Ambassador Mrs. Mehriban Aliyeva. UNESCO Director-General Koichiro Matsuura,

UNESCO Goodwill Ambassadors, education ministers and experts from several countries, representatives of the Government of the Republic of Azerbaijan, and foreign ambassadors in Baku also participated at the Conference (UNESCO Azerbaijan).

Thus, the background of international education in Azerbaijan is characterized by a gradual shift from a nationally bounded, centralized system to a more open, flexible, and globally oriented model. This transformation has laid the foundation for the current expansion of international education in schools, positioning Azerbaijan within the global educational landscape while maintaining its national identity.

International education in schools in Azerbaijan has become an increasingly significant component of the country's educational development strategy, particularly since independence. The integration of international curricula, multilingual instruction, and global educational standards reflects Azerbaijan's broader goal of aligning its education system with global practices and enhancing competitiveness. International programs such as the International Baccalaureate (IB) and foreign-language-based instruction in English and Russian have been introduced in both public and private schools, fostering critical thinking, creativity, and intercultural competence among students (Heydarov 2026)

Socio-cultural context - in terms of description of the national context of international education or internationalization of education in Azerbaijan it seems correct to shortly introduce Azerbaijan and its education system. Geographically, Azerbaijan is a country at the boundary of Western Asia and Eastern Europe. It is also a part of the South Caucasus region and is bounded by the Caspian Sea to the east, Dagestan to the north, Georgia to the northwest, Armenia and Turkiye to the west, and Iran to the south. The capital as well as large and consequently most urbanized city is Baku. The geographical position of the country, thus being at intersection of Eastern Europe and Western Asia, resulted in heritage that combines Eastern and Western educational traditions.

1.2. Brief History of the Education System

The history of modern education in Azerbaijan can roughly be divided into four big periods:

1. Before-Soviet Period – This period can be characterized by timeline covering XVII-XIX centuries; education was organized in schools and madrassas that were functioning within mosques and other religious centers. The introduction of education charter in 1829 lead to the establishment of schools in different regions of Azerbaijan. Sharia, recitation, huskhat, arithmetic, Russian and Azerbaijani language were taught in these two-level schools.

2. Education during the First Independence period – in 1918 a new Democratic Republic was founded by the elite educated mainly in Europe. This republic was the first parliamentary republic in the Turkic and Islamic world, with a government that included a Parliament and a Council of Ministers. The foundation of the first modern university in Azerbaijan, that is Baku State University is remarked as one of the main accomplishments of this historical period.

3. Education of Soviet period – Covers the years from 1920 up to the beginnings of 1990-ies. The period can be characterized by strong state control and standardized curricula. It also features with the rise of the level of literacy throughout the whole country due to reinforcement of secular and compulsory education. The first university in the country, Baku State University, was founded by the ADR in 1919.

4. Education of Post-Soviet OR independence period – is specified by a number of efforts to make changes in varies fields. These efforts mainly cover such issues as reforming curricula, expanding access to higher education, increasing funding for research and development, and promoting multilingual education to enhance internationalization of the entire education system and to maintain its competitiveness. The first step in the process of internationalization of the system and in taking an attempt to integrate into the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) can be considered the Azerbaijan's joining to the Bologna Process in 2005. "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". (Mammadova, L. & Valiyev, A. (2020).

After signing the Bologna Declaration, the country started to implement ECTS and respectively, a three-cycle degree structure, that is, bachelor, master, doctorate was introduced. The most distinctive feature of the current situation that does not align with the European standards is the third cycle. That is, in Azerbaijan any person becomes a Ph.D. upon completion of doctoral studies and successfully defending a dissertation (the same degree as Kandidat in the old system) But at the same time all "Ph.D.s need to defend another dissertation if they want to receive the title of Doctor of Science. This is not consistent with Western standards, since there is no other title of Doctor of Science in Europe or US. This led to the concern that the change happened predominantly in the shift from the name Kandidat to Ph.D., while the system remained virtually the same (Aliyev, Valiyev, Rustamova, 2011)

2. Governance of internationalisation and international mobility in education in Azerbaijan.

Organization and Management of the Education Azerbaijan is primarily managed by the Ministry of Science and Education (MSE). The system comprise pre-school, general (primary and secondary), vocational and higher education. Higher education institutions (HEIs) diversify as of being both state universities, private universities, academies and specialized institutes where the management is still centralized, yet universities have gained increasing autonomy in academic and administrative decision-making processes. Speaking about the legislation, it should be noted that the Law On Education (No.833-IIIQ of June 19, 2009) of the Republic of Azerbaijan (2009, amended in 2021) provides the legal framework for international cooperation in education. It determines the state's responsibility for promoting academic mobility, supporting participation in international programs, and recognizing foreign qualifications. External relations in the field of education are coordinated by the Ministry of Science and Education in cooperation with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Advanced data analysis methods, accessible and comprehensive data, and simplified global information sharing have led to a steady growth in assessments used to make informed policy decisions. In line with this general trend, international education assessments have also become a global and widely recognized phenomenon. International education assessments have significant and far-reaching implications for the organization and structure of national education systems. Education reform in direct response to international assessment results is observed in many countries. Much of the current literature on the results of assessment projects examines only the official policy level, without considering the mechanisms and impact on actual practice and results. This is one of the starting points for preparing this special issue on the impact of international assessments on education. The materials presented in this special issue expand perspectives for a better understanding of the phenomenon of international education assessment. Taken together, this issue demonstrates that international assessments shape how education and its effectiveness are defined today. The articles published in this issue also show that the influence of international assessments manifests itself in both formal and direct "top-down" ways, and in more subtle, hidden "roundabout" ways.

Advanced electronic data analysis techniques, the availability and inclusiveness of data, and facilitated global information exchange have led to a steady increase in the number of assessments used to make informed policy decisions. An attractive additional value of estimates is that they provide an easily accessible description of cause-and-effect relationships, although, as a result, these relationships often turn out to be false if the study design or appropriate data analysis does not take into account the impact of unobserved characteristics. In this regard, it is often assumed that the analysis of evaluation data can reveal solutions to identified problems – that is, examples of best practices.

3. Pedagogical concepts and key terminology in the field of internationalisation of education and international education in schools in Azerbaijan.

The pedagogical concepts and key terminology associated with the internationalisation of education provide a theoretical foundation for understanding its implementation in Azerbaijani schools. These concepts - ranging from global competence and intercultural education to multilingualism and student-centered learning - reflect a broader shift toward a more globally oriented education system. Their effective integration into national practice remains essential for the continued development of education in Azerbaijan.

4. Policy documents, recommendations, for the internationalisation and in the particular international education in schools in Azerbaijan.

The internationalization of school education in Azerbaijan is shaped by a combination of national strategies, legislative frameworks, and international recommendations. These policy instruments aim to align the national education system with global standards, enhance quality, and promote global competencies among students.

One of the most important policy documents is the State Strategy for the Development of Education in Azerbaijan, which outlines long-term priorities such as: modernization of curricula, integration of international standards, development of student-centered learning, strengthening global competitiveness. This strategy emphasizes the need to prepare students for participation in a globalized world through internationally relevant skills and knowledge.

Scientific-popular, cultural-educational, and educational programs play a crucial role in the development of modern societies. These initiatives contribute to the dissemination of scientific knowledge, the preservation of cultural heritage, the improvement of education systems, and the enhancement of public awareness.

In Azerbaijan, the preparation and implementation of such programs have become an important component of state policy since the country regained its independence in 1991 [News.Az reports].

State Program on Education of Azerbaijani Youth Abroad - The Azerbaijani government, together with international organizations and non-governmental institutions, has undertaken numerous initiatives aimed at strengthening education, promoting science, supporting cultural development, and expanding international cooperation. These initiatives not only foster national intellectual potential but also help integrate Azerbaijan into the global educational and cultural space.

One of the most important areas of Azerbaijan’s policy is the modernization and development of the education system. The government has implemented several state programs aimed at improving the quality of education, expanding access to knowledge, and strengthening scientific research.

Among the key priorities of these programs are: modernization of educational infrastructure, digitalization of learning processes, development of STEM education (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics), promotion of innovation and research activities, improvement of teacher training systems. Another important initiative is the State Program on the Education of Azerbaijani Youth Abroad, which allows talented Azerbaijani students to pursue higher education at leading universities around the world. The program contributes to the development of highly qualified specialists who later bring international experience and knowledge back to Azerbaijan.

Scientific-popular programs are designed to bring scientific knowledge closer to society and encourage public interest in science and research. In Azerbaijan, scientific institutions, universities, and research centers regularly organize conferences, exhibitions, seminars, and public lectures.

This program promotes internationalisation by supporting students’ education in foreign countries and encouraging the transfer of global knowledge back into the national system. It

contributes to building human capital with international experience [https://news.az/news/modernizing-education-and-culture-azerbaijans-national-initiatives]

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This article was prepared as a result of the project "The Network on International Education in the South Caucasus and Central Asia at the Intersection of Educational Spaces" (NIE-SCCA-EdSp)". The project is funded by the DAAD with support from the German Federal Foreign Office as part of the programme "Higher Education Dialogue with the Muslim World".