

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.

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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).

Although a two-tier system in higher education in Azerbaijan was introduced earlier in 1993, only after signing the Bologna Declaration, the country started to implement ECTS. Thus, students who accumulate 240 credits during the first cycle are eligible to apply for a master's degree. This cycle in turn, lasts for two years and requires 90-120 credits. Students who hold a master's degree may apply for doctoral degrees as well. As of today, Azerbaijan has yet to implement any credit system in regard to doctoral degrees (BFUG, Azerbaijan Report, 2015). In fact, this cycle in the degree structure element of the Bologna process requires more attention for further improvement. The current situation related to the third cycle is that upon completion of doctoral studies and successfully defending a dissertation, a person becomes a Ph.D., which is the same degree as *Kandidat* in the old system. Ph.D.s in turn, 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). What is more important is that the third cycle is essentially a traditional supervision-based doctoral education, and there are no systematized doctoral programs in Azerbaijan (BFUG, Azerbaijan, Report, 2012-2015) as opposed to some other post-Soviet countries, such as Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Georgia and Kazakhstan, who “have abolished the second Soviet doctorate” (Huisman, Smolentseva, Froumin, 2018, p.17).

Beyond the degree structure issues faced by universities, the concern of quality is another aspect that needs to be addressed in Azerbaijani HEIs. Considered to be one of the cornerstones of Bologna process, quality assurance (QA) also requires special attention in the analysis of the reform. This element of the Bologna process was highlighted during the meeting of ministers in 2015 and resulted in the adoption of two important documents: *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in EHEA* and *European Approach to Quality Assurance of Joint Programs* (Bologna, Ministerial Conference, 2015). The acceptance of these documents shows how seriously the QA is regarded and how actively Bologna signatory countries should act to guarantee that those policy documents are implemented. The 2015 Bologna Implementation Report accepted that improvements had been achieved in the quality assurance system of Bologna signatory countries, especially related to teaching, research and internationalization. Nevertheless, the other main aspect, particularly the involvement of student stakeholders, revealed that reforms were not progressing at the necessary speed (European Higher Education area in 2018). The Bologna Process Implementation Report (2018) gathered information about students’ involvement in quality assurance activities in different countries, and the data for Azerbaijan shows that students do not participate at all or if they do, only in one level of the external review. It was also stated in another source that,



“in the area of quality assurance in some countries no improvement could be reported, as still no system for quality assurance is in place.” (Bologna with Student Eyes, 2005, p.4). Unfortunately, Azerbaijan was among the countries listed on the 2018 Report (Bologna Process Implementation Report, 2018, p.138). As our study mainly focuses on the students' participation in the reforms, their role in the quality assurance mechanism needs special attention. According to the report (BFUG, Azerbaijan Report, 2012-2015), it is advisable that students take part in the governance structure of National QA agencies, observe external review teams, and participate in follow-up procedures. However, they must fully participate in the preparation of self-evaluation reports. The involvement of the academic staff, nevertheless, is required in all of the abovementioned areas. Regarding the internal evaluation process, all the HEIs must create their internal evaluation system and actively involve students in this process.

Mobility of students is considered another important sign to the successful implementation of Bologna process (Bargel, 2011). It is understood as a powerful way to promote mutual understanding and employability of graduates. However, very few Bologna member countries “ensure full portability for students” (Bologna Process Implementation Report, 2018, p.243). Student mobility should not be only understood as the number of incoming and outgoing students, it is also the internationalization of higher education institutions through policy documents and strategies. According to the Bologna Process Implementation Report (2018, p. 245, 251), in Azerbaijan, no national strategy exists for promoting mobility and internationalization of HEIs, and neither are there mobility targets for outgoing students.

Finally, social dimension, the last important tool of Bologna Process, focuses on equal access to education: developing learning opportunities for socially and physically disadvantaged groups by providing them with aid or counselling services (Berlin Communiqué, 2003). EHEA ministers emphasized social dimension in higher education at the meeting in 2015, expressing their hope to see inclusive societies by 2020 (Bologna Process Implementation Report, 2018). Public responsibility of higher education is explained as the responsibility of it to provide accessible legal and financial infrastructure getting education. This accountability is closely connected to the social dimension, which is mainly about equity equal access opportunities to higher education (Kooij, 2015). In Azerbaijan, handicapped students (1st and 2 group), orphans, people internally displaced from their native lands as a result of military conflict, and students whose parents died during the war with Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh receive scholarships in the form of free study in state HEIs (BFUG, Azerbaijan Report, 2009-2012). However, the institutions do not have special departments or designated people to provide counseling, psychological help, mentorship and other services.

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.

Successes and Downsides in Implementation of Bologna Reform

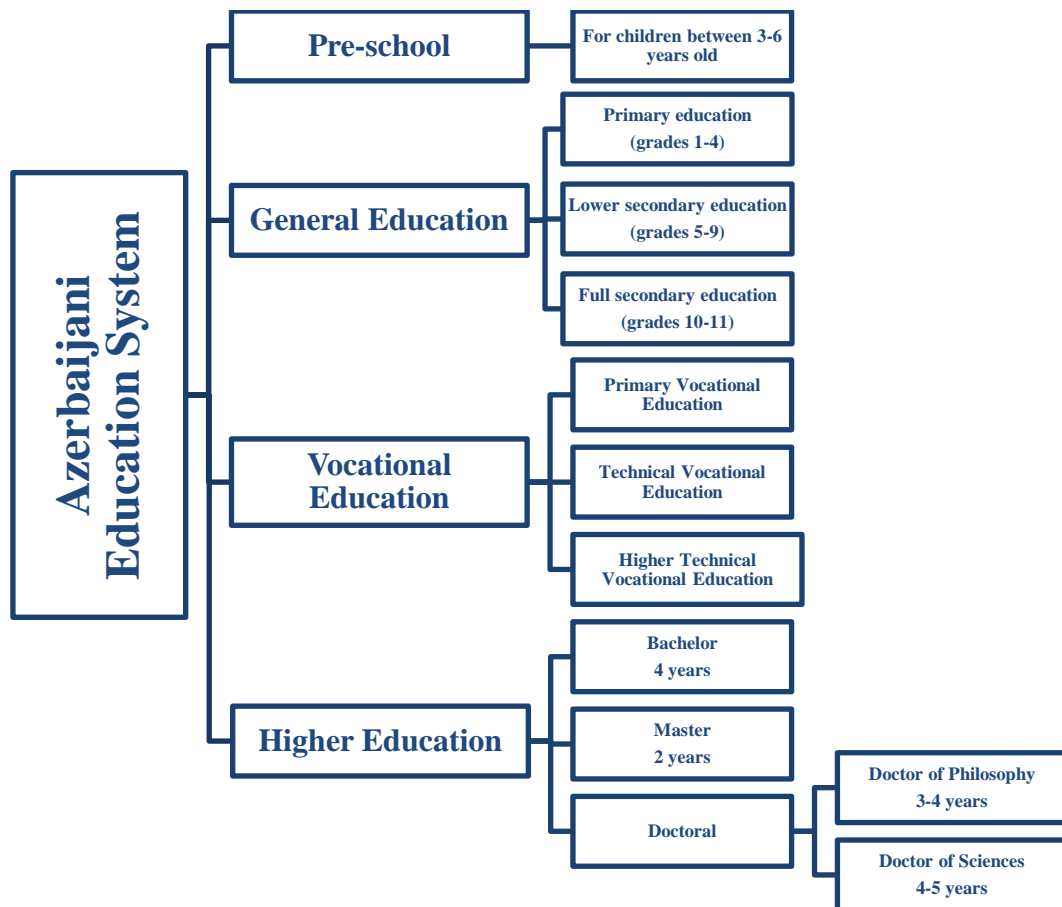
On May 19-20, 2005, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Armenia, Ukraine, and Moldova became new participating countries in the Bologna Process (Bergen Communique, 2005). Analyzing the last fourteen years, we can state that this process was not smooth nor entirely successful.

Degree Structure

Even before signing the Bologna Declaration, Azerbaijan started implementing a three-level system in its higher education institutions. Already in 1993, Azerbaijan had moved to a three-cycle system. The five-year diploma equivalent degree was split into the Bachelor's degree (4 years) and Master's degree (2 years). The Doctoral degree, however, was initially not reformed at all. The biggest challenge that clouded these reforms was poor and unprepared implementation. Thus, the five-year diploma program was squeezed into a four-year schedule, while master's programs lacked curricula and research approach. Today, the system of education in Azerbaijan functions as follows:

Figure 1.

Structure of the Education System of Azerbaijan



It must be noted that after completing both lower secondary education and full secondary education, students can chose to go to the vocational education. However, to be eligible to chose higher education, they have to complete grade 11. Azerbaijani legislation allows to apply for higher education after completeing the vocational education and vice versa.



Review of Literature

Despite the fact that Georgia, Armenia, Ukraine, and Moldova joined EHEA in the same year with Azerbaijan and share certain political, geographical, cultural, and economic commonalities, there is a significant variation in the level and pace of reform implementation in each of them. Peculiarities of each country had an inevitable impact on the reform procedures. All these countries currently implement three-cycle degree structure in their HEIs with the use of European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), which is “a tool of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) for making studies and courses more transparent and thus helping to enhance the quality of higher education” (ECTS User’s Guide, 2015, p. 6). Although in all of these countries, the Doctorate level is included in the Degree structure, similar to Azerbaijan, they generally do not use ECTS during the study period. Only in Georgia, PhD students are awarded 180 ECTS within three years of study (The Bologna Process in Bulgaria, Romania, Moldova, Georgia, Ukraine and Turkey, 2014). It would not be right however, to compare degree structures of national HE systems because the types of HEIs, age group of students, curricular aims, and labor market opportunities may well affect the process (Witte, 2006).

The main purpose of the implementation of the three-cycle degree structure was to provide students with necessary qualifications accepted by the labor market upon finishing the first cycle. In other words, bachelor’s degrees must prepare students for employment (Sursock and Smidt, 2010). Master’s degrees in turn, were seen as the route to career enhancement. Thus, to improve study programs so that they cultivate graduates with the qualifications demanded by the labor market and to enhance the global

competitiveness of European higher education system are the focal points of the Declaration (Kehm & Teichler, 2006). According to Luchinskaya and Ovchinnikova (2011), in Ukraine, only 14.4 % of students with a bachelor's degree can get a job after the first cycle, while the majority continue to the master's level due to the perception of 4-year degree programs as incomplete or insufficient for the labor market. A similar study must be conducted in Azerbaijan because, as one of the Post-Soviet countries striving to integrate its tertiary education into the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), Azerbaijan has been implementing Bologna process reform for 14 years, and there is a need to identify the progress and the areas for improvement thus far.

It is stated in the national report that the Ministry of Education provides all the HEIs with the necessary recommendations and instructions regarding the integration of learning outcomes into the curricula of all programs. It is also claimed that the staff working in the field of assessment and evaluation are provided with trainings on student-centered learning and learning outcomes. Among the three cycles in Azerbaijani education system, the second cycle has the most share in joint programs (60%). In the first cycle, it is 40% while in the third there are no joint programs at all. Joint programs most commonly exist in international law, engineering, and tourism fields (BFUG, Azerbaijan Report, 2012-2015). Although the Bologna National Report may present quite optimistic results for the country, there are certain actions that need to be taken, such as reforming HE curriculum to accommodate the needs of employers and students, increase student, faculty, and staff mobility, enhance internal and external review processes, etc.



Quality Assurance

In Azerbaijan, quality assurance and accreditation of higher education institutions and programs are implemented by the Accreditation Commission (Akkreditasiya Komissiyası) under the Ministry of Education. This Commission evaluates the results of the quality assurance process and sends the final version to the institutions themselves and the Ministry of Education (Overview of the Higher Education System, Azerbaijan, 2017, p. 25). The Bologna Process Implementation Report (2018) displays the results of the research conducted about the requirement to develop and publish a strategy for internal quality assurance. Sadly, Azerbaijan is among the 15 systems which have not developed any legal obligations for HEIs regarding this issue. When it comes to external quality assurance system, government is the key responsible body. However, several countries such as Albania, Latvia, Malta, Cyprus, Ukraine, etc. have made significant gains in developing external quality assurance agencies since 2015 (Bologna Process Implementation Report, 2018). As our main focus in this study is to learn the level of student involvement in different stages of Bologna reform, we researched what had been reported about Azerbaijani students' participation in the external quality assurance procedures. Unfortunately, the Report shows that there is no available data on Azerbaijan with regard to this issue. Additionally, Azerbaijan is reported among the countries with no established reliable quality assurance system, whereas the situation in the countries which joined EHEA in the same year is much better. In Ukraine and Georgia, for instance, the quality assurance system operates at least nationwide. This fact shows that a lot is still to be done with regards to quality

assurance system in Azerbaijan to make it compatible with European standards.

Mobility

“One of the hallmarks of the Bologna process is to enable and increase the mobility of students” (Bologna with Students’ Eyes, 2005, p. 32). To measure the success of the process, one can look at the degree to which active student exchanges are happening among Bologna signatory countries (Vögtle & Windzio, 2016). Teacher and student mobility is also highlighted in the State Program on Reforms in the Higher Education System of the Republic of Azerbaijan (2009). HEIs with the support of the Ministry of Education, the Cabinet of Ministers and the Ministry of Justice are expected to establish and enhance the mechanism on mobility and recognition of documents which is aligned with the principles of the Bologna process. However, our country does not have a formal national strategy for internationalization of higher education. Despite this gap, higher education institutions in Azerbaijan build international partnerships through exchange programs, joint research activities as well as joint projects and events. Nevertheless, these fragmented steps are taken only at the institutional level without any state budget for funding (BFUG, Azerbaijan Report, 2012-2015). Among several obstacles related to the mobility issue, funding, recognition, and language are the most remarkable ones, according to the National Report (BFUG, Azerbaijan, Report, 2012-2015). Similar to Azerbaijan, Georgian universities also promote the mobility of their students not with the help of state funding, but more through EU projects, such as Erasmus Mundus and Erasmus +. Despite this, there is a positive change in the number of outgoing and incoming students in Georgian HEIs (Lezhava, 2016). In Turkey, as opposed to Azerbaijan, the number of



incoming students is increasing as a result of Erasmus programs and partnerships with such post-Soviet countries as Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, etc. (Yagci, 2011). This positive trend in mobility can be explained by successful implementation of recognition elements, such as the Diploma supplement, Lisbon Recognition Convention, and National Qualification Framework. Yet, Turkey also experiences issues related to funding, language, and insufficiency of courses in common languages for incoming students (Yagci, 2011).

Social Dimension

How inclusive is the higher education in Bologna signatory countries? Do young people from disadvantaged backgrounds have an equal access to higher education? Are students supported with various services in their institutions? These questions have been in the spotlight since social dimension was emphasized by EHEA ministers in 2001 in Prague. There is a need, therefore, to examine how successfully Azerbaijan considers this element in the reconstruction of its HEIs. The National Report of Azerbaijan states that no concrete measures have been taken yet to ensure inclusiveness in higher education. Neither are there any quantitative goals about entering, continuing, and finishing the study in HEIs. (BFUG, Azerbaijan, 2015). Overall, this issue cannot be considered completely solved in many European countries as well, despite the fact that they signed the Declaration long before Azerbaijan. For instance, problems with democratic access to higher education are reported in countries such as Estonia, Belgium, Germany, and Slovakia. Bureaucratic procedures in social support application are said to be prevalent in France and Lithuania (Bologna with students' eyes, 2005). Regarding education support and guidance, the

documents reveal that few Azerbaijani universities have career centers. However, no information is available about other guidance and counselling services in Azerbaijani universities (Overview of the Higher Education System, Azerbaijan, 2017). In Turkey, as opposed to Azerbaijan, the General Directorate of Higher Education Credit and Hostels Institution and the universities provide disadvantaged students with subsidized accommodation, food, and health care services, which existed even before the implementation of Bologna reforms (Yagci, 2010).

Data Collection and Methods

This article primarily employed 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 design employed data collection through surveys among students from several institutions (See Appendix) and in-depth interviews for qualitative analysis. The reason of employing such method is possible problems with validity of surveys, and reliability of interviews. Moreover, some observations from personal experience were used too. All three methods (triangulation) helped to offset problems with each other. Researchers conducted th pilot study among thirty students to check the validity of the instrument of data collection. The anonymity of the survey and interview respondents were ensured.

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. The survey used non-probability sampling, namely, convenience sampling, selecting participants because of their availability and representing a group of people needed for the current research (Creswell, 2012). The researchers chose the groups and sections with classes during the day from specific department and schools. The survey procedure followed the standard procedure used in the country: the surveys were introduced to the ongoing class; the purposes of the survey were explained in detail during the next 3-5 minutes and the survey was distributed. The survey was conducted anonymously. The questionnaire contained items covering different aspects of the students' education background; their perception, knowledge and competencies. The average expected margin of error varies between the departments [technical vs non-technical], but none are greater than 5%. Within the period of 30 days, researchers distributed self-administered surveys in the groups and covered around 2,400 students. The surveys were distributed in the Azerbaijani language. The researchers and people controlling the survey process were able to control the absence of interactions between survey participants to eliminate interaction problems.

The survey used by the researchers contained items covering different aspects of the Bologna process, such as degree structure, quality assurance, mobility, and social dimension. To measure the participation of students as one of the main stakeholders in the reform process, the researchers asked 16 close-ended questions, the answers to which could reveal the situation through students' eyes. The questions in the questionnaire were based on data derived from the National Report regarding the Bologna process implementation in Azerbaijan 2012-2015 and Trends 2010: A decade of change in European Higher Education (Sursock & Smidt, 2010). Four general demographic questions were followed by two questions related to ECTS and student workload, four questions about the Quality assurance, more specifically related to students' role in internal evaluations and one question to measure employability after the first degree cycle. There were three questions about student mobility and one about joint degrees and programs as well two questions linked to social dimension. The survey took approximately 10 minutes to complete and was piloted before being conducted.

To learn about the students' awareness, experiences, and perspective on the implementation of ECTS, the researchers asked questions about the number of credits for the degree cycle and student workload and teacher-student contact hours. To know if the students took part in the design or reconstruction of curricula, the researchers asked them to evaluate their participation in the process on a 4-point scale, with 1 being fully involved, 2 partially involved, 3 not involved at all, and 4 not informed about any redesign or change in the curriculum. What is more, to measure if the students were ever involved in the evaluation of the institution, the teachers, the program, or the subject, the researchers included 3-point scale question, where 1 stood for full participation, 2 for partial



participation, 3 for no participation at all. Also, to learn how students evaluate the first cycle as sufficient for finding a job, the questions: *It is possible to find a job without a master's degree; It is possible to find a job without a master's degree in limited organizations; There is no need for a master's degree to find a job* were asked using Likert Scale to allow the respondents to indicate how much they agree or disagree with the particular statements. Remaining questions required mainly Yes/No answers. If the respondents did not have any opinion regarding the issues stated in the questions, they could choose "do not know" or "have no information".

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.

Limitations

The main limitation related to this study is the method of data collection. The researchers used mostly non-random probability sampling among the students of the main universities of Azerbaijan. However, all of these universities are located in Baku and regional

universities were not included in the study. Moreover, many small and medium-scale universities were not covered due to the limited time and resources. Despite the fact that the surveys were anonymous, the impact of factors such as administrative influence (surveys were conducted during class time) could not be ruled out. However, these factors do not greatly undermine the reliability of the data and could be basically generalized to the larger student population.

Results

Quantitative Data

The collected data was 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

HEIs	Total # of respondents	Demographic Variables			
		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.

Student Participation in Curriculum Design and Knowledge about ECTS

% 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 Process

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

University	Career Service	Guidance	Psychological Support		Foreign Courses	Language	Study Awareness	Abroad
	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%

Qualitative Data

For the purpose of supporting the quantitative part of the research and to gain some insights regarding the student involvement in the Bologna reform, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted among education experts (See table 5). The experts chosen for the interviews are working for university administration for the last 5-10 years. Additionally, one head of NGO and one expert from the ministry of education were interviewed. They have unique and deep knowledge of the problems of university. The respondents were reached via email. The interviews were conducted at their workplaces. The respondents were sent Informed Consent Form prior to the interviews. The interviews ranged in length from 45-60 minutes and were conducted in English. Upon the

agreement of the respondents, the interviews were recorded. The data collection lasted for two-week period. Overall, ten questions were asked three of which were related generally to the changes in HEIs within the framework of Bologna reform, and the rest specifically related to the implementation of the elements of Bologna process. The data was transcribed and analyzed based on the themes taken from literature review and the quantitative data. Later, the results from the interviews were compared with the results of the survey.

Table 5.

Interviewee Demographics

	Gender	Position
1. Interviewee # 1	Male	Education expert currently working in the ministry of education
2. Interviewee # 2	Male	Vice-Rector of one of the universities in Azerbaijan
3. Interviewee # 3	Male	Dean of department in one of the universities in Azerbaijan.
4. Interviewee # 4	Female	Head of NGO
5. Interviewee # 5	Female	Head of Education Department in one of the universities in Azerbaijan

Discussion

In the current study, we looked at the Bologna process through students' eyes and explored how key universities of Azerbaijan have transformed their Soviet model of instruction into European standards, particularly by putting students into the center of the whole reform process. The interpretation of the findings shows that structurally, the performance of Azerbaijan in the process of harmonizing its HE system to EHEA can be considered somewhat successful. Yet shortcomings related to the content of the reform

cannot be denied. Currently, the universities in Azerbaijan implement the Bologna degree structure. Similar to the other neighboring countries which joined Bologna reform process in the same year as Azerbaijan, the study programs in the country use 180-240 credits at the Bachelor's level and 90-120 at the Master's level. The main purpose of the implementation of the credit system was to "create degrees that will have both an academic and a labor market perspective" (Bologna with student eyes, 2005). However, "in a few countries, only a minority of first-cycle graduates continue directly into the second cycle although this does not necessarily mean that the Bachelor is accepted by the labor market. For example, in Hungary, national regulations mean that only 35% of first-cycle graduates can continue to the second cycle, yet students holding bachelor's degrees express concerns for their future and the possibility of finding relevant jobs" (Sursock & Smidt, 2010, p.40). Our research findings support the idea stated by Sursock and Smidt. Azerbaijani students mostly do not feel ready for employment after finishing the first cycle. According to the Bologna Implementation Report (2018), a similar situation is observed in Moldova as well. Graduates with only bachelor's degrees are more likely to face unemployment problems than those with master's degrees in Moldova. The report also shows that 75-100% of Ukrainian bachelor's degree graduates tend to enter a second-cycle program within one year of graduation like Azerbaijani students. Thus, although Azerbaijan was not very much challenged by implementation of three-cycle degree structure, deeper analysis shows that there is still need for improvement in the content of the degrees. This issue is also evident when we consider the fact that the number of credits earned in the first cycle of all examined universities is 240. It means that mainly the "old type of degrees was put into a new structure" in the form of 240 credits, which means that there is



no substantial difference in the content and length of the programs in comparison with the old system (Bologna with student eyes, 2005). Thus, we must be careful to speak about comprehensive content reform in the study system of Azerbaijani universities.

Another concern is related to the students' awareness and knowledge about the gained credits during their study cycle. Our research shows that nearly half of the respondents (43%), who are in their third or last year, do not have any idea about the number of credits they need to gain in order to get the degree. The question arises now as to whether we can really claim that students are well aware of the rules of allocation and accumulation of credits. Furthermore, it was alarming for the researchers to find out that the students from surveyed universities could not simply provide solid and accurate information about the formal and informal workload that is required within their study programs. This shows that although ECTS is used in Azerbaijani universities as the way of assessment, it is questionable as to what extent it substantively provides evidence about open dialogue among students, teachers, and administrators to promote a student-centered approach. The importance of the student involvement in dialogue is also stated in the ECTS Guide (2015), which highlights that in the general principles of learning, teaching, and assessment, "all stakeholders should be involved in constructive discussion of program design and delivery. Student representatives should participate in such discussions with full voting powers" (p.27). Similarly, Georgia, one of the countries which joined Bologna with Azerbaijan, accomplished the introduction of ECTS. However, the evaluation done by the Center for Social Sciences, estimates that ECTS in Georgian universities may not always be aligned with student workload, and the process can

mainly be evaluated as a formal requirement of accreditation process only (Lezhava, 2016).

Qualitative data also highlighted the problem related to ECTS. One of the respondents, who is the administrative figure, and who is involved in the issues related to HEIs in Azerbaijan stated:

Our universities are not fully implementing some EHEA requirements, and the best example is the distribution of workload. Although Azerbaijani universities started the reconstruction of their study programs in 2014, it was merely a the decrease in the number of subjects, whereas the number of hours remained the same. The students must accumulate exactly 30 credits each semester regardless of the number of subjects.

This fact displays an obvious gap in the regulation of allocation and accumulation of the credits in Azerbaijani universities.

According to another interview respondent,

Azerbaijani students do not have a chance of flexibility regarding credits. Unlike their European peers, our students cannot take extra credits from upper courses if they have time for it. The earliest they can get their bachelor's degree is after four years of study. Although in Azerbaijani universities, there is an opportunity of 30+8 credits, it is mainly understood and used in the cases such as compensation of students' failed courses.

This idea contradicts the survey response shown in National Report (2015), where it is stated that well-performing students can take subjects from the subsequent year's programs. According to ECTS Guide (2015), "a flexible program structure is essential to allow for students' choices and meet different needs, e.g., opportunity should be given for developing personal learning pathways and optional activities should be offered" (p.27). In addition, an appropriately designed ECTS mechanism "enables combining learning experiences within an institution, [...], adapting to the



specific pace of studies, or completing only certain components of program” (The European Higher Education Area in 2018, p.52). Hence, based on the above-stated ideas, we can imply that Azerbaijani universities have not achieved much progress with respect to student flexibility, choices and needs related to ECTS.

The importance of student support services has been emphasized by the Bologna Declaration, since these services can help potential and current students to identify their study and employment path (Trends, 2010). Therefore, the researchers were interested if support services such as career guidance, psychological support, additional foreign language services, and information services about studying in foreign countries are existent in the sample universities. Disappointingly however, both quantitative and qualitative data reveal that there is a huge gap in provision of these services in Azerbaijani universities; There is need for more enhanced student services, especially, career guidance and counselling services because they “play a key role in widening access, improving completion rates and preparing students for the labor market” (as cited in Trends, 2010, p. 83). Fostering employability of graduates of every cycle was a point of focus at the ministers’ meeting in 2015 as well. The ministers emphasized that “...at the end of each study cycle, graduates possess competences suitable for entry into the labor market which also enable them to develop the new competences they may need for their employability later in throughout their working lives” (Bologna, Ministerial Conference, 2015, p.2). Current study, nevertheless, reveals that Azerbaijani universities do not cultivate young people with competences and skills demanded in the labor market, since most of respondents do not feel confident in terms of skills and competencies to start a job after getting a bachelor’s degree. Surprisingly, this is also a problem in developed European countries

such as Germany. Similar kinds of research was conducted there, and great number of students articulated their uncertainty regarding the possibility of getting professional qualification after the first cycle, thus planned to continue their studies with a master's degree (Bargel, 2011).

Mobility of students and faculty is also in the center of attention of EHEA. "A supporting pillar of the European Higher Education Area will be called into question, if the exchange of students – i.e. the possibility of students to study some time abroad – is not working properly" (Bargel, 2011, p.17). It can be noted from the findings that this goal of Bologna Declaration has not been sufficiently implemented in Azerbaijani universities, since majority of the respondents stated that they had never been abroad for any training, exchange, or internship purposes. The idea is somehow supported by one of the interview respondents, who does not see any structured mechanism in Azerbaijani universities providing real mobility opportunities, which is not only about the number of outgoing but also incoming students. Additionally, the National Report (2015) indicates funding, recognition, and language as the main barriers for incoming students, and funding obstacles for outgoing students. Although mobility is the aspect of the Bologna process which needs more development in Azerbaijani HEIs, the representative of the administration highlighted the positive steps taken on the way to student and faculty mobility. According to him,

It is optimistic that Azerbaijani universities have departments of international relations, which perform more dynamically in comparison with the other departments and which attract useful projects into their institutions. Erasmus + and other EU funded projects can be a good example of the case.



Another interview respondent holding an administrative position at the Azerbaijan State Economic University also spoke positively about student mobility, emphasizing the fact that if 4-5 years ago, the number of students going abroad with student exchange programs was very few, today this number has scaled up significantly.

“One of the unique elements in the policy making in the Bologna process is the underlying partnership attitude” (Bologna with student eyes, 2005, p. 49). As students are among the main stakeholders of higher education, their active and full participation in governance was emphasized in Berlin by the ministers (Realizing the European Higher Education Area, Berlin 2003). Thus, our survey attempted to examine the extent to which Azerbaijani students are involved in the evaluation process of the university, faculty, program, courses as well as in the reconstruction or design of curriculum. It must be stated that at HE level, Azerbaijani students mostly actively participate in the institution, faculty, and program evaluation processes. As stated by one of the interviewees, who holds an administrative position in the education department in one of the universities,

Students are actively involved in the evaluation process of teachers. This process is conducted anonymously through an electronic system. Nevertheless, the results of the survey show that in curriculum reform and course evaluation level, the students' involvement is non-existent.

The main issue here can be related to the problem in acceptance of students as equal partners by other stakeholders. The results imply that Azerbaijani HEIs are not yet ready for this, as opposed to Nordic or Baltic countries where students are considered as partners and not only as clients (Bologna with student eyes, 2005). The idea was also

accentuated in the meeting of the ministers on 14-15 May, 2015. With the purpose of enhancing the quality and relevance of learning and teaching, the Communique stresses that students must be as actively involved in curriculum design and quality assurance as the other stakeholders. Our findings confirm the fact stated in the Bologna Process Implementation Report (2018) that the quality assurance system in Azerbaijani universities is not yet ready to be considered well-matched with European standards, at least in terms of student involvement in the process.

The access to higher education both at home and abroad by under-represented and vulnerable groups and support for its completion is the issue which was particularly highlighted in the last meeting of ministers in France (Paris Communique, 2018). In our research we attempted to examine how social dimension is considered in Azerbaijani universities from the perspectives of the students. As the findings expose, our students are either pessimistic about the level of the support or they simply have no information about any support available. According to the local expert, social dimension is a very extensive issue, which covers equity and equal opportunities in HE. Particularly, in terms of physical and geographical accessibility and learning materials, Azerbaijani universities cannot claim that they are extensively considerate about vulnerable student populations. Tuition waivers and scholarship opportunities provided by the government for disadvantaged groups, which was mainly mentioned by the participating students as the only support type, are not actually a real showcase of social dimension. Inclusion of under-represented social groups in another post-Soviet country, Ukraine, who joined Bologna process in the same year with Azerbaijan, is considered based on geographic location and disability. Quotas, distance learning opportunities and



financial support are presented by the Ukrainian government with the aim of reducing the under-representation of disadvantaged groups in HE (The Bologna process in Bulgaria, Romania, Moldova, Georgia, Ukraine, and Turkey, 2014). When it comes to Azerbaijan, as stated by the expert, we have yet much to do to claim that we have achieved the goal of social dimension successfully. Another respondent also said that the support for disadvantaged group of students is mainly provided at the level of student unions rather than at the macro level.

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).

The findings of this articles can be extremely useful for the countries of the former Soviet Union republics. Due to of similarity of education systems, these countries will share the same problems as Azerbaijan and solutions could be also applicable. Meanwhile, structure of labour market and student competences are the same across the countries, and we expect that findings in Azerbaijan may give some suggestions for researchers in other countries to conduct the similar research.

Since this research provides data collected mainly from the student body of six state universities, further studies are needed to examine faculty perspectives and samples from more universities to see similarities and differences in their experiences related to the reform process. A larger sample of administrators can also shed more light on the effectiveness of integration into EHEA from the policy-making perspective, and the triangulation of the findings can provide more accurate and convincing data. Furthermore, in future research, statistical analysis can be done to determine the main variables affecting the results among sample universities.

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APPENDIX

Survey Questions

1. Age:

2. Gender:

☐ Male

☐ Female

3. University you study at:

☐ Baku State University

☐ Azerbaijan University of Languages

☐ University of Economics

☐ Azerbaijan Pedagogical University

☐ ADA University

4. Current degree of study:

☐ Bachelor

☐ Master

☐ Doctorate

5. What is the number of credits in the degree you study?

☐ 90-120

180-

☐ 240

Have

☐ no information

other

☐

(please specify):

6. Please indicate estimated number of hours you spend per week on the following learning activities (including preparation time):

<i>Learning activity</i>	<i>Time spent per week (hrs)</i>
Formal courses (lectures, seminars, etc.)	
Studying by yourself (outside university)	
Lab works	
Reading (articles, books, book chapters etc.)	
Projects (presentations, reports, research etc.)	
Term papers	
Other (please specify):	

7. Which of these services does your institution provide?

- ☐ Career guidance services
- ☐ Psychological Counselling services
- ☐ Information on study opportunities in foreign institutions (e.g. exchange programs)
- ☐ Additional Language training
- ☐ None
- ☐ Other (please specify)

8. Your opinion about the following statements:

	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree
It is impossible to get a job without Master Degree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
It is possible to get a job without Master degree but not in many organizations	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
There is no need for Master degree to get a job	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

9. Have you, during your studies:

	Yes	No
Done any course abroad	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Studied abroad	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Done internship abroad	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

10. To what extent are you involved in the design of the curricular?

- ☐ Fully involved ☐ Partially involved ☐ Not involved at all
- ☐ Have no information about it at all

11. To what extent have you been involved in the evaluation of the following:
(you can choose more than one)

	Fully involved	Partially Involved	N Not involved at all
University	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Faculty	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Program	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Course	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

12. Do joint programs/degrees exist in your institution?

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Have no information

13. Does your university provide financial support opportunities to study abroad? If not, skip question 14 and go to question 15.

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Have no information

14. In which form is this support provided:

15. Does your university provide financial support to start and complete your studies in your country? If not, skip question 16 and finish the survey.

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Have no information

16. In which form is this support provided?

- ☐ Grants
☐ Loans
☐ Exemption from tuition fee
☐ Other (please specify):