

PUBLIC SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF
VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING IN AZERBAIJAN

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ABSTRACT

PUBLIC SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING IN AZERBAIJAN

By

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This is a qualitative study that explored public lower secondary school students' perceptions of Vocational Education and Training. Throughout the years, the government has made several efforts and implemented the state program with the aim to improve the field and attract more students to Vocational Education and Training institutions. Although those efforts succeeded to some extent, the figures show the number of students matriculating to vocational education to be significantly lower than the ones not continuing their education at any level. This study explored two research questions: (1) How do secondary school students in Azerbaijan perceive VET? (2) What are the factors influencing students' attitudes towards and decisions about VET?

To address the above-mentioned research questions, 8th and 9th -grade students from lower secondary schools were recruited. Simultaneously, the collected data were transcribed and coded to be analyzed. Document analysis and memoing were used to ensure credibility through data triangulation.

The findings suggest that the participants perceive vocational education as a destination for the students with less potential. Another finding about the participants' perception is the lack of awareness of vocational education. In addition, the findings further suggest that a number of student-related and environmental factors influence the participants' decisions/attitudes toward vocational education. The findings of the data analysis contributed to the development of a model named

Students' Perceived Decision Model of VET. Following the discussion of the findings, implications for research and practice are presented.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Vocational Education and Training (VET) has been attached of great significance in Azerbaijan since its gaining independence in 1991. Vocational Education is highly important for building up a competitive economy and forming an evolving society (Strategic Roadmap for Vocational Education and Training in the Azerbaijan Republic, 2016). Starting from independence, several large-scale measures have been taken by the government to enhance the field and attract students. To meet up-to-date standards and provide vocational education schools with facilities, the Cabinet of Ministers of the Azerbaijan Republic accepted the Resolution “On actions to improve basic vocational education system” on August 23, 1996 (Strategic Roadmap for Vocational Education and Training in the Azerbaijan Republic, 2016). The initiatives by the government towards the development of the field aim to build up links between the labor market and economy (EU Neighbours, 2021) and strive against unemployment (UNEVOC, 2005). In this regard, the “State Program for the development of technical vocational education in the Azerbaijan Republic 2007-2012” was approved by the Decree of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan dated July 3, 2007 (Exec. Order No. 2282, 2007), was a great initiative in terms of taking appropriate actions and succeeding higher student enrollment to vocational education schools (UNDP, 2017). Figures show that number of the students enrolled in vocational education institutions was 14718 in 2007, while in 2012 approximately 4000 more students were accepted with a total number of 18394 (State Statistical Committee of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2021).

Taking a look at the situation from a wider perspective and comparing Azerbaijan with developed countries, the figures differ. Statistics show that the

enrollment rate of the students in vocational education in developed countries is 40-60% of overall secondary school students, while in Azerbaijan it is less than 11% (Strategic Roadmap for Vocational Education and Training in the Azerbaijan Republic, 2016). In 2020, the number of students completing lower secondary education was 118.257 with 17.140 of them, which is approximately 14%, enrolling in VET education while more than 21000 seats were available that year (State Statistical Committee of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2021). Considering that compared to higher education institutions, getting accepted to vocational education institutions is less competitive and more accessible in Azerbaijan, these figures suggest that the enrollment rate in VET is considerably low. The difference between the number of available seats and the number of students enrolling in VET is one of the factors showing that VET is a less competitive field. On the other hand, compared to the secondary specialized educational institutions and higher education institutions, getting accepted to VET schools does not require any examination. This is another factor suggesting VET is more accessible than the other levels of education in Azerbaijan. Taking a look at the statistics in a more detailed way, the overall rate of the upper secondary school students enrolling in VET education is 11%, secondary specialized education is 10% and higher education is 20% (Salahov, 2010). These statistics show that slightly less than 60% of the students graduating from secondary schools in Azerbaijan do not pursue their education at a further level and step into the labor market without having appropriate education. The provided data help to present the significance of this study, which is exploring the factors influencing students' attitudes towards VET that could contribute to the decision-making process of educators and related decision-makers to involve the rest 60% of the students in education.

1.1 Purpose and Significance of the Study

My purpose in this research is to understand lower secondary school students' attitudes towards vocational education and explore factors that influence eighth and ninth graders' interest in vocational education as a possible option for their future education. Since the perceptions of the lower secondary school students and the factors shaping their attitudes on VET have not been discussed before, this study would contribute to the literature by suggesting key findings and pave the way for further related research in the field. Moreover, considering that in Azerbaijan vocational education is an integral part of the human capital policy (Strategic Roadmap for Vocational Education and Training in the Azerbaijan Republic, 2016), the findings of the study can help policymakers toward future legislative decisions and regulations on VET.

1.2 Research Questions

The following questions will guide this study:

1. How do secondary school students in Azerbaijan perceive VET?
2. What are the factors influencing students' attitudes towards and decisions about VET?

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This chapter of the paper focuses on the literature review to gain a deeper understanding of what has already been explored about students' perception of vocational education and factors affecting secondary school students to decide on their further academic choices. The main purpose of the study is to understand how secondary school students perceive vocational education and the factors affecting those students' career decision-making. The main aim of this literature review is to approach the same research problem and questions from a wider perspective and provide a general view of how the issue was studied in various contexts.

To make sure that the most recent statistical findings are included and to provide a more relevant picture of the current situation, articles published in recent 10 years were taken as the main resources to be reviewed. Moreover, studies conducted in post-soviet countries, including Georgia, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine; and in a wider region, Turkey which encompasses historical and regional similarities with Azerbaijan were considered for the review due to the similar backgrounds. Additionally, some western literature was also included in the section to explore factors influencing the career decision of the students from comparatively different contexts.

2.2 Definition of Terms

Perception – For the purposes of this study, I defined the term as a person's understanding of a concept or a matter based on “knowledge and experience associated with it” (Kasim & Fachriah, 2018, p. 294). Perception is more of a

process rather than a simple situation of understanding which involves the factor of awareness as well (Huffman, 1997).

Vocational Education and Training (VET) – I referred to where the term is defined as “the level of education in which qualified workers are trained in various professions on the based secondary education and upper secondary education by the needs of the labor market” (1.0.16).

2.3 Political Significance of VET

Vocational Education is of global importance in terms of a competitive economy (Strategic Roadmap for Vocational Education and Training in the Azerbaijan Republic, 2016) and an integrated society that targets the inclusiveness of more people to society by attracting them to the act of employability (Alvarez-Galvan, 2014). A review of the literature from the abovementioned countries helps to say that VET is a highly political field in terms of reforms and laws being applied throughout a considerable period. As the example for Azerbaijan, considering global trends and the economic significance of the vocational education field, Strategic Roadmap for Vocational Education and Training was approved in 2016 and included a strategic vision for 2020, a long-term vision for 2025, and an aspirational vision for post-2025 (Strategic Roadmap for Vocational Education and Training in the Azerbaijan Republic, 2016). Alongside the Strategic Roadmap, in 2016 the government established the State Vocational Education Agency which executes the state policy on vocational education, and in 2018 a presidential decree (Exec. Order No. 1071, 2018) about the very first Law on Vocational Education was signed (Pillay, & Aliyev, 2020). State Statistical Committee of Azerbaijan (2021) provides the number of the vocational educational institutions and the number of the students

to be 103 and 22012 respectively as of 2021. Currently, vocational education is given a high priority by the government by offering free of charge education to the students, providing them with monthly stipends, and even according to the latest changes, the students of higher vocational education with the highest academic standings are given the diploma which is equal to sub-bachelor degree and gives them the opportunity of entering to the higher education institutions without state examination in accordance with their major (State Agency on Vocational Education, 2020). Considering all these factors, as of 2020, the number of students applying to vocational education is only 15% (State Statistical Committee, 2022), while the rate is between 40%-60% in other countries (Strategic Roadmap for Vocational Education and Training in the Azerbaijan Republic, 2016). The factors influencing this low figure will be explored during the research.

Similarly, Kitiashvili and Sumbadze (2018) draw attention to the political significance of the sector mentioning that raising the attractiveness of VET in Georgia has been the main aim for improving Georgia's economic and social development. As a part of governmental policy, Vocational Education and Training Development Strategy for 2013-2020 was initiated by the Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia to achieve "socio-economic objectives for the reduction of poverty within a more equitable and inclusive society and the broader reforms designed to bring that about within the context of dynamic economic growth and development." (VET Development Strategy for 2013-2020, 2013, p. 3). Ukraine started taking identical steps toward vocational education by initiating Government's Medium-term Priority Action Plan for 2017-2020 (Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine, e.d.). By means of reforms in the sector, which aimed to fill the

gap in the labor market for qualified workers and contribute to the country's economy, starting the first pilot project in the initial year of the Action Plan, the quality of vocational education increased by 12-17% (Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine, e.d.). The increase was measured by the efficiency of the project, the total number of employed students from the former cohorts, and the decrease in the expenses for the facilities (Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine, e.d.). In Kazakhstan, VET is preliminarily regulated by the Law on Education parallel with the Law on Higher Education (UNESCO-UNEVOC, 2012). Political aims and objectives of vocational education in Kazakhstan were addressed by the State Programme of education development in the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2011-2020 (UNESCO-UNEVOC, 2012) where the three main functions of VET – “qualification: to provide the population with the skills needed to foster economic prosperity and social stability; employment: to help the population to find a job suited to their preferences and responsive to societal needs; integration: to help individuals to insert successfully in the society”– were included (Alvarez-Galvan, 2014).

2.4 Lack of Prestige in Vocational Education

In most common cases, lower secondary school students have two educational paths to follow: either to continue upper secondary education and apply for higher education institutions or to enroll in vocational education schools or secondary specialized educational institutions. Although matriculation to VET after graduating from upper secondary education is also possible in Azerbaijan, mostly the students pursuing their education through upper secondary education target to apply for higher education. Chichinadze (2018) asserts that vocational education is

the shortest way to employment. He justifies that college graduates are struggling to find jobs due to the over-supply of those professions in the labor market, while some other technical vocations are most in-demand in Georgia. It is further mentioned that vocational education is considered the destination of less-capable students by society, which in return highly affects the decision-making process of potential school students (Chichinadze, 2018). Unlike the Georgian case on the abundance of in-demand vocational jobs, the OECD report (2020) on vocational education in Turkey claims that employability opportunities are more scarce in terms of VET. Yet, VET is practically considered easier to transform from school to work in comparison with the wider likelihood of getting employed after higher education enrollment. Hence, this factor was presented as one of the reasons why school students prefer higher education when making their decisions.

The same social phenomena can also be observed in Azerbaijan. SWOT analysis of the vocational education and training sector provided in Strategic Roadmap for Vocational Education and Training in the Azerbaijan Republic (2016) sheds light on several weaknesses and threats that the VET sector faces in the country. One of the weaknesses of the sector was defined as its having a low public image. Unlike the Georgian factor, which relates low image of VET with less competent students, the clear reasons for the low image of VET in Azerbaijan and students' approach to the issue have not yet been confirmed by research evidence. This factor was mentioned as a challenge before the government in developing the field, yet to what extent it affects shaping secondary school students' perception of VET and impacts career decisions is intended to be presented as a finding of this study.

“They used to say, if you don’t study hard, you’ll end up in a vocational school” (European Training Foundation, 2021, para. 3) said Olha Kovat, Member of the Ukrainian Parliament and chair of the parliamentary sub-committee on vocational education, following her idea that focusing on increasing the image and prestige of vocational education is of significance asserting that vocational qualifications are more perspective in terms of future job opportunities and educational earnings than at universities. In Ukraine, vocational education is also asserted to be in thick relation to family decisions in terms of the career choices of the students (European Training Foundation, 2021).

2.5. Parents’ Involvement in Career Decisions

According to Sabauri (2017), it is important to establish professional career planning and support services, such as advising, to ensure that students are on the right path in their career decision. This assertion stems from the results of a survey on the role of career advising on vocational education one of the findings of which is the increasing effect of parent/teacher priorities on students’ career decisions. Similarly, the survey of Georgian students of career choices (Mardalesihvili & Sabauri, 2017) aims to find out the extent to which parental involvement affects students’ career decisions and findings present a significant level of impact of parents on students’ career decisions. An identical study was also conducted in Kazakhstan in 2017. The findings of the survey emphasize four main factors that hinder effective career decisions by the students:

First, high school students are not mature enough, nor are they prepared to taking informed decisions about their careers. Second, in-state dominated tertiary education system requires students to make career decisions too

early. Third, the higher education state grant allocation system shifts students' focus from choosing the subjects / future career they like a subject for which they can easily win a grant/scholarship. Last, collectivist culture and parental expectations further aggravate the problem of winning grants for students (Bidanov, 2017, p. 6).

2.6. Summary

The review of the literature could help to identify three main commonalities in the literature: the political significance of vocational education, lack of prestige of vocational education in the reviewed countries, and parental impact on career decisions of the students. These commonalities, in turn, pave the way for studying the problem and finding out what the main factors are in the Azerbaijani context and to what extent they overlap or contradict with others. This would help for the further analysis of the sector and make decisions on further reforms. Above all, the literature review helps to identify a gap that could be defined as the factors shaping the students' interest in VET in Azerbaijan from students' perspectives.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

The research questions of the study fall under the Interpretivist paradigm by Sipe and Constable (1966) since they mainly focus on the participants' views of VET and understanding their perceptions. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) described the purpose of the Interpretivist paradigm using the verbs *describe*, *understand*, and *interpret* which align with the purpose of the study and the research questions as well.

Defined research problems were explored through *qualitative method research*. Therefore, designed research questions were answered by meanusingative data collected from the sampling population.

3.1. Research Site

The research was conducted in two public secondary schools located in Baku city. The number of samples depended on the saturation principle (Creswell, 2012). Data collection and sampling methods were elaboratively described further in this section.

The rationale behind choosing public secondary schools located in Baku is mainly the accessibility opportunity provided by the Baku City Education Department, which ensures ease of access to any school operating under the Department. Since getting permission from the school administration to conduct research, and having face-to-face interviews are crucial elements of the study, the recently signed Memorandum of Understanding between ADA University and Baku City Education Department bestows substantial facility.

For this study, two public secondary schools were selected. Considering that visiting schools, selecting participants, and arranging interviews require time, the selected schools were defined based on the time efficiency factor, and the ones which are the closest to my workplace were sent a request.

3.2. Participants

The participants of the research were secondary school students. In Azerbaijan, the students that can apply for vocational education are either last year students of lower secondary education (9th graders) or final year students of upper secondary education (11th graders). Considering the fact that the initial phase of starting to decide on their further academic path (pursuing their education through upper secondary education, applying for secondary specialized or vocational education, or not continuing their education at all) is when they complete lower secondary education, the participants of this study were selected among 8th and 9th graders of public secondary schools located in Baku. Further, Azerbaijani schools have mainly two major mediums, Azerbaijani and Russian, which means core subjects are being taught in the language that they have been enrolled in. Hence, students studying in non-Azerbaijani mainstreams were excluded because of possible language barriers that could emerge during the data collection process.

3.3. Sampling

To recruit the participant, a non-probability sampling approach was utilized. The exact method that was employed was the convenient sampling method (Cresswell, 2012). This method of sampling was based on the willingness of the samples to participate in the study which provides a possibility of obtaining rich data from the participants (Cresswell, 2012). The sample size for the research was based

on the saturation principle, which means “data collection produces no new information or insights into the phenomenon” (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016, p. 199) being studied. The estimated sample size was approximately 8-10 students. The final total number of participants was 8 where saturation was reached.

To recruit the participants, after getting a permission letter from the Baku City Education Department, I contacted both school principals and made sure that the purpose of the study was clear to them. To select the students, the school principals were asked to assist by informing the 8th and 9th graders about the research and involving the ones who were interested to participate in the study. The final total number of the recruited students from both of the schools was 9 consisting of 4 (four) male (2 8th graders and 2 9th graders) and 5 (five) female students (2 8th graders and 2 9th graders).

3.4. Data Collection

The data collection process of the study was carried out through qualitative data collection (semi-structured interviews) and document analysis.

Interview. Semi-structured interviews which are described as “one of the most powerful ways in which we try to understand our fellow human beings” (Fontana and Frey, 2000, p. 645) was used for qualitative data collection. Semi-structured interviews gave a chance to identify or go further using follow-up questions that would assist to gain more insights into the understanding of the participants. Galletta (2013) defines semi-structured interviews as the ones the questions which are more flexible and allow enriching the data obtained. The semi-structured interviews gave a chance to elaborate on the participants’ ideas and initially prepared questions presented in the Interview Protocol (Appendix A).

After the sample selection phase, I visited each school and arranged a meeting with all the participants that were selected with the help of principals (the principals were asked to inform the 8th and 9th graders and involve the ones willing to participate in the list of interviewees) to provide more detailed information about the research and answer their questions which were stated to be the participants' main rights in the Consent Form (Appendix B). To pursue the ethical norms, previously prepared and printed hard copies of the Consent Forms were given to the students. Since the participants were underage, the consent form was addressed to the parents of the students. Each student was provided with two copies of the Consent Form, one to sign by the parents and return, and the next for keeping.

The initial introductory meeting was followed by arranging a time for face-to-face interviews with each student. Since one of the schools decided to go on a lockdown for one week due to the high rate of Covid-19 infection cases among students and teachers, the first cohort of the interviews was decided to be online. An attempt to hold face-to-face interviews with the students from the second school was also unsuccessful due to time arrangement issues. Hence, all the interviews were held online.

3.5. Data Analysis

Qualitative data were simultaneously analyzed, which means each completed interview was transcribed and underwent an initial coding procedure to identify data units and benefit from existing data in upcoming interviews. A code is "a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data" (Saldaña, 2013, p. 3). Assigned codes were used to identify the main categories/themes in the

collected data. Categories are “conceptual elements that “cover” or span many individual examples (or units of the previously identified data) of the category” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 206).

Simultaneous transcribing and coding were helpful to define the saturation. Although the recruited number of the participants was 9 (nine), the final number of the interviewed students was 8 (eight) because of reaching the saturation point.

During data analysis, there were held several meetings and a workshop with the supervisor. The initial coding workshop helped me have some idea of how to categorize the codes and create main themes. Since the workshop was held together with two other students who are supervised by the same supervisor, there was a chance to peer review the initial draft of masked codes.

3.6. Trustworthiness

Polit and Beck (2012) emphasize the trustworthiness of the study as the extent to which the presented data, analysis, and methods are confident. Lincoln and Guba (1985) have identified four ways to assess the concept of trustworthiness: credibility, dependability, conformability, and transferability.

Credibility

Credibility is one of the primary factors in ensuring the internal validity of the study. Credibility helps to ensure that the participants of the study are accurately described and identified (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I used strategies, such as triangulation and peer review to ensure credibility.

Triangulation. This strategy is used to increase confidence in the findings (Heale & Forbes, 2013). Triangulation can be ensured through the use of four

methods: the use of multiple methods, multiple sources of data, multiple investigators, and multiple theories (Denzin, 1978). The use of multiple sources of data and multiple methods were mainly used in this research. Triangulation through multiple methods was based on multiple strategies of data collection such as interviewing; document analysis, and memoing. That is, the findings of this study emerged based on the data collected through three different sources. Mainly, the data obtained through interviews were interpreted in relevance to the findings of the document/literature review and personal notes of the researcher from the data collection process (memoing).

Peer review. A review of the research by peers is another way of ensuring the credibility of the study. Peer review is defined as the process of presenting key findings to colleagues and receiving feedback (Morse, 2018). Peer examination of this study was carried out through the review of the research paper by each committee member during the defense process and providing feedback on the findings of the research.

Dependability

This method objects to ensure the reliability of the data and the final results of the study (Guest et al., 2012). It can be ensured through various ways such as triangulation and audit trail, which I used in this study.

Audit trail. This method elaboratively describes the process of the data collection and decision-making (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Therefore, I kept a research journal that involves the ideas, questions, difficulties, and issues we will possibly encounter during the research process. These records helped me with

analyzing data as well, and additionally, the readers will have a clear view of the research findings as these records describe the research process in detail.

Transferability

Transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) or external validity implies the extent to which findings can be generalized or transferred to other settings.

Transferability in this study will be ensured through peer review and rich and thick description.

Thick and rich description. Merriam & Tisdell (2016) defined rich description as “a description of the setting and participants of the study, as well as a detailed description of the findings with adequate evidence presented in the form of quotes from participant interviews, field notes, and documents” (p. 257). In this study, I ensured a rich description of the study by providing detailed information about participants and including quotes from interviews while presenting key findings.

Ethical Considerations of the Research

The ethical conduct of the research is one of the primary concerns of a qualitative study (Hammersley & Traianou, 2012). Data collection methods such as interviews necessitate several participants to give their consent to participate in the study.

Ethical issues checklist. To ensure the ethical norms of the study there can be used several techniques offered by Iphofen (2009). The initial step to be taken was to provide the participants with an informed consent form (Appendix B) that includes information about the research, participant selection process, the purpose

and benefits of the study, that the data will be stored, and that the participants can withdraw from the study at any time they desire. Further, the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants were ensured by masking any kind of data that could reveal the participants' or any other persons' identity mentioned by the participant.

3.7. Delimitation of the Study

In this study, aside from exploring the students' perceptions of and attitudes toward VET, my purpose was also to identify factors that influence the decision of the students about their future academic path. The participants of the study were selected among the 8th and 9th graders. Hence, involving the students from lower grades could have hindered the process considering that they might not have decided on their future academic careers.

3.8. Limitations

The study has several limitations. The first limitation is the sampling region. As was mentioned before, because of the accessibility opportunities provided by Baku City Education Department, the schools located in only Baku city (2 schools, to be exact) were involved in the study. Hence, the schools in the other regions were excluded from the sampling. That limited the opportunity of recruiting a more homogeneous group of participants which could provide a chance to understand the various aspects of the perceptions of the students from different regions.

In this study, all the participants had good academic standings and it is a very high probability that their perceptions and decisions are affected by that. Hence, not having a varied sample in terms of academic performance is the limitation of this study. Additionally, since parental influence was defined as one of the factors

shaping students' attitudes and perceptions toward VET, the parents of the majority of the interviewed students having higher education (participants being second-generation members) is also the limitation of this study. The final limitation is the scarcity of literature about VET in the Azerbaijani context.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

In this study, I explored the following research questions: How do public secondary school students perceive vocational education? What are the factors influencing students' attitudes towards and decisions about VET? From the data collected, four major categories emerged. Since this study had two main questions, I first provide a brief overview of the categories relevant to the research questions and then present the findings in detail later in this chapter.

Overview of the Findings

The findings of this study reveal secondary school students' perception of VET and present factors shaping secondary school students' decisions and attitudes about VET. In the following section, I briefly present the findings of the study according to the research questions.

Research Question I: How do secondary school students perceive VET?

The data suggest that participants understand VET as *a destination for the students with less potential*. During interviews with the students, some questions were posed on the subject named *Technology* to discover how they understand VET and what their attitudes are. This subject can be considered a foundation of VET at the school level due to the relevance of the subjects taught to students and the majors offered in vocational institutions. Although the national curriculum of Azerbaijan does not categorize subjects, the interviewed students frequently used the phrase *main* subjects referring to the ones that are included in the list of subjects for university entrance examination consists of. Hence, the answers, that will be presented in the following sections, helped to conclude that none of the participants

consider the Technology subject as important as the other *main* subjects, such as Math, English, Azerbaijani, Chemistry, and History. Thus, the primary conclusion of the participants was that the ones who do not have the *potential* and interest to succeed in *main subjects* and are incapable of getting accepted by higher education institutions decide to apply for vocational education.

During the interviews, the participants were asked to define VET as well. This would help to understand how the students in this study perceive VET. The participants defined VET as the level of education, which is lower than, where the students are thought theoretical and practical details of a profession. The definition that the participants provided is almost the same as the actual definition of VET provided by the Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan on Vocational Education and Training (2018). Also, one of the students defined VET in a way that does not align with the actual definition. This was a sign of *misalignment* between the definitions of VET by that student and the commonly accepted definition, which means that the participant had a faulty understanding of VET.

VET as a destination for the students with less potential. A unanimous thread throughout the student responses on how they perceive VET was the idea that VET is for the students who have less potential. The majority of the students used the expression of “*əsas fənlər*” [main subjects] referring to the subjects that are mostly required to take an exam for getting a graduation certificate from the school or when applying for higher education. As was mentioned previously in the overview of findings section, to gain a deeper understanding of what students think of VET, their attitudes towards the subject named *Technology* were explored as well. Technology is a subject that is taught to the students from the first grade and

encompasses significantly related topics to VET so that it can be considered a fundamental knowledge base of VET at the school level (ARTPI, 2013). A great share of the participants having a good academic standing expressed that although the knowledge gained from this subject might be useful in daily life circumstances, the ones capable of doing well in other main subjects do not need the knowledge of Technology. Speaking about her thoughts on VET, an 8th grader and a well-performing student Banovsha said:

Daha öncə də dediyim kimi, mənə elə gəlir bu çətin fənləri hər insan anlamaz Həmin insanlar üçün üçün mənə peşə məktəbləri var ki, bu fənləri o qədər yaxşı çalışıb öyrənə bilməyənlər, peşə məktəblərinə gedir ki, orda gələcəkdə hansısa bir peşəyə yiyələnə bilsinlər. [As I said before about VET, I think not everyone can understand these difficult subjects... . For this reason, there are vocational schools for those students, so that the ones who cannot succeed in these subjects can apply for VET schools and master a profession.]

She consequently related her thoughts to Technology and added: “əsas və daha çətin fənləri oxuya bilməyən, özünü daha çox texnologiyaya verən uşaqlar 9-cu sinifdən çıxıb peşə təhsilinə üz tuturlar.” [The ones who cannot learn main and relatively more difficult subjects leave school at grade 9 and go for VET.]

Most of the students shared identical thoughts about VET being a choice for students with less potential. Similarly, an 8th-grade student Roya promoted Banovsha’s thoughts stating that:

...bilyi, savadı olmayan bir insan, mən belə fikirləşirəm ki, gedib səhəri gün iqtisadiyyatı idarə edə bilməz. Yəni, iqtisadiyyat üzrə işləyə bilməz. Lakin bu

insanlar kimi orta səviyyədə təhsili olanlar isə daha çox belə deyək, dediyiniz kimi dülgər olur, dərzi olur. [... I think an uneducated person cannot manage the economy. That is, s/he cannot work in the field of economy. But people with a mediocre level of education like the previously mentioned ones can become a carpenter or a tailor.]

These participants referred to VET as an alternative to HE for the ones who have poor academic standing in the *main subjects*.

The way how students understand VET is considerably identical and shared ideas are almost the same. Yet, one of the students studying in 9th grade, Musa, supported the aforementioned idea departing from a different angle. Musa said:

Belə ola bilər ki, hansısa bir insan universitetə girə bilməsə, peşə məktəbinə gedib, müxtəlif cür bacarıqlar, yəni bacarıq deyəndə, hansısa bir işi görməyi bacarar. Ustalıqı və yaxud aşpazlığı öyrənib, öyrənib daha rahat yaşaya bilər. Daha öncə dediyim kimi, maliyyə cəhətdən daha yaxşı olar, işi olmamaqdansa daha rahat həyatı olar. [A person might go to VET, and learn some skills, meaning that can master some profession if s/he cannot succeed in getting into a university. S/he can have a better life through learning workmanship or cooking. As I said earlier, financially that person can have a better life compared to being unemployed.]

Unlike the majority of the participants, he spoke of VET as an opportunity for people who cannot succeed to get into higher education institutions. Yet, by comparing higher education and VET and presenting VET to be easier to reach into, he was also the supporter of the main idea that was shared by all the other participants.

Misalignment in the definition of VET. The collected data identified a discrepancy among the definitions of VET provided by the participants. The data suggested that not all the students define VET in the right way and they do possess some false information. An 8th grader Bahram, whose desire is to be a doctor in the future, is one of the participants that I observed a misalignment between his definition and the generally accepted definition of VET. He had quite positive opinions on VET and he also planned to get a VET education during his university studies. The reason why I categorized Bahram's thoughts as misalignment in definitions is that he defined VET as an internship process that the university students are involved in during the last term of their studies. He says:

Peşə təhsilinin həkimlikdə rolu odur ki, sən təcrübi bilik əldə edə bilərsiniz.

Bəzi insanlar var ki, universitetdə oxuduğu müddətdə hər hansısa bir həkimin yanında yardımçı kimi işləyirlər və təcrübə əldə edirlər. Bu işin incəliklərini öyrənir və o, öz istədiyi peşəyə daha asanlıqla nail ola bilər. Düzdür, həkimlikdə daha çox təhsil rol oynayır, amma praktiki təcrübəyə də ehtiyac var. [The role of VET in Medicine is that you can gain some practical knowledge. Some people get vocational education that works as an assistant to other professionals during their university education and gain experience. S/he learns the details of the job and can easily learn the job. No doubt that theoretical knowledge plays a bigger role in medicine, yet practical knowledge is also necessary.]

He appreciated VET and thought it to be very useful since it helps a person to gain practical knowledge:

“Dediyim kimi həkimlikdə də peşə təhsilinin rolu var və mən də həkim olmaq istədiyimə görə peşə təhsilindən faydalanmağı düşünürəm.” [As I said before, VET has a role in Medicine as well and since I want to be a doctor, I intend to benefit from VET.] As was stated by the data, not all the students have a clear and proper understanding of VET, which could this one way or another affect their academic decisions.

Summary

This section presented the findings on how secondary school students perceive VET. The aforementioned data suggest that majority of the participants understand VET as a choice for the students with lower academic results. The responses of the participants presented that hard-working students with higher grades are capable of achieving better results in *main subjects* which are necessary for university admission exams. On the other hand, students with difficulty doing well in main subjects mostly prefer to apply for VET. The section also indicates that one student in this study misconceptualize VET, which means that the participant does not have a clear understanding of what VET is.

Research Question II: What are the factors influencing students’ attitudes towards and decisions about VET?

Regarding the second research question, the data suggested four main factors that shape students’ decisions on their further education path and VET: students’ interests in particular subjects; parental influence on the academic decision-making process; better job opportunities through higher education; salary instability of VET and financially secure life provided by higher education. Those factors were

presented within two categories: student-related factors and environmental factors.

Table 1 presents a clearer picture of the findings.

Table 1. *Factors influencing students' decisions about VET*

| Student-related factors | Environmental factors |
|--|--|
| Students' interests in particular subjects | Parental influence on the academic decision-making process |
| | Teacher influence on subject/profession preference |
| | Job opportunities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Better job opportunities through higher education - VET as a short way to join the labor market |
| | Salary instability of VET and financially secure life provided by higher education |

As the data presents, one of the main reasons why students in this study do not prefer to matriculate for VET is their interests in subjects and their internal interests. In addition, the study identified that the major stimulators of the decision-making process are parental advice as well as the participants' thoughts on job opportunities. The participants believe that VET provides an easier and shorter way to start working and holding a position in the labor market. The final factor is about financial opportunities and higher-paid jobs offered by HE. These factors will be presented more elaboratively through the quotes by the participants in the following section.

Student-related Factors

Students' interests in particular subjects. Semi-structured interviews provided an opportunity to pose some related questions about students' school life

and their favorite subjects. With the help of those questions, the final bulk of data helped to relate that majority of the students are inclined to pursue their academic careers in the profession that is related to their favorite subject at school. Identifying factors affecting students' further academic decisions helped to reveal a relationship between the students' perception of VET, their favorite subjects, and future academic decisions. As was mentioned before, the students in this study perceived the subject of Technology as a foundation of VET at the school level and students consider that subject as the one that should be paid attention to by the ones who aim to pursue their education on VET. Hence, the participants do not recognize it as one of the main subjects. Considering that all the students mentioned their targets to be getting higher education, their favorite subjects were the *main* ones, which are *more important* to know to be able to get access to higher education institutions. A 9th grader Sevinj's response can be a good example of this:

Düzünə qalsa, texnologiyanı oxuyuram amma bir o qədər önəmsəmirəm, çünki məqsədim universitetə daxil olmaqdır və düşünürəm ki, digər önəmli fənlərə daha çox köklənməliyəm. [To be honest, I do study Technology subject, but do not pay much attention. Because I aim to get into university and I think that I should focus more on other more important subjects.]

Another participant, Nilgun from 9th grade expressed her attitude towards Technology as:

Texnologiyadan öyrəndiyimiz məlumatlar bizə cəmiyyətdə bəlkə lazım ola bilər. Məktəbdən sonra. Sadəcə bəzi şagirdlər var texnologiyaya üstünlük vermirlər, yəni əsas fənn olaraq götürürlər. Məndə daxil. Yəni əsas fənn olaraq götürmürəm. [The information we learn from Technology may be

useful for us in society. After school. But some of the students, including me, do not pay much attention to Technology, that is, they do not consider it the main subject. I mean, I do not think it as the main subject.]

Since the participants do not consider the Technology subject to be main and useful for getting accepted to universities, they mentioned that is not in their area of interest.

Participants shared that their favorite subjects and academic decisions fall far apart from Technology and VET. Referring to the reasons for future academic decisions presented by the students, I observed that they are all related to the main subjects, the subjects that are their favorite or thought by their favorite teachers. 8th-grade student Ulvi supported his further academic decision by saying:

II qrupa vermək istəyirəm. II qrupdakı fənləri daha çox sevdiyim üçün. Ona görə də iqtisadiyyata daha çox önəm verdim və gələcəkdə universitetdə o sahə üzrə oxumaq istəyirəm. [I want to go for the second major group because I love the subjects there most. That is why I attached more importance to the economy and I want to study in this field at the university in the future.]

The participant responses suggested that their inclination toward the *main subjects* that they are more interested in is closely related to their perception of VET. Since they described themselves as students with successful academic stands, they shared their interests in particular subjects that have a role in their future academic decision.

Summary

This section focused on student-related factors that defined the participants' attitudes and decisions towards VET. The data suggested that participants' interests in particular subjects are one of the main determinants of why students do not choose to go for VET. The data presented the notion of *main subjects* which were defined by the participants as the ones that they consider necessary to study for university education.

Environmental Factors.

Parental influence on the academic decision-making process. According to the data, the influence of the parents on the participants is about guiding their children to get higher education. The data suggested parental influence as advisory guidance to the children. All the participants mentioned that their parents frequently advise them to do well in their studies and get higher education for achieving better living standards: "Anam və atam həmişə deyir ki, ali təhsil çox vacibdir. Gələcəkdə rahat yaşayışın olsun istəyirsənsə, ali təhsil almalısən." [My parents always say that HE is very important. They say if I want to have a comfortable life in the future, I should get HE.] (8th grader Ulvi).

I observed the influence of parents on the participants' responses to their future academic plans. They all plan to get higher education stating advice from their parents as one of the rationales to not matriculate for VET. One of the participants, a 9th grader Sevinj presented her parents' advice:

Valideynlərim hər zaman deyirlər ki, yaxşı oxu. Oxumasan, təhsil almasan, universitetdə oxumasan, gələcəyin olmayacaq, heç kimin yanında danışmaq

istəməyəcəksən, utanacaqsan, çəkinəcəksən. Mən də həmişə özümə deyirəm ki, oxumasam, cəmiyyətdə özümə yer tapmayacam. Mən universitet oxuyacam. [My parents always advise me to study hard. They say that If I do not study and get a university education, I will have no future. I will be embarrassed and will avoid talking to others. I also remind myself that if I do not study, I will have no position in society. I will get a university education.]

The data present that parental guidance has a substantial level of influence on the students` inclination to higher education. This was mostly observed through the identification of the factors encouraging students to get higher education. The majority of the students shared that it was what they have been hearing from their parents. This factor was also observed in Nilgun`s response to the question asking about her parents` advice on education. She answered:

Valideynlərin mənə təhsillə bağlı çox məsləhətlər verirlər. Ən çox da anamla söhbətimiz olur. Deyir ki, oxumalısan, universitetə qəbul olmalısan ki, dünya görüşün artsın, daha yaxşı həyatın olsun. [My parents give me a lot of advice on education and I mostly talk to my mother about this. She says I need to study hard and get into university. So that I can broaden my worldview and have a better life.]

The participants all mentioned their parents advising them to go for a university education. The data suggested that the influence of the parents on the participants` academic decisions is mostly shaped by guiding their children to get higher education. It is also noteworthy to state that the parents of the majority of the

students had an education on HE level which poses a relation that parents with HE advise their children to go for HE as well and this indicated that the participants are not going to be the first generation getting HE.

Teacher influence on subject/profession preference. Interviews with some of the students helped to identify that the notion of main subjects has been influenced by subject teachers. The data suggested that the teachers influenced the students' subject preference by prioritizing subjects and inoculating what is important to learn and what is not. The interview with Banovsha helped to identify this factor and to focus on the issue in upcoming interviews:

Biz texnologiya fənnini ibtidaidən bəri keçirik. Amma belə yaxşı formada keçən ildən keçməyə başlamışıq. Ondan əvvəl müəllimlərimiz üstündən keçirdi, Ana dili, Riyaziyyat keçirdilər. Daha vacibdi deyirdilər. [We have been learning Technology since primary school, but we started to get better lessons last year. Before our teachers used to pay little attention to it and teach Azerbaijani, Math instead. They used to say they were more important.]

Nilgun, who mentioned that her Technology classes usually were used to be neglected being replaced with Azerbaijani or Math described her future desire as:

Bu barədə çox düşünməyimə ehtiyac olmayıb əslində, Azərbaycan dili müəllimi olmaq istəyirəm. Çox düşünməmişəm, çünki Azərbaycan dili müəllimim mənim üçün hər zaman bir nümunə olub və mən də dərslərimdə hər zaman yaxşı olduğumdan, Azərbaycanca düzgün danışmaqdan və müəllimim kimi ana dilimi öyrətməkdən çox xoşum gəldiyindən, bu peşəyə

yiylənmək istəyirəm. [To be honest, I did not need to think much about this. I want to be an Azerbaijani teacher. I have not thought too much because my Azerbaijani teacher has always been an example for me. Since I have always been good at my studies and love speaking accurately in Azerbaijani and teaching my mother tongue just like my teacher, I want to have this profession.]

Participants' responses suggested that teacher influence on the participants is in two directions: prioritizing subjects and shaping their interests in *main subjects* and being a source of motivation for the participants to choose an exact profession.

Job Opportunities.

Better job opportunities through HE. Another factor that was discovered to have an influence on students' academic decisions was the better opportunities for jobs offered by higher education. Questions asked to reveal the participants' attitudes and decisions about VET were responded by the majority with the idea that VET has scarce job opportunities while graduating from university provides a chance for the graduates to have a better choice of jobs. 8th-grade student Roya supported her ideas saying that:

... ali təhsili başa vuranın həyatda, yəni iş tapmaq imkanları daha yüksək olacaq. Çünki dövrümüzdə daha çox ali təhsil tələb olunur. Lakin peşə məktəbini bitirən uşaqlar, yəni gənclər isə onların iş tapmağı digərlərinə nisbətən bir az azdır. [... the people having higher education will have more chances to find a job. Because higher education is in more demand these

days. Yet people graduating from VET institutions will have fewer chances to find a job in comparison with others.]

Supporting the idea of job opportunity scarcity, she touched upon a very interesting point mentioning that:

Peşə təhsilinin mənfi cəhəti odur ki, gənclərin dünyagörüşü mənəcə tam olaraq formalaşmır ali təhsilə nisbətən və yəni qeyd etdiyim kimi, bu da onlara iş tapmaqda bir az çətinlik yaradır.” [The negative side of VET is that the young fully widen their worldview, and this, as I have already mentioned, makes it difficult to find a job.]

Among the ones supporting the idea that a VET diploma benefits you less when looking for a job, one of the participants, 8th grader Ulvi, supported his idea of not choosing VET as his future academic step saying:

Ali təhsil alan insan dövlət işində işləyə bilir. Amma peşə sahibi olan insanlar, hər yerdə asanlıqla işləyə bilməyəcəkdir. ... Valideynlərin də mənə həmişə yaxşı oxumağımı, yüksək bal yığıb universitetə daxil olmağımı və daha yaxşı iş imkanları əldə etməyimi deyirlər. [One that has got HE can work as a state servant, however, others having a VET diploma will not be able to work anywhere they want. ... My parents always advise me to study hard, score high on university admission exams, and gain better job opportunities.]

The responses by the 9th-grade student Musa to the question asking his opinions on VET suggested that VET and HE differs from each other in terms of broader opportunities that the HE diploma brings:

Fərq ondadır ki, universitet diplomu çox yerdə lazım olur iş üçün. 9-cu sinifdən peşə təhsilinə də getmək olar, amma mən universiteti üstün tuturam. Demirəm peşə təhsili pisdır, amma mən universitetə getmək istəyirəm. İş imkanları daha çoxdur. [The difference is that a university diploma is required for a job in most places. One can apply for VET, but I prefer HE. I do not say that VET is bad, but I want to study at university. It offers more job opportunities.]

As we can observe from the data presented above, although the rationale can differ from student to student, the main idea is the same: HE offers better/more job opportunities.

VET as a short way to join the labor market. One of the participants expresses that VET can be a good opportunity for the ones who want to start working earlier because it provides a faster way out to join the labor market. The 9th-grade student Rufat's opinions can be presented as the best representer of the idea:

Mən düşünürəm ki, peşə məktəbini qurtaran insan, yəni maksimum bir ay ərzində iş tapa biləcək. Amma, maliyyəni qurtarıb, bankda işləmək hər zaman mümkün olmur. Yəni aşağı pillədən, yuxarı pilləyə doğru irəliləmək lazım olur. O da sənin bir çox vaxtını, illərini ala bilər. [I think a person graduating from VET school can find a job in a maximum of one month. But it is not always possible to graduate from Fənance and work at the bank. It takes a long time to go from the very bottom to the top. It can even take one's years.]

Although Rufat desires to be a businessman in the future, referring to his ideas supporting VET, he is also positive to get VET one day to enhance his chances of finding jobs:

... peşə təhsilini oxusan, o peşəyə nail olursan, qısa vaxtda yaxşı işlər tapa bilirsən. Amma ali təhsildə, məsələn elə fakültələr var ki, girirsən, ondan sonra 10 aydır iş tapa bilmirsən. Başqa bir işlə məşğul olmaq məcburiyyətində qalırsan. Mən də gələcəkdə iş imkanlarımı artırmaq üçün peşə müəssisəsində təhsil ala bilərəm. [If you get VET, you learn that profession and can find good jobs in a short time. However, there are some faculties in HE that you begin to study, and then after graduation, you cannot find a job for the next 10 months. You have to work in some other unrelated jobs. One day I can apply for VET institution to increase job opportunities as well.]

The participant described VET to be more advantageous than HE in terms of finding a position in a labor market faster. He emphasized that through HE it can take years to find the desired job or to level up to one's desired position, yet VET offers you a direct and a faster way to work.

Salary Instability of VET and Financially Secure Life Provided by Higher Education. The last item in the first category of the factors affecting students' academic decisions is related to the idea that the jobs one gets after VET offers you an unstable salary which in turn influences financial comfort. This factor is closely related to the previous one, which was about the participants supporting the idea that HE is more beneficial than VET in terms of job opportunities. Hence, this factor can also be considered a subcategory of the previous one. Yet, although these factors are

related, there is also a distinction. The first is about having job opportunities.

Another point is having higher-paid jobs. 8th grader Bahram says:

Ətrafımda müəyyən insanlar var ki, 9-cu sinifdən çıxıblar. Kolleçə və ya peşəyə gediblər. Lazımı səviyyədə təhsil almayıblar və maddi vəziyyətləri yaxşı deyil. Mən isə universiteti üstün tuturam. Çünki universitetə daxil olduqda maddi cəhətdən rahat həyat yaşaya bilərsən. [Some people around me left school in 9th grade. They applied to secondary specialized education or VET. They did not get the required level of education and they are not in a financially good condition. I prefer university because one can have a financially comfortable life when s/he gets a university education.]

The data provided was not only supporting the idea that a VET graduate can always earn less money, but it is hard to get a job with a fixed salary which is a discomfort to have an ideal living. 8th grader Ulvi promoted this opinion saying:

Ali təhsili bitirən insanlar dövlət işi ilə təmin oluna bilirlər. Peşə təhsilini bitirən insanlar isə dövlət işinə qəbul ola bilmirlər və onlar elə bil fərdi işləyirlər. Aylıq qazancları məlum deyil. Bir ay çox ola bilər, bir ay az ola bilər. Amma dövlət işinə qəbul olan insanlarda sabitdir. [HE graduates can be employed as state servants but VET graduates cannot. They work... let's say, individually. They cannot always know their monthly earnings. One month can be much, another can be less than it was. But the people working as state servants get a fixed salary.]

This factor emerging from the data suggests that one of the reasons why some of the participants do not intend to matriculate for VET is their belief that the

VET-related jobs do not offer fixed salaries. Also, the participants shared the idea that the chances of finding high-paid jobs are less which can prevent one from having a financially secure life.

Findings of Document Analysis

The initial intention of the document analysis was to analyze any kind of document that could be reached within schools that could assist to answer the research questions. By this, my intention was mainly to analyze posters, informative pictures and stands in the schools. Visits to the schools for data collection provided a chance to observe them and deduct certain conclusions after comparing what has been observed with the findings. Both the schools were fully equipped and the walls were busy with certain informative posters. They can be considered to be quite informative and helpful for the students to get insights into other areas such as medicine, emergency cases, and teaching, yet the attempt was unsuccessful to find some pictures, posters, or any VET information. Asking for some additional existing documents from the school management could not benefit either since they shared that they have no documents targeting to inform or raise the awareness of the school students.

Summary

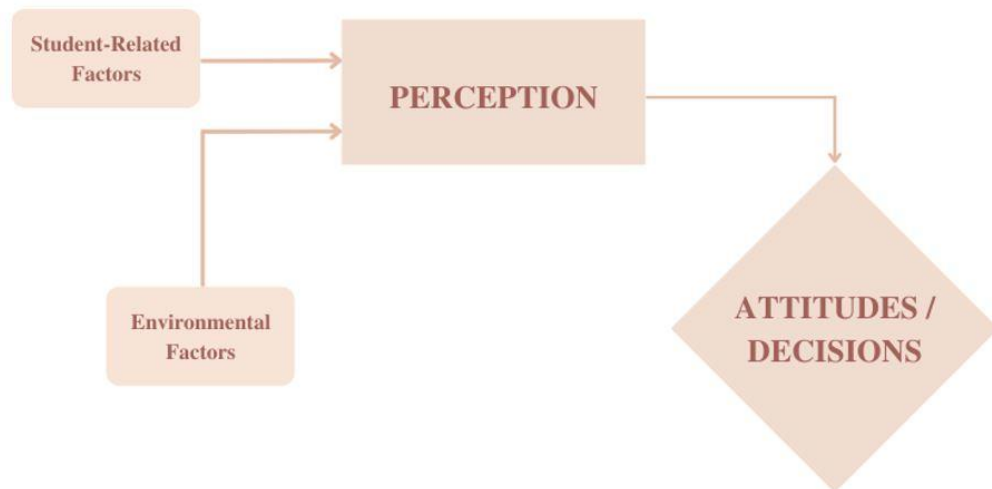
The data helped to conclude with four major factors that shaped the participants' decisions about VET. The factors that emerged from the data are a parental influence on participants' academic decisions, teacher influence on subject/profession preference, job opportunities, and the financially secure life offered by HE. Parental influence was described as a factor that guide the

participants to HE and not VET. The relation between the parents' academic background and their guidance of their children was also presented. The section also described the influence of teachers on the participants' decision-making process by mostly prioritizing subjects. Job opportunities factors were presented as consisting of two subfactors: better job opportunities offered by HE and VET as a shorter way to the labor market. The last factor is related to the participants' thoughts that HE offers better life in terms of financial situation, which was expressed to be one of the reasons to not matriculate for VET.

Students' Perceived Decision Model of VET

Analysis and interpretation of the acquired data presented in the previous chapter benefited the development of a new model. Figure 1 visualizes the general overview of the model called the Students' Perceived Attitude Model of VET.

Figure 1. *Students' Perceived Decision Model of VET*



Students' Perceived Attitude Model of VET describes how students' attitudes and decisions about VET are related to their perception of VET and how their perception is affected by the factors that have been discovered to influence their perception. As was mentioned in the findings sections, five major categories emerged that were explored to have an influence on the students' attitudes toward and decisions about VET. As depicted in Figure 1, it was concluded that students' decisions and attitudes about VET are fed by their perception: VET is the destination of the students with low potential. The factors influencing their perception were presented as two separate sources of effect as it was categorized in the findings section: Student-related factors and environmental factors. Based on the

acquired data, the parental influence was interpreted as one of the bottom line factors affecting participants' academic decisions. As was presented in the findings section, the majority of the participants shared that studying hard, making more effort, and getting a university education is the most important thing in the next level of their academic life, which in return, affected the concept of subjects that are *more required* for getting accepted to HE institutions. Parental guidance to higher education and teachers' subject prioritization were interpreted as shaping the certain scope of main/more important subjects that urged students to focus more on the subjects that are more important to study for the university admission exam. Students having a certain area of interest pay attention to future job opportunities that would support financially comfortable living standards, which are the factors that derive from parental guidance on HE being the best option. Because all the participants introduced themselves as hard-working and high-potential students, and their plans on getting a university education, the previously mentioned four factors were concluded to be a source of effect on their perceptions.

The second source of influence, student-related factors, interest in particular subjects was described as the one affecting students' decisions about VET. The relation of the factor with the perception is that the participants in this study presented themselves as hardworking students whose interested subjects are among the main subjects, which were conceptualized as the ones being necessary for university admission. Hence, lack of interest in VET-related subjects, such as Technology, was justified by the participants that since they intend to get HE, not much attention is paid to that subject because it is a subject that students with less potential should focus on to apply for VET.

To conclude, the developed Students' Perceived Decision Model of VET suggests that the students' attitudes and decisions about VET are directly related to their perception of VET, and the factors nourishing the student's attitudes/decisions about VET are interrelated to each other and the way how they perceive VET.

Summary

This chapter presented the findings on how public secondary school students perceive VET and factors influencing secondary school students' attitudes toward and decisions about VET. The aforementioned data suggest that the students perceive VET as a destination for students with lower potential. Participants' ideas were based on their beliefs about the main subjects, their significance, and hard-working students who target to get a university education paying more attention to them. Participant perspectives indicate that the students with no potential for HE prefer to matriculate at VET institutions due to the fact that it is easier to study at VET. In addition, the discrepancy in the definitions of VET provided by the respondents is among the answers to the first research question exploring how students perceive VET. The findings suggested that a lack of awareness of VET also exists among the participants.

Participant responses in the chapter identified major factors that have an influence on students' future academic decisions. The data helped to categorize four major factors namely: students' interests in particular subjects; parental influence on the academic decision-making process; job opportunities (better job opportunities through higher education/VET being a shorter way to the labor market); salary instability of VET and financially secure life provided by higher education.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSIONS

Chapter 4 provided a detailed presentation of the study findings that covered the following research questions: How do public secondary school students perceive vocational education? What are the factors influencing students' attitudes towards and decisions about VET? Before the discussion of the findings, it is necessary to briefly remind the findings from the literature review so that it could help to provide a more clear comparison of the findings. As presented in chapter 2, a review of the literature was concluded with the following categories:

- Political significance of VET;
- Lack of prestige in VET;
 - o VET is commonly a choice of the students with poor academic standings;
 - o The common belief that VET has scarce job opportunities;
- Parental influence on the decision-making process.
- Personal factors, interest in the subjects.

Revisiting the findings of the study, the participant responses showed consistency between the findings of the literature review regarding the first research question (How do public secondary school students perceive vocational education?). The data suggest that the secondary school students perceive VET as a destination for the students with low potential which shows a direct similarity with the findings of the studies by Chichinadze (2018) and the European Training Foundation (2021). The relation between the findings can be interpreted as VET being perceived identically, as an alternative to HE for the ones with poor academic standings, both in Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Ukraine by the students.

In addition to the consisting findings of the study, the data revealed a factor (misalignment in definitions/lack of awareness of VET) that had not been discovered in the literature review. The results identified that a lack of awareness about VET exists among secondary school students, which is one of the main factors affecting students' decisions about and attitudes towards VET.

Regarding the second research question (What are the factors influencing students' attitudes towards and decisions about VET?), the group of factors affecting students' decisions on VET was suggested to be similar to the main findings of the reviewed literature. Those factors were: students' interests in particular subjects; parental influence on the academic decision-making process; teacher influence on subject/profession preference; job opportunities (better job opportunities through higher education/VET as a shorter way to labor market); salary instability of VET and financially secure life provided by higher education. As data presented, in Azerbaijan, parents have a big role in guiding their children through their further academic decisions, yet this intervention was suggested to be limited to guiding their children to get HE. The findings of the study support the reviewed literature in terms of parental influence on the students' decision-making process (Sabauri, 2017). However, another research finding, a unanimous response by the participants that their interests are the main factor in choosing which specific field they want to choose to study in the future, opposes findings by Sabauri (2017), Mardalesihvili and Sabauri (2017), and Bidanov (2017) whose results suggested parents being decisive factors on choosing their children's future profession. The finding that identified students' interests and interests in subjects to be the main factors in

choosing a future profession supported the findings from the Western literature (Edward et al., 2008; Haney, 2002.)

According to Ehrenberg and Smith (2000), people make three types of labor market investments: education, migration, and new job search. When making decisions among these three kinds of labor market investment, people usually weigh the costs and benefits of it. The factor about VET being a shorter way to the labor market can be related to the investment in education to get easier access to job opportunities.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the aforementioned findings indicate secondary school students' attitudes and decisions about VET are influenced by several factors that are related to each other. As was described in the Perceived Attitude Model, there are two groups of factors that have an effect on the secondary school students' perceptions, attitudes, and decisions about VET. The data indicate that secondary school students understand VET as an alternative to HE for the ones who do not have potential (poor academic standing, low grades). The first group of factors, which were suggested by the data to be the own interests of the students, parental influence on the decision-making process, lack of job opportunities in VET related areas, and financially comfortable living standards offered by HE, are the ones that discourage the students to matriculate at VET schools. The second group of factors, lack of awareness of VET and the idea of VET being a shorter way to the labor market, have been categorized as the encouraging factors for the students to matriculate at VET schools.

In this chapter, a discussion of the findings was provided. In the further section, delimitations and limitations of the study were presented. Finally, I presented the implications for future research and practices.

Implications

Implications for Research

As the data suggested and was described in the Perceived Attitude model, students' attitudes towards and decisions about VET are highly influenced by what is advised to them by their parents. Interviews with the students revealed that the majority of the participants were encouraged to pursue their education at the higher education level which in return was observed to influence how students perceive VET. Since this study already discovered student perception of VET which was analyzed to be derived from parental factors, I would suggest that further research be conducted to *explore parents' perceptions of and attitudes about VET*.

Chapter 4, the overview of the findings frequently presented the notion of the main subjects, which was another factor shaping students' perceptions of what is important to study and what is not. As was stated earlier, the concept of the main subjects was influenced by the teachers, neglecting Technology classes and prioritizing the *main subjects* that they consider to be. From this perspective, considering that teachers influence shaping students' opinions on VET and related subjects as the data suggested, it would be beneficial to *study teachers' opinions about VET and their attitudes towards subject prioritizing*.

As was presented in the previous chapter, I developed a new model based on suggesting consistency among identified factors, students' perception of VET, and

students' decisions on VET. I suggest the researchers *test the developed Students' Perceived Decision Model of VET* in further studies.

Implications for Practice

This section includes a suggestion for public secondary education institutions based on the findings of this study.

Raising awareness on VET. The implications for public secondary schools do not merely target encouragement of the students to be more knowledgeable on VET so that they would be more inclined to get VET but to increase the level of awareness which, this way or another, could affect their future decisions. Although the lack of awareness (misalignment between the student's definition and commonly accepted definition of VET) examples from the findings of this study were in favor of VET, that does not guarantee that the contrary scenario does not exist among the rest of the students. As a reflection of the findings from the analysis of the documents, I would suggest the *Ministry of Education pay more attention to assisting the schools with providing fundamental conceptual information on VET which could be supported by merely using the walls to present useful information on VET, or giving space to VET-related topics in the clubs that operate within the school.*

APPENDIX A

Interview Protocol

Location _____ Date/Time _____

People attending _____

Researcher conducting interview: Sara Mirzayeva

My name is Sara Mirzayeva and I will be interviewing you on “Public secondary school students’ perception of VET.” The main objective of this study is to explore the secondary school students’ attitudes towards VET and factors influencing their opinions while making decisions on the further level of their education. The data collected from this data will be used to come to certain conclusions.

You have agreed to participate in this research voluntarily based on a request sent to your school, and you are one of the 8-10 participants who will participate in the research.

You were provided with two consent forms before the interview (one to be signed by your parent and returned, and one to keep). As it was mentioned in the consent form, the interview will last a maximum of 45-60 minutes. The information you provide will be kept confidential, and the anonymity of you or any other person you mention indicate will be protected by providing a different name. Further, as stated in the consent form, the interview will be recorded on a voice recorder so that the information can be studied at a later stage. Do you have any objections to this?

If you don't have any questions, let's start with the first question.

1. General information

- To get started, let's first start with introducing yourself.
- How is your academic standing at school?
- What is your favorite subject?
 - What motivates you to learn this subject?

2. Decisions about education or future profession and the factors influencing them

- What is the profession you want to have in the future?
 - Why did you decide to go in this direction?
- Have you consulted or are you considering consulting someone when deciding on your future career? Why?
- What are the factors that motivate you to continue your education?
- What advice do your parents give you about education??
- If any member of your family has vocational education, what does s/he think about it?
 - What experiences about their vocational training did they share with you?

3. Attitude to vocational education

- What is vocational education for you? In general, can you talk about what you have heard or read about vocational education so far?
- Can you talk about what you have heard about vocational education from school, your family, or other people around you?
 - Why do you think they think so?
- Have you ever considered studying VET? (Which profession?)
- What is the difference between vocational education and higher education (university education) for you?
 - Where do you think these differences come from?
- What do you think are the advantages of vocational education?
- What do you think are the disadvantages of vocational education?

APPENDIX B

Consent Form

Public Secondary School Studets' Perception of Vocational Education in Azerbaijan

CONSENT TO TAKE PART IN RESEARCH

I,,
.....'s parent, voluntarily agree for my son/daughter to participate in this research study.

I understand that

- if I agree my son/daughter to participate now, I can withdraw at any time or refuse my son/daughter to answer any question without any consequences of any kind;
 - my son/daughter will contribute to the study that would be beneficial for the Vocational Education by participating in 46/60 minutes interview and answering the questions addressed by the researcher;
 - I can withdraw permission to use data from my son/daughter's interview within two weeks after the interview, in which case the material will be deleted;
 - I will not benefit directly from my son/daughter's participating in this research.
- My son/daughter has had the purpose and nature of the study explained and has had the opportunity to ask questions about the study.
- I agree to my son/daughter's interview being audio-recorded for further data analysis.

I understand that

- all information my son/daughter provides for this study will be treated confidentially;
- in any report on the results of this research my son/daughter's identity will remain anonymous. This will be done by changing his/her name and

disguising any details of his/her interview which may reveal his/her identity or the identity of people he/she speaks about;

- confidentiality measures will be taken based on laws and regulations of the Azerbaijan Republic;
- disguised extracts from my interview may be quoted in dissertations, publications, and conference presentations;
- signed consent forms, original audio recordings, and a transcript of my son/daughter`s interview in which all identifying information has been removed will be retained by the researcher;
- under freedom of information legalisation I am entitled to access the information my son/daughter has provided at any time;
- I am free to contact any of the people involved in the research to seek further clarification and information.

Researcher: Sara Mirzayeva, Master`s student at ADA University.

Academic Supervisor: Dr. Jeyran Ağayeva, Assistant Professor at ADA University.

Signature of research participant`s parent

Signature of parent

Date

Signature of researcher

Signature of researcher

Date

I believe the parent is giving informed consent to his/her son/daughter`s participation in this study.

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