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## The efficiency of international relations of regional higher educational institutions in a globalised context

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**Abstract.** In the context of globalisation, the purpose of regional higher education institutions is to provide access to education for people from all social strata and to facilitate their integration into the international arena. The primary objective was to achieve recognition and expansion of Azerbaijani higher education and regional higher education institutions in the global context. Additionally, Azerbaijani higher education aims to sign new cooperation agreements with foreign higher education institutions alongside existing collaborations. Methods of comparison, synthesis, induction, and deduction were employed in the study. The study confirmed that the international relations and strategic development plans of regional higher education institutions contribute to economic development. Furthermore, the programs implemented by these institutions have increased the number of foreign students, which improved the recognition of these regions abroad. As this is the first research study of its kind in the Republic of Azerbaijan, it will be valuable for domestic and international researchers. The conducted research, comparisons, and analyses facilitated the development of a comprehensive approach to learning theoretical concepts and models, which can be applied in teaching practices. Additionally, for foreign researchers, this study can be used as a resource for obtaining information about the regional higher education institutions in Azerbaijan, as well as their international relations, forming a foundation for further studies

**Keywords:** knowledge; internship programs; educational programs; innovation; student mobility; modern university

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## INTRODUCTION

One of the positive aspects characterising modern Azerbaijani education is the integration into the global education arena, alignment with the European educational space, and the establishment of connections between regional higher education institutions, both in the capital and in other regions, with the world's leading universities. From the early years of independence, systematic efforts were undertaken to organise regional higher education institutions. This facilitated access to education for all social strata in these regions and surrounding areas. The economic advantages also created educational opportunities for vulnerable segments of the population, which further contributed to the recognition of these regions in the international education sphere.

The dissertation by A. Manafova (2021) highlighted the integration of the national education system into the international education system and the formation and development of the specialised education services market. This development positively impacted labour market quality, economic growth, and national competitiveness. V. Babayev *et al.* (2019) noted that globalisation and digitalisation contributed to the growth of international cooperation in education. The authors emphasised the increasing domestic and international demand for competitive education, alongside proposing measures to create a safe educational environment for international students. The authors concluded that international collaborations of



universities improve influence and promote regions in foreign markets. The authors examined the components of intercultural competence and their relationship with the self-efficacy of teachers in training students of diverse cultural backgrounds. Their findings underscored intercultural interest, stability, absence of ethnocentrism, and management of intercultural interactions as core predictors of teachers' effectiveness in multicultural environments. T. Shapiro & V. Yanovskaya (2024) argued that the dissemination of scientific outcomes amplifies the impact of innovative development, positively influencing economic growth processes. Examining internationalisation policies, X. Gong (2024) proposed a conceptual business model for inter-university campuses based on comparative analyses of foreign university campuses. The author highlighted the potential of inter-university campuses as central hubs in regional ecosystems. I. Barantsova (2023), studying intercultural dialogue in higher education, identified its significance as a crucial component of higher education, emphasising its foundation on communicative aspects. Y. Hang & X. Zhang (2023), in their research on the role of intercultural transitional competence in adaptation to internationalised campuses of students, highlighted the importance of personal development through cultural integration and interpersonal interactions. Their findings reinforced the concept of self-regulated learning, emphasising not only academic but also social adaptation. Lastly, A. Zelenková & D. Hanesová (2019), in their article addressed the growing demands on intercultural competence of university teachers due to increased international student and staff exchanges. The authors recommended systematic training programs based on the experience of Central European universities to enhance teachers' skills and meet the demands.

The study aimed to analyse the effectiveness of international relations of regional higher education institutions in the context of globalisation to identify ways of their development and integration into the international educational space.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

Various methods, including comparison, synthesis, induction, deduction, and measurement, were employed. The comparison was based on diverse criteria such as education, scientific research, internationalisation, faculty-to-student ratios, international collaboration, and career prospects, as these are critical factors considered by students during the selection of universities. A comparative analysis of Azerbaijani regional universities, including Lankaran, Ganja, and Mingachevir State Universities, was conducted. The analysis addressed the accessibility of these institutions for local populations in economic and cultural terms, collaboration with international educational organisations, dual-degree programs, educational exchange initiatives, international agreements, student mobility, and the intercultural competencies of students and faculty. The implementation and effectiveness of various programs,

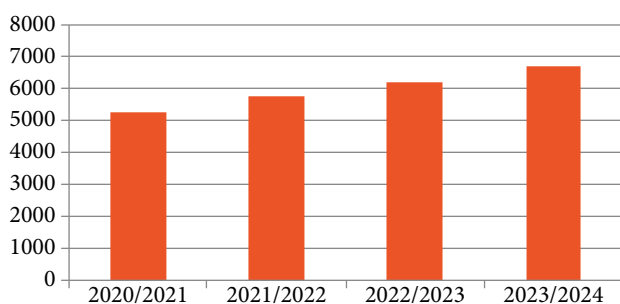
including those addressing cultural differences and promoting multicultural values, were also analysed. Additionally, the study explored the strengths and weaknesses of these institutions, along with the challenges they face in achieving their goals. Recommendations for attracting more international students and creating an environment where they can showcase their cultures and share multicultural values were addressed. Efforts such as the organisation of courses, webinars, and distance education by higher education institutions (HEIs) were noted, although their implementation was found to be suboptimal in the regional HEIs studied. A wide range of data sources, including legislative acts, decrees, monographs, local and international scientific articles, dissertations, conference materials, publications, statistical databases of the Republic of Azerbaijan, educational literature, exchange programs, accreditation reports, and strategic development plans of regional universities, were analysed.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The development indicator of a society and country is directly proportional to the level of education, the cultural and socio-economic development metrics of all countries and societies depend on the value placed on education. Analysing the economy of developed Western countries and their role in the political, social, and cultural arenas of the world, it is possible to note how much these states value education. Furthermore, this high priority devoted to education has directly contributed to the recognition of these states on a global scale. "The Community shall contribute to the development of quality education by encouraging cooperation between the Member States and, if necessary, by supporting and supplementing their action, while fully respecting the responsibility of the Member States for the content of teaching and the organisation of education systems and their cultural and linguistic diversity" (Maastricht Treaty, 1992). As a result of the development of science and technology, one of the positive aspects of progress in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries is the provision of educational accessibility for all social strata. Globalisation in education, prompting the development and adaptation of national education system to the new trends in the globalised education system, thus leading to changing dynamics of the globalised world. Countries expand their educational sphere by adopting the education systems, practices, policies, and methods of other countries domestically.

In the period from 2020 to 2024, the number of foreign students studying in Azerbaijan has increased (Fig. 1). The development of any country begins primarily with the development of its regions. The culture, living standards, education level, access to education, and specialised fields of the population living in that area substantially contribute to the development of the region. The most optimal way to ensure accelerated development is to establish a higher education institution in that region. This is determined by the requirement of educated and qualified personnel for further development. The main purpose of establishing

higher education institutions is to train qualified specialists needed in that region, thereby laying the groundwork for development. After restoring its independence, Azerbaijan established several regional higher education institutions, including Ganja State University, Ganja Agrarian University, Azerbaijan University of Technology, Nakhchivan State University, Mingachevir State University, Lankaran State University, and regional branches of the Azerbaijan State Pedagogical University (Sheki, Guba, and Shamakhi branches) as well as the Zagatala branch of Azerbaijan State University of Economics (UNEC). These institutions significantly impacted the economies of the regions and their surrounding areas.



**Figure 1.** Number of foreign students studying in Azerbaijan (2020-2024)

**Source:** compiled by the author based on State Statistics Committee (2024)

The continued operation of any higher education institution (HEI) in subsequent years depends on how well it justifies its existence. Depending on competition, the demands placed on higher education, and developments in the region and the world, higher education institutions may either cease operations or prove their worth and strive. Lankaran State University (LSU), which started as an independent university in 1992 and is recognised as a regional higher education institution, had a limited number of specialisations, faculties, and students in its early years. In the following years, new faculties, departments, and specialisations were established at this regional higher education institution, and the number of students reached 5,000. The expansion of new specialities at LSU is growing day by day. This is done to further enhance the cultural development of the population by addressing the characteristics of the regional nature and the trends occurring in its economy. The “Ecology” speciality in the 2017-2018 academic year, “Information Technologies” and “Marketing” in the 2018-2019 academic year, “Horticulture and Vegetable Growing” in the 2019-2020 academic year, “Veterinary Medicine”, “Plant Protection,” and “International Trade and Logistics” in the 2020-2021 academic year, “Agricultural engineering” and “Management” in the 2021-2022 academic year, and “Horticulture and Vegetable Growing” in the 2022-2023 academic year were established in this university. In addition to the mentioned specialities, the creation of new specialities is planned. This was already a significant achievement

for a regional higher education institution. Thus, one of the aspects that distinguishes LSU from many other higher education institutions in the country is that, in addition to the bachelor’s degree programs, it also operates departments for other levels of education, such as master’s and PhD (dissertation) programs. Following the requirements of “the State Program on Increasing the International Competitiveness of the Higher Education System in the Republic of Azerbaijan for 2019-2023” the implementation of a dual-degree program is also done at LSU (Reforms in Higher Education, 2013). “In 2019, a Dual-Degree Program agreement was signed between UNEC and LSU. Students studying in full-time education in the partner universities’ specialties of “Economics”, “Business Administration”, “Accounting and auditing”, and “Finance” will participate in the program” (Natiq Ibrahimov, 2023). The goal is to ensure cooperation between universities, student-teacher exchange, and the graduation of highly qualified students per the requirements of the labour market. “Students can participate in the international exchange and dual-degree programs of the partner university. LSU students also benefit from the dual-degree programs offered by UNEC in collaboration with Montpellier University in France and other renowned foreign universities” (UNEC News, 2019).

In addition, agreements regarding the establishment of dual degrees between Lankaran State University and Kaposvar University in Hungary and Kafkas University in Turkey were signed. One of LDU’s areas is cooperation with prestigious higher education institutions within the country and globally to achieve high rankings in national and international rankings. The directions reflecting HEIs’ internationalisation policies are outlined in the fourth section, titled “International Cooperation and the Internationalisation of Academic Activities”, in the Strategic Development Plan of Lankaran State University. This document covers the years 2022-2030 (Accreditation Report, 2023). To develop its international relations, an International Cooperation Department and an International Language Centre were also established. The international relations of the university include bilateral cooperation with higher education institutions abroad, student-teacher exchange, participation in international education programs, collaboration with various regional and international organisations, projects, etc. This higher education institution is a member of the Association of Caucasus Universities and the Eurasian Universities Association. Within the framework of international cooperation, it collaborates with organisations such as the British Council (United Kingdom), DAAD (Germany), CAMPUS (France), ERASMUS+, and others, implementing various projects. Within the framework of these projects, connections were established with universities in France, the United Kingdom, Italy, Germany, Poland, Hungary, Spain, and other countries. Currently, it is an active participant and partner in several international projects within the Erasmus+ KA2 program (capacity building in higher education). In the coming years, LSU plans to sign new cooperation agreements with renowned

higher education institutions to expand its relations with foreign HEIs. This also includes the involvement of foreign faculty in the teaching process. This is regarded as one of the factors ensuring the quality of education and is aimed at increasing competitiveness in the job market (Jung-Cheng Chen *et al.*, 2024; Jiexiu *et al.*, 2024).

As a regional higher education institution, one of the objectives of LSU is to increase the number of foreign students. To achieve this, LSU will implement new programs that enable more foreign students to study at all levels of higher education based on the signed agreements. In this regard, the university collaborates with international organisations such as Campus Global, Aran Academy, Yoshe-def and Istanbul-study agencies, also participating in International Education exhibitions. At the same time, it is a member of the Association of Caucasus Universities, the Caspian Universities Association, and the Eurasian Universities Union. It also collaborates with universities such as Sinop University, Amasya University, Kastamonu University, Kocaeli University, Artvin Çoruh University, Iğdir University, Kafkas University, Sakarya University in Turkey, Leon University in Spain, and the University of Warmia and Mazury in Poland, and others.

LSU aims to send university staff, and young researchers, such as master's, PhD, and dissertation candidates to research centres in leading universities of various countries for training, at the same time, to invite foreign specialists to benefit from their experience and to conduct training sessions for local experts. In the context of globalisation, studying and internships in international education programs are crucial in shaping the future goals of LSU students. This process is further accelerated by collaboration between countries, the rapid development of information technologies, and other factors. Although opportunities for studying abroad have increased in recent years, most prestigious universities allow their students to intern at the world's leading companies during their studies. This has been set as a goal for LSU. Internship in foreign countries improves professional knowledge, provide career experience, and establish professional relationships for individuals of all ages, both individually and in team settings. International experience provides graduates an advantage over other candidates when applying for jobs in the future, ensuring a competitive edge. Most graduates who have interned abroad and possess foreign language skills acquire professional and technical competencies in their fields and can learn personal strengths and weaknesses in their specialisation, allowing them to prioritise their skills on specific goals. Students also can learn from their mistakes, developing skills such as gradual approach to success, professional conduct, and self-confidence. On the other hand, an international internship familiarises students with different cultures and provides the chance to meet people from various nationalities. Additionally, the participation of university staff and students in various international projects is substantial in achieving the goals set by the university. The significance of LSU in the

development of the Lankaran-Astara economic region is considerable. The creation of new knowledge, along with the formation, utilisation, and export of products and services, will bring all sectors of the economy in the region to a global standard.

One of the major regional higher education institutions operating in the country is Ganja State University. This higher education institution, established in 1938 as a Teachers' Institute, was named Ganja State University in 2000. Given the accessibility of higher education for the population of the area and surrounding regions, the university has broadened its scope and now trains highly qualified specialists across various fields, aligning with current-day demands and the market economy.

Meeting the needs of the regional population and various sectors of its economy, new faculties and specialties were established every year. Currently, the following faculties operate at GSU: Chemistry-Biology, Mathematics-Computer Science, Physics and Technical Sciences, Pedagogy, History-Geography, Foreign Languages, Economics-Management, and Philology. Additionally, a Master's and a Correspondence Education Department is also in operation at GSU. To support the regional economy, an "Innovations Department" was also established at the university. This department includes the following departments: Transfer and Marketing of Innovation Technologies, Strategic Analysis, Evaluation and Monitoring, Formation of Information Resources, Project Management, Intellectual Property, Information and Communication Technologies, International Relations, and Publishing. In addition, there are 31 departments, 15 divisions, 8 centres, and 1 research laboratory operating. Currently, 7,184 students are enrolled in bachelor's programs, 453 in master's programs, 70 in dissertation programs, and 56 in PhD programs (Chentukovna & Marena, 2020; Petrychenko, 2023).

Alongside cooperation with domestic higher education institutions, collaborating with foreign higher education institutions and participating in various programs is one of the priority directions for GSU. Ganja State University (GSU), has active bilateral agreements with Urbino in Italy, Nova Gorica in Slovenia, Galati in Romania, Debrecen in Hungary, as well as universities in Spain and the Kingdom of the Netherlands, and Gazi and Sivas Universities in the Republic of Turkey, conducts bilateral cooperation. This higher education institution, based on existing agreements, is cooperating in areas such as internships, organising scientific conferences, student-teacher and scientific information exchanges, etc. Ganja State University has even broader relations with higher education institutions in Turkey. The "German Academic Exchange Service" (DAAD) is considered the world's largest scholarship organisation, facilitating the international exchange of students and researchers. Ganja State University continues its relations with the organisation. In the framework of this cooperation, the university participates in several internship programs in Germany. Ganja State University has set the goal of further strengthening international relations in

the coming years and implementing several projects to provide modern educational opportunities for students.

GSU has developed a special Strategic Plan to achieve its future goals and strategic objectives (Action Plan, 2023). Strategic Plan outlines the following goals, corresponding strategic objectives, and directions for strategic activities aimed at achieving these objectives: support of the selection of proper management and evaluation methods to improve educational programs, application of educational technologies to enhance the quality of teaching and learning, advancements in scientific researches, integration into the global scientific community, development of scientific and intellectual potential, support of the development of innovation and entrepreneurship, establishment and improvement of a modern management system, promotion of sustainable development, inclusivity development, equitable, and accessible quality education for all and supporting lifelong learning opportunities, improvement of the quality assurance system and aligning processes with modern standards and guidelines etc (Takaharu, 2022; Knight, 2024).

One of the prominent regional higher education institutions in Azerbaijan is Mingachevir State University (State Program on Reforms..., 2009). Established as a branch of various higher education institutions in 1991 and later as an independent institution, this regional institution has existed under the name of Mingachevir State University since 2015. In a short period, this higher education institution has achieved significant success at the national and regional levels and has begun attracting students in various fields of study. Corresponding with the continuously expanding trends in the Azerbaijani higher education system in recent years, foreign relations of MSU continue to grow. Currently, at MSU, training is conducted for bachelor's degrees in 38 specialities and master's degrees in 20 specialities within the fields of economics, engineering, and education. More than 3,500 undergraduate and graduate students study across 3 faculties and 10 departments. The university also hosts a Research Centre for Sustainable Development and Regional Innovations (Action plan on the basis..., 2016).

The international relations policy of Mingachevir State University is implemented within the framework of bilateral cooperation. This includes participation in large-scale educational programs, attraction of foreign students to the university, dual certification of degree, collaboration with international institutions, organisation of joint summer schools, etc. It is also planned to organise scientific conferences and seminars, as well as to conduct mutually beneficial exchanges of experience. Hereby, within the framework of developing international relations, the university has signed cooperation protocols with Turkey's Gazi University, Yildiz Technical University, KTO Karatay University, and Istanbul Gedik University (MSU, 2022; Office of international..., 2023). Furthermore, a memorandum of cooperation was signed between Mingachevir State University and the Kyiv National University of Economics, as well as the Kyiv National University of Technologies and Design (KNUTD). The memorandum has initiated the GEOCLIC project, titled "New Courses in Geospatial Engineering for

Climate Change Adaptation of Coastal Ecosystems", within the framework of the Erasmus+ program. In this three-year program, higher education institutions from Azerbaijan, Germany, the Netherlands, Lithuania, Kazakhstan, Romania, and Turkmenistan have participated as partners. Additionally, the memorandum envisions scientific and cultural collaboration following the educational policies of both universities. Universities prioritise joint participation in international grant programs such as Erasmus+ and Horizon Europe. Potential areas of collaboration, including student and faculty exchanges within an academic framework, are also emphasised. Furthermore, it is planned to develop and implement educational programs, conduct scientific research, and organise scientific conferences, forums, and other events (KNUTD, 2021).

In recent years, HEI operating in the regions of the Republic of Azerbaijan have set the goal of becoming international universities and the main trends in this regard are as follows: attraction of international students, provision of participation in international exchange programs, establishment of international dual-degree programs, development of education programs in foreign languages, strengthening of academic opportunities, alignment of education programs with international practices, enhancement of international competitiveness.

## CONCLUSIONS

The research on the internationalisation policies of regional higher education institutions concluded that in recent years, new programs were implemented to attract foreign students. As a result of these programs, the number of foreign students coming to the country has increased, and the internal recognition of these regions was also noted. Online courses, the involvement of foreign lecturers, and other initiatives were proposed as part of the strategy. The research confirms that the internationalisation policies and strategies of regional higher education institutions have contributed to economic development. The policy of attracting foreign students and staff, as well as the strategies adopted by regional institutions in the context of increasing recognition of Azerbaijan's regional higher education in the international arena, were highlighted. These strategies include international partnerships, the development of academic and auxiliary services for foreign students, and the improvement of the appeal of higher education for international students.

The first fundamental strategy of internationalisation is to increase the attractiveness of foreign students. Therefore, the main objectives for Azerbaijani regional higher education institutions include attraction of students and professors from renowned foreign universities, improving the recognition and expansion of Azerbaijani higher education in the international arena, signing new cooperation agreements with foreign universities in addition to existing collaborations, increasing the potential for teaching in English alongside the native language, training highly qualified personnel for international foreign relations, and establishing appropriate departments for foreign collaborations at regional institutions. The study also highlighted

the need to establish permanent delegations of specialists fluent in foreign languages for visits to partner countries, the creation of an international cooperation office, and a centre for foreign students. These directions are prioritised, and further development of these efforts is planned.

None.

None.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

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## **Ефективність міжнародних зв'язків регіональних вищих навчальних закладів в умовах глобалізації**

**Анотація.** В умовах глобалізації метою регіональних вищих навчальних закладів є забезпечення доступу до освіти для людей з усіх соціальних верств і сприяння їхній інтеграції в міжнародний простір. Першочерговим завданням було досягнення визнання та розширення азербайджанської вищої освіти та регіональних вищих навчальних закладів у світовому контексті. Крім того, азербайджанська вища освіта прагне підписати нові угоди про співпрацю з іноземними вищими навчальними закладами на додаток до існуючої співпраці. У дослідженні були використані методи порівняння, синтезу, індукції та дедукції. Дослідження підтвердило, що міжнародні зв'язки та стратегічні плани розвитку регіональних закладів вищої освіти сприяють економічному розвитку. Крім того, програми, реалізовані цими закладами, збільшили кількість іноземних студентів, що покращило впізнаваність цих регіонів за кордоном. Оскільки це перше дослідження такого роду в Азербайджанській Республіці, воно буде цінним для вітчизняних та міжнародних дослідників. Проведені дослідження, порівняння та аналіз сприяли розробці комплексного підходу до вивчення теоретичних концепцій і моделей, які можуть бути застосовані у практиці викладання. Крім того, для іноземних дослідників це дослідження може бути використано як ресурс для отримання інформації про регіональні вищі навчальні заклади Азербайджану, а також про їхні міжнародні зв'язки, формуючи основу для подальших досліджень

**Ключові слова:** знання; програми стажування; освітні програми; інновації; студентська мобільність; сучасний університет