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E-mail: studyinabroad80@gmail.comORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1375-4034>**Enhancing of the Effectiveness of Internationalization Strategies in Higher Education Institutions:
A Focus on International Students in Azerbaijan**

This study explores internationalization strategies in Azerbaijani higher education institutions (HEIs) with a particular focus on the recruitment and retention of international students. Despite the global trend toward increased international student mobility, Azerbaijan has struggled to compete with neighboring countries, such as Turkey, in attracting international students. This research identifies the gaps in current internationalization efforts and proposes strategies to address challenges related to marketing, institutional infrastructure, and student support services. Through qualitative analysis, the study outlines recommendations for improving the international appeal of Azerbaijani universities, thus enhancing their global reputation and economic sustainability. Whether public or private, regardless of focus, from humanitarian studies to engineering, most of the universities don't have the International Student Offices or the activities of these offices are not enough in comparison with developed countries of Europe. Country Higher Education Strategy issues related to international students are one of the main priorities. In this regard Increasing the Effectiveness of Internationalization in the context of International Students admission and Proper Marketing strategy will help to establish the necessary infrastructure for pleasant and successful education life for international students. In order to reach that goal, the Office has to provide all useful and necessary information to all international students from registration to graduation, guidance to all administrative procedures and organize social and cultural activities for easy orientation.

Keywords: Internationalization, Higher Education, International Students, Azerbaijan, Marketing Strategies, Institutional Support.

Introduction. Higher education has always had a global dimension, with students and scholars crossing borders in pursuit of knowledge. Over the past few decades, internationalization has evolved from incidental interactions to strategic and organized processes. Today, universities across the world are engaged in recruiting international students and fostering partnerships to enhance academic mobility. However, internationalization is not just about student mobility – it also encompasses efforts to build institutional capacities and support services that cater to foreign students. This study focuses on Azerbaijan's higher education landscape, exploring the challenges faced by its HEIs in internationalizing and competing in the global education market. Regardless of the subordination and the form of ownership, foreign citizens have the right to get an education in educational institutions of the Republic of Azerbaijan at all stages and levels of education, as well as to study at scientific research institutions at doctoral level of higher education according to the approved resolutions. Number of foreign students educated in state and non-state higher educational institutions statistics by The State Statistical Committee of the Republic of Azerbaijan [The State Statistical Committee of the Republic of Azerbaijan] shows that in 2020–2021 academic year 5265 foreign students' study in Azerbaijan HEIs. Analyses show that this number continues to grow. In 2021–2022 academic year the number of foreign students was 5765, in 2022–2023 academic year the indicator was 6223 (<https://www.stat.gov.az/source/education/>). It shows that the interest of foreign country citizens to study in Azerbaijan HEIs is rising. But comparing to other region countries these numbers are not satisfactory. Even the total number of foreign students is equal the total number of foreign students in one university. And this fact makes us to think, to act and to develop strategies and policies in this regard. The majority of international students studying in Azerbaijan come from countries such as Turkey, Iran, Georgia, Russia, and the People's Republic of China. In addition, students from the United States of America, Norway, India, as well as the EU Member States are undertaking studies at Azerbaijani HEIs.

Literature review. Internationalization in higher education has been a growing focus globally. European initiatives, such as the Erasmus program, have been central to shaping the modern landscape of student

mobility. Universities worldwide now prioritize creating welcoming environments for foreign students through marketing strategies, support services, and administrative frameworks designed specifically for international students (De Wit, 2020).

The role of internationalization in strengthening national and institutional competitiveness is widely recognized. Scholars argue that for universities to attract international students, they need to enhance their institutional infrastructure, improve the quality of education, and provide support services that ease the transition for foreign students (Knight, 2011). Azerbaijani universities have started developing strategies based on these principles, but as compared to neighboring countries, their progress remains limited.

Studies show that international students bring multiple benefits, such as economic revenue, cultural diversity, and global partnerships (Altbach & Knight, 2007). However, attracting and retaining these students requires comprehensive planning and a consistent policy document implementation. This study investigates how Azerbaijani universities can improve their internationalization efforts by learning from best practices worldwide.

Methodology. This research adopts a qualitative approach to examine the internationalization strategies of Azerbaijani HEIs. Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews with university administrators, international office staff, and current international students in Azerbaijan. The interviews focused on institutional challenges, the experiences of foreign students, and the existing infrastructure to support internationalization.

Additionally, secondary data were gathered from Azerbaijani government reports, university statistics, and previous studies on internationalization in higher education. The data were analyzed to identify trends, gaps, and opportunities for improvement in Azerbaijan's approach to recruiting international students.

Findings. The study identified several key challenges faced by Azerbaijani HEIs in attracting and retaining international students:

Lack of Institutional Support Services: Most Azerbaijani universities either do not have dedicated international student offices or these offices lack the necessary infrastructure and trained personnel to provide adequate support to international students. International students often report difficulties in navigating administrative procedures such as admissions, visa applications, and housing.

Marketing and Recruitment Deficiencies: Azerbaijani universities have yet to develop effective marketing strategies tailored to international audiences. Currently, most universities rely on traditional recruitment methods, with limited engagement in international education fairs, partnerships with overseas agencies, or digital marketing.

Insufficient Infrastructure: University facilities such as dormitories, libraries, and sports complexes are not always up to international standards. This affects the overall student experience and makes Azerbaijani universities less competitive compared to institutions in neighboring countries.

Limited Opportunities for Practical Experience: International students in Azerbaijan have few opportunities to gain practical experience, such as internships and industry placements. This lack of experiential learning affects student satisfaction and career prospects, reducing Azerbaijan's appeal as a study destination.

Discussion. The study's findings highlight several areas for improvement in the internationalization efforts of Azerbaijani HEIs. To increase the number of foreign students, universities need to adopt a more structured approach to recruitment, marketing, and support services. The following recommendations are made:

Development of International Student Offices (ISOs): Azerbaijani universities should establish or enhance ISOs to provide comprehensive support to international students. These offices should assist students with administrative procedures, organize orientation programs, and offer social and cultural activities that promote integration.

Targeted Marketing Strategies: Universities need to develop marketing campaigns that emphasize the unique advantages of studying in Azerbaijan. Digital marketing, participation in international education fairs, and partnerships with recruitment agencies should be prioritized.

Infrastructure Improvement: To compete globally, Azerbaijani universities must upgrade their campus facilities. Investments in modern dormitories, libraries, and recreational areas would greatly improve the student experience and make Azerbaijan more attractive to international students.

Support for Practical Learning: Universities should establish partnerships with industries in Azerbaijan to provide international students with internships and hands-on learning opportunities. This would not only enhance student satisfaction but also improve employment prospects for graduates.

The research shows that Azerbaijan Higher Education Strategy issues related to international students are one of the main priorities. In this regard, increasing the effectiveness of internationalization in the context of international students' admission depends on a proper marketing strategy which will help to establish the necessary infrastructure for pleasant and successful education life for international students including mobility students and staff. The effective marketing strategy will be a guide for local universities to develop the effective

internationalization strategy. The Universities will be provided all useful and necessary information to all international students from registration to graduation, guidance to all administrative procedures and organize social and cultural activities for easy orientation.

Conclusions. The number of international students in Azerbaijan has been steadily increasing, but there is some significant potential for further growth. By improving infrastructure, enhancing marketing strategies, and providing better support services, Azerbaijani HEIs can become more competitive in the global education market. Learning from the experiences of European universities and adapting those strategies to the local context will be essential for Azerbaijani universities aiming to enhance their international profiles:

- Enriching the University experience for international students; including students' orientations to the life in campus and community, assistance with admission, visas or residence permits, travel arrangements.

- Collaborate with different departments and offices to create a nationally recognized international learning community in the university.

- Advocate for a pathway program for students to integrate intensive Azerbaijani/English language courses in the first grade such as Foundation program.

- Provide crucial information to students, scholars, and departments through scheduled communications and reminders, conducting several info days, seminars and workshops.

- Developing intensive orientation programs for students and scholars that implement face to face and on-line learning tools, experiential sessions, to promote group identity and community involvement, expanded continued orientation sessions, and comprehensive resources accessible through the internet.

- Transforming the University campus into an International Campus for existing and future international students and staff. A campus that fosters an institutional commitment to diversity, inclusion and bridging cultural gaps.

- Increasing the numbers of international students and staff; this will require a new marketing strategy and PR campaign lead by the ISO staff supported by the administration.

- Providing mobility windows for staff at all levels, including administrative staff as well faculty aiming at quality and successful knowledge transfer to other peers.

- Coordinating the activities contributing to the University International Ranking.

Promoting international education for increasing educational opportunities and diversify methods of communication to the campus and community we plan to realize following activities:

- Providing international education seminars and workshops presented in multiple venues and formats.

- Collaborating with Alumni Associations to connect international students in the country or abroad. Assist international alumni connect with other alumni in their home countries. Connect Alumni Association and Career Development Center for assistance with job search abroad.

- Actively participating in campus events and professional organizations such as New Faculty Orientation, Welcome Weeks activities, community festivals.

- Developing and implementing policies for the promotion of international education through the mass media – radio, TV, and etc.

To sum up, a well-coordinated internationalization strategy will not only attract more foreign students but also contribute to the global reputation of Azerbaijani higher education institutions, fostering a more vibrant and diverse academic community.

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Підвищення ефективності стратегій інтернаціоналізації у вищих навчальних закладах: акцент на іноземних студентів в Азербайджані

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Це дослідження аналізує стратегії інтернаціоналізації в азербайджанських вищих навчальних закладах (ВНЗ) з особливим акцентом на наборі й утриманні іноземних студентів. Незважаючи на глобальну тенденцію до збільшення міжнародної мобільності студентів, Азербайджану важко конкурувати із сусідніми країнами, зокрема з Туреччиною, у залученні іноземних студентів. Це дослідження визначає прогалини в поточних зусиллях з інтернаціоналізації та пропонує стратегії вирішення проблем, пов'язаних із маркетингом, інституційною інфраструктурою та службами підтримки студентів. За допомогою якісного аналізу в дослідженні наводяться рекомендації щодо покращення міжнародної привабливості азербайджанських університетів, таким чином підвищуючи їхню світову репутацію та економічну стійкість. Незалежно від того, державні чи приватні, незалежно від спрямованості, від гуманітарних досліджень до інженерії, більшість університетів не мають міжнародних студентських офісів або діяльності цих офісів недостатньо порівняно з розвиненими країнами Європи. Питання Стратегії вищої освіти країни, пов'язані з іноземними студентами, є одними з головних пріоритетів. У цьому розумінні підвищення ефективності інтернаціоналізації в контексті прийому іноземних студентів і правильна маркетингова стратегія допоможуть створити відповідну інфраструктуру для приємного й успішного освітнього життя іноземних студентів. Щоб досягти цієї мети, Офіс має надавати всю корисну та необхідну інформацію всім іноземним студентам від реєстрації до випуску, забезпечувати керівництво всіма адміністративними процедурами та організацію соціальних і культурних заходів для легкої орієнтації.

Ключові слова: інтернаціоналізація, вища освіта, іноземні студенти, Азербайджан, маркетингові стратегії, інституційна підтримка.

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