

Educational reforms and innovations in Azerbaijan

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Abstract

The focus of this article is made on the analysis of some important reforms and innovations implemented in the education sector by the government of Azerbaijan. During the Soviet period, Azerbaijan education system was based on standard soviet model imposed by Moscow. After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Azerbaijan started successfully to move forward towards the development as an independent country. The country established the close relations with different international organizations and institutions, as well as started to learn the practice of developed countries in education and other fields. As a result, the government of Azerbaijan started the implementation processes of reforms focused on the improvement of the quality of education and development of international relations in the sphere of education in order to ensure compliance with international standards. In the early 1990s, Azerbaijan didn't have enough resources to make the large-scale changes in education and we got support from various international organizations in order to begin the application of modern education systems in our country. Different projects, such as Education Reform Project, Education Sector Development Project, Second Education Sector Development Project, General Education Concept – National Curriculum in Azerbaijan Republic and other projects were conducted and still undergoing in collaboration with the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Azerbaijan and World Bank. This article provides a brief overview about the above mentioned programs, their application processes, as well as the results and their influences in our education system. Nowadays Azerbaijan with its recent development and the international support, is working towards providing a high quality education for its citizens.

Introduction

The progress of society has directly depended on the development of education and the correct assessment of its importance at all times. The demand of society has been strengthening the education's development, and scientific and technical progress raised more complicated duties to be solved in front of the education system. The role of education is increasing at a time when the competition in social and economic spheres of activity intensifies and natural resources is gradually exhausted in an information society where the scope of globalization is expanding widely. Unsurprisingly, the United Nations Organization has announced the XXI century "The century of education." The role of higher education in forming the human capital of higher intellect has received the significant importance.

Achievements in this field lay in the basis of important social and technological changes. The great attention paid to the education and its development in the Republic of Azerbaijan depends on the strategic importance of this sphere, the role of education in our society and the interests of major part of countries population.

Since the beginning of the XXI century Azerbaijan has become the most dynamically developing country of the region and post-Soviet space from educational point of view.

After Azerbaijan gained its independence, the need for fundamental reforms in education as in other areas emerged. The start of transition process from the Soviet education system to modern and international standards education system goes back to the mid-90s of the last century.

The education system in Azerbaijan was established during the eighth century. Higher education was developed during eleventh and fourteenth centuries.

The modern education system of Azerbaijan consists of three historical periods: the first period being from 1918 to 1920, the next period from 1920 to 1990 imposed by the Soviet Union, and the current education system which has been maintained since the country became independent from the Soviet in 1991.

Azerbaijan is listed among the countries with compulsory elementary and secondary education. The 1995 Constitution of Azerbaijan Republic regulates the rights to education (Article 42), according to which every citizen has a right to education and the State should provide free compulsory secondary education.

The Azerbaijan education has been changing radically since independence from the Soviet Union, and the large-scale projects have been designed and implemented. These projects have resulted in rapid and efficient progress during the short time, especially in preparing new textbooks, training aids, and learning and reading materials, including transition from Cyrillic to Latin Scripts. Azerbaijan has been politically stable and it could engender more favorable conditions for educational reform.

The education reforms carrying out in our country since gaining independence have global nature and cover all its aspects. The President of the Republic of Azerbaijan approved "The Reform Program in Education" which aims to identify strategic dimensions of reforms in education sphere.

Azerbaijan had to strengthen international relations and mutual cooperation to make progress in education sphere and to bring the education system of Azerbaijan in a line with international standards. (May 4, 1999)

Nowadays, education like any other spheres of political, economic and social life breaks the previous stereotypes down by eliminating borders among institutions, economies and more basically among people. With an easier access to Universities, the education systems now are expected to provide better quality and meet the demands put forward by external environment. Reforms and innovations undertaken to improve the quality of education is a through process based on multiple and comprehensive approaches to elementary, secondary as well as higher education systems.

Azerbaijan's education welcomes global reforms. Integration of education system of European countries and formation of European higher education space demonstrate special urgency. From this point of view, Bologna process is very important among performed actions. The country joined the Bologna process in 2005. However, even before the signature of the Bologna Declaration, Azerbaijan's higher education had opened its doors to the 2-cycle education system: starting from early 1990s, many of the Universities set up education at the bachelor and master levels. The above-mentioned Education Law is a step forward towards the transfer to the 3-cycle education system harmoniously integrating the doctoral level into the European Higher Education Area.

In order to implement provisions of Bologna declaration, in accordance with the appropriate action plan for 2006-2010, was approved the structure of minimum state requirements to the content and quality of bachelor degree preparation, confirmed and prepared new generation state educational standards in corresponding fields.

After Azerbaijan joined to the Bologna process, a need to apply a credit system in higher education has raised. In accordance with the application of this system has been learned the experience of some foreign countries in order to create the legal-normative basis.

Furthermore, was prepared and approved "Regulation on organizing the educational process through a credit system in higher education institutions," and in the preliminary stage has been decided to experiment with the application of the credit system in the number of universities. Experiment started in 10 universities for 2006-2007, surrounded all specialties of the universities in the next years. Experience of several foreign countries on the direction of creation of legislative norm on application of this system, has been thoroughly learned.

The purpose of our universities was to undertake changes not only in form, but also in the content. Anyway, we understood from the beginning that in the long run, the Bologna process was about quality, and that introduction of the credit system was not a formal assignment of numbers to subjects, but was an internal conceptual restructuring of these courses. And the process of reforms required that for genuine implementation of the credit system to be understood and accepted by large communities involved in the education process.

It should be taken into account that all these reforms get considerable governmental support. However, the reform process itself has been able to boost the bottom-up approach at the universities. Many of the reforms now are being initiated from within the universities and successfully communicated to higher instances.

The involvement of the students in the decision-making process became a leverage for promoting quality control overall. Students' opinion was considered in curriculum design, students were able to select or reject a course, and student's assessment became an important part in course and teacher evaluation.

Furthermore, there have been implemented relevant measures on recognizing diplomas of students studied abroad in Azerbaijan. Thus, in accordance with the "Rules for recognition and determination of equivalence (nostrification) of qualifications in the higher education area of foreign countries" was established by Standing Commission in the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Azerbaijan.

Collaboration of the Ministry of Education with World Bank continues from 1999. Thus, the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Azerbaijan in cooperation with the World Bank has developed a Concept and strategy on continuous pedagogical education and teacher training in the Republic of Azerbaijan within the Education Sector Development Project. The document was approved in 2007. After the approval of the concept paper, a number of activities have been carried out with regards to the implementation of reforms in the content of pedagogical staff training.

In general, solution of problems such as lack of teaching staffs at schools, and ensuring young specialists with work estimated as an important activity direction that will give a contribution to the future development of Azerbaijan education.

Therefore, the development program on the provision of comprehensive schools of the Republic of Azerbaijan with teaching staff in 2005-2009 had a special importance and played a special role in the solution of problems.

The main goal of the program was to successfully solve the problem connected with the lack of teaching staff at comprehensive schools of Azerbaijan within the next five years. Moreover, the prospective activity included some other problems as well. Different

indicators, such as the existence of unqualified teaching staffs at schools and their involvement to the special training courses to improve their skill, as well as the increasing of their quality were taken into account. What is more, one of the goals was the preparation of small specialists to ensure the citizens with workplaces in the future.

Second Education Sector Development Project is being implemented since 2009. The objective of the Project is to enhance the effectiveness of teaching and learning conditions in general education schools through curriculum reform and teacher in-service training. Project covers 3 education levels and consists of 6 components. As in previous projects, departments and senior officials of the Ministry of Education are responsible for implementation of the Project. The Project closing date is March 31, 2016.

To facilitate the development of new social studies instructional practices, the Azerbaijan Institute of Educational Problems established a curriculum center that was responsible for the development of the scope and sequence of the national social studies curriculum. The Ministry of Education of Azerbaijan sent many specialists to different countries to learn their experiences, to conduct research in their educational system and in curriculum development.

In 2005 the Curriculum Center prepared the standards and in 2006 they prepared curriculum of general education which was successfully implemented in Azerbaijan.

Azerbaijan Teachers Institute is one of the leading educational institutes in Azerbaijan for upgrading and retraining of teachers. The Institute has contributed very much to the development of scientific and pedagogical thought, enlightenment and national culture in Azerbaijan and plays an important role in additional and vocational education of teachers. Founded at the end of the XX century the Institute has played an important role in improvement of their scientific and methodical level.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union Azerbaijan faced serious problems in the system of education, the lack of teaching staff in the rural mountain settlements, discrepancy within the common European standards caused the necessity of foundation of a new type of Higher Education Institution.

Azerbaijan Teachers Institute and its branches were established by the decree of Heydar Aliyev in 2000.

The National Leader who believed a teacher to be rescuer of nation used to say: "Being a teacher is both honorable and hard responsibility. Being a teacher at a HEI, which is being a teacher's teacher is twice as honorable."

With opening 11 branches of Teachers Institute in different regions of the country, the Institute not only solved the problems regarding the staff in the regions, as well as strengthened the staff potential. Currently the Institute continues to support the creation and increase of intellectual community possessing of new knowledge and prevents the migration of rural population to the industrial centers.

Rector of the Institute, Professor Agiya Nakhchivanli said: "Azerbaijan Teachers Institute (ATI) is an educational establishment focused on constant development and innovation." These innovations put the student in the center of the teaching process. The student, not the programs, books, curricula, learning resources etc. now became the final product of the University. Nor was the professor/instructor the sole decision-maker on the goals of teaching, and this made the student the main stakeholder in the new education market, where Azerbaijan Teachers Institute took an active part.

Azerbaijan Teachers Institute is one of the major higher educational institutions for higher education and teacher training in Azerbaijan. ATI is the only higher educational establishment with 11 branches in the country.

Education

Leaving behind 85 years of activity, ATI offers undergraduate, graduate and doctorate programs, as well as, advanced qualification and retraining programs in accordance with Bologna process and the credit system requirements.

There are three faculties with 10 specializations:

- The Pedagogical Faculty
 - Teacher of Primary school
 - Pedagogy and methods of primary education
 - Teacher of mathematics and information science
- The Faculty of Philology and Psychological Assistance in Education
 - Socio-psychological service in the education
 - Pedagogy and psychology
 - Preschool education and children's upbringing
 - Pedagogy and methods of preschool education
 - Teacher of Azerbaijani language and literature
- The Faculty of Advanced Qualification and Retraining

Additional education

The Institute plays an important role in additional and vocational education of teachers in Azerbaijan. Each year ATI organizes professional upgrading training, which involves more than 10,000 teachers from universities, colleges, secondary schools and preschool institutions.

Azerbaijan Teachers Institute promoted the sustainability of reforms also through the international partnerships. Many successful bilateral projects became a true external evaluation mechanism for our programs. ATI is the official UNEVOC Centre in Azerbaijan. As EMINENCE (Erasmus Mundus – Integration of Neighboring Eastern Regions through Cooperation in Higher Education) consortium member in 2012 the Azerbaijan Teachers Institute was successfully selected for Erasmus Mundus External Cooperation Window Action 2 project with Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznan, Poland as a coordinating university.

The project lasted 3 years during which students and academic staff from eastern neighborhood region had the mobility within the partner institutions from Western Europe. Students and academic staff from Europe partner institutions have been involved in mobility within the institutions in the universities of countries of eastern neighborhood region.

With the purpose of improvement of the teaching quality of teachers of the Azerbaijan Teachers Institute regular meetings, round tables, courses and trainings have been organized through support of embassies of France, Germany, USA, and United Kingdom.

Azerbaijan, as a young country moving forward with the solid steps towards democracy, takes all necessary measures to improve the educational system as we clearly understand that higher educated citizens are the pillars of progress in all spheres of life.

There is a high attention to development of education in order to secure the country's future sustainable development. In the framework of these development processes the different regulations on (re)organization of education system, as well as reforms in

international context are the essential part of continuing processes of improvements and innovations.

Today the representatives of the education system of Azerbaijan participate in the activity of UNESCO, UNICEF, UNEVOC, ISESCO and European Educational Fund; also our Republic collaborates with the bodies on education issues of the international organizations, such as the Council of Europe and the European Union using their practice and assistance.

Along with the reforms taken to improve the quality of education in Azerbaijan, the country's leadership takes necessary steps to ensure opportunities for young Azerbaijanis to study in leading Universities of the world. According to the strategy of transferring oil capital into humancapital on April 16, 2007, the country's President Ilham Aliyev signed a State Program on Azerbaijan citizens' education abroad for the period of 2007-2015.

The program is financed by funds allocated by the State Oil Fund. Under this program, the Azerbaijani young people have been sent for education to developed countries like Australia, South Korea, China, Malaysia, Singapore, the U.S., Germany, France, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Finland, Italy, Belgium and Great Britain.

Through the period from 2007-2015 academic years 3185 Azerbaijani citizens were able to study at the Universities abroad and the efficient use of the potential of specialists educated abroad in the country's development is being ensured.

A new state program will be adopted on the education of young people in foreign countries for the period of 2015-2020.

Besides beginning of new reforms in the education system Azerbaijan has increased volume of funds allotted by the state in several times, in parallel to economic development of education in the country. An important part of the state budget expenditure on education is directed on construction of new schools, for the modernization of the educational infrastructure. As well as the more funds are allocated on construction of new schools in the country, repairing and modernization of the old ones by the Heydar Aliyev Foundation and the Reserve Fund of the President of Azerbaijan.

Starting its activity since 2004, the Heydar Aliyev Foundation has been actively participating in building a new society and contributing to the social and economic development of the country, by implementing various projects in the sphere of education. Today the President of Foundation is Azerbaijan's First Lady, Mehriban Aliyeva. At the same time, she is Goodwill Ambassador of UNESCO and ISESCO.

The major goal of the Program conducted since the year of 2005 has been to support the efforts aimed at addressing existing problems in education, establishing new training centers meeting the world standards in the country, eliminating the obstacles having a direct impact on the quality of education, and finding out the possibilities for cooperation among various social strata, as well as local and foreign companies in this field.

In the framework of the Support to Education Program, up to 400 school buildings were erected or renovated in the different regions of the country during 2005-2012, with an overall capacity exceeding 100 thousand school children. Each of the schools was equipped with up-to-date laboratories, libraries, cafeterias, state-of-the-art computer classes, workshops, gymnasia and playgrounds. Each school was equipped with its own heating system.

Development of education in Azerbaijan, providing of children and young people with world class education, training of highly qualified personnel comprise of important part of the strategy of the country's president on turning of oil capital intellect to development of professionalism.

The President of the Azerbaijan Republic issued an instruction on the preparation of the Development Concept "Azerbaijan – 2020: Look into the Future". The need to prepare such concept is due to the fact that our country has stepped into a new stage of development.

The formation of a modern education system in 2012-2020, the share of the funding for education will increase from year to year and reach the appropriate indicator in developed countries.

Work to construct and refurbish schools will continue and a special program will be drafted and implemented to rationalize the network of general education institutions. Transition to a 12-year general education system will be secured. Education at the level of full secondary education will be organized on the basis of specialization and individual developing programs will be created for talented children.

At the same time, various developing, correcting and inclusive education programs will be created for children who need special care and have limited physical abilities. University estates (campuses) and appropriate industrial parks will be created for institutions of higher education.

The computerization of the information system will always be in the center of attention as one of the main directions of establishing general education at a modern level. In 2013-2020, a state program will be adopted to computerize the education system in the Azerbaijan Republic. Within the framework of the state program, all the education institutions of Azerbaijan (including schools located in remote regions) will be provided with access to the Internet, as well as every education institution will be provided with the necessary technical equipment and connected to the single Education Network of Azerbaijan. Every classroom in schools will be provided with a laptop, projector and electronic table, while all pupils will be provided with a netbook or tablets within the framework of the project one pupil – one computer. The use of electronic education technologies will significantly expand and a virtual learning environment will be created for teachers and pupils.

The number of "electronic schools" will reach 1,000. To ensure the self-education and growing demand for lifetime education, libraries will be modernized and opportunities for using digital education resources will be expanded. The number of electronic libraries will increase, a Distant Education Centre will be created and the use of distant education in institutions of education will expand.

At the same time, an online TV channel Tahsil TV will be established and presented to the general public.

Taking into account that the factor of teachers is of special importance in the efficiency of the education and its achievements, special importance will be attached to the strengthening of teachers' training. All general education teachers will specialize in active/interactive teaching technologies and inclusive education, and a flexible system will be created to ensure that every teacher learns ICT skills. The training of Azerbaijani teachers will be brought in line with international standards, a stimulating refresher training system for teachers based on a new module-credit system will be developed and mechanisms that meet modern requirements will be created to ensure teachers' career

development, stimulate their activities and spread the working experience of leading teachers.

Along with that, differential salaries and an awarding system based on results will be created. The new mechanism employed in the recruitment of pedagogical staff will be improved even further, and material stimulation measures aimed to providing remote village schools with pedagogical staff will be strengthened.

The integration of Azerbaijani education into world and European education will increase. Along with the unification of education standards and deepening of the Bologna Process, attention will be paid to the expansion of the international relations of Azerbaijani institutions of education, especially institutions of higher education, and the creation of appropriate conditions for their active involvement in international programs being implemented in the sphere of education.

Conclusion

Saying without any doubt, we believe and hope that at the twenty fourth year of the country's independence educational development is the highest priority on the agenda of the Government of Azerbaijan. Investments allocated in education are long-term and strategic importance. The Government takes all necessary steps, through improvement of quality in education, to increase the social welfare of its population and facilitate the country's progress. And this will be possible by preparing highly qualified professionals for various sectors of political, social and cultural life.

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