

CHALLENGES FACED BY INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AND THEIR LIFE SATISFACTION IN AZERBAIJAN

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ABSTRACT

Ever since Azerbaijan's educational system reform to that of the European standards coupled with the fairly low cost of obtaining a European-style education, there is an increasing number of international students from different countries studying in Azerbaijan each year. Despite the fact that international students face massive challenges while studying away from their home countries. The purpose of this paper was to uncover challenges faced by international students in Azerbaijan, their life satisfaction and its overall impact on the study experience. The data were collected using a mixed-methods research, both qualitative and quantitative tools employed. An electronic questionnaire was developed and sent to be filled-up by sample international students studying at different universities in Azerbaijan. Through one-to-one discussions and focus groups individual experiences were recorded. Approximately, the total number of 50 plus international students voluntarily filled-up the questionnaire; 10 universities and about 20 different nationalities. The data collected were analyzed by excel analytics. The findings reveal that participants widely face challenges in communication, adapting to the local cuisine, cultural environment and social interaction. Nonetheless the overall experience is positive and life satisfaction is skewed towards satisfaction. For the country to attract more students, an increased focus on minimizing all the challenges is a must.

Keywords: Azerbaijan, international students, challenges, universities, culture, language, life satisfaction

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INTRODUCTION

Azerbaijan as a secular democratic Muslim-majority state is attracting the attention of an increasing number of International students. According to the Human Development Index (HDI), Azerbaijan has a high level of human development i.e. 0.754 in the 80th percentile. Definitions of international students vary between countries. Some countries define international students according to their citizenship or visa status in the host country. According to Kritz (2015), International Students are those who temporarily reside in a country other than their country of citizenship or permanent residence in order to participate in international educational exchanges as students, teachers, and researchers. Despite, an increasing trend and upward rising graph of students going to international universities, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development's (OECD) and the United Nations Educational Science and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) figures understate the number because they only include students who go abroad for a year or more of study (Rajkhowa, 2014). There are many reasons that attract international students to study abroad such as economic, political, security and academic even though they face different challenges during their studies. Challenges may refer to a confrontation or struggle with something as a test of one's abilities or one's due claim to something, that is, any difficulty that stands in the way of an opportunity for development. Despite the challenges face by international students, the number of students studying outside of their country of origin is increasing worldwide (Nuffic 2012: 75; OECD 2012; Rajkhowa 2014). Today, education of International students in Azerbaijan has become one of the primary directions of the Department of international relations of the Ministry of Education. Moreover, the growing number of international students who study at Azerbaijan universities steadily increased from 5,410, representing 75 countries in 2017/2018 to 6,004 representing 86 countries in 2018/19. These official numbers comprise international students who study at various Azerbaijani universities under Azerbaijan state scholarships for international students, the ERASMUS exchange program as well as international students who come under private or self-financing. In general, in this representative number of international students studying at local universities of Azerbaijan, Turkey sends the maximum number of students to Azerbaijan, followed by Iran, Russia, Georgia, Iraq, Pakistan, Turkmenistan, Bangladesh, China, Nigeria, Kazakhstan, Syria, India (sub-continent), South-East Asian countries and African countries. As we are all aware, studying in a foreign environment is not an easy task and is regarded as a challenge owing to the fact that international students face cultural shock, language barriers, adjustment issues with customs and values, feeling of depression, anxiety, homesickness, differences in the educational system, and a loss of their established social network (Rawjee, 2012). Singh et al. (2003) also states that the known challenges international students include: racial discrimination, changes in their life status, climatic conditions and food differences, language, accommodation, separation from home, dietary restrictions, money, diminished social discrimination, and discrepancy in educational systems. Le et al. (2016) is of the view that the majority of international students have to deal with dominant challenges such as language barriers and culture gaps. Owing to the thrust of challenges, international students are at risk of developing mental health problems due to the loss of support systems and acculturation stress (Maclachlan and Justice 2009). The same problem is mentioned by Sam et al. (2015) that students become prone to mental health problems such as depression, psychosomatic complaints, anxiety, and paranoid reactions. The difficulties they face that contribute to this mental health risk are highlighted as language difficulties, culture shock, difficulties in negotiating day-to-day social activities, racial and ethnic discrimination, and a lack of physical activities (Yoh et al. 2008; Wang 2009). This leads international student, on their return home, to find themselves feeling frustrated because of the vast differences between their overseas training and the reality of their home countries (Robinson, 2009). Many researchers have indicated that the challenges for international students may differ from region to region depending on the country where they are pursuing their education. Talebloo (2013) researched international students in Malaysia concluded that international students are faced with four

common categories of problem, which are facilities (accommodation, transportation, food, and libraries), the social environment (culture, communication, and English difficulties), academic difficulties (the academic system, lectures and methodology, faculty supervisors), and the international office program (lack of entertaining activities). Rawjee (2012) researched exchange students' communication challenges in South Africa and argued that on exchange programs students are faced with communication issues and culture shock. Furthermore, a study on African students showed south-Africans faced with challenges related to crime, travel, medical insurance, acquiring a study permit, discrimination, and distance from their family, work challenges, limited funds, accommodation, and limited access to other resources. Lewis et al. (2013, p. 18-22) surveyed international students in Taiwan and concluded that they are faced with language, culture, transportation, weather, gender, and ethnic challenges. International students from the United States of America are faced with language problems, financial issues, cultural issues, feelings of social exclusion, homesickness, loss of social support, and even racism. The US News (2015) added that there are six common challenges of foreign students to America, which are new assignments, new professors, new food, a new culture, new subjects, and new friends. This literature reveals that the challenges international students meet are somehow similar in nature, be it different parts of the world. They try their very best to overcome these challenges by living with them, but still some challenges are mentally agonizing and measures should be taken to deal with them.

RATIONALE AND AIM OF STUDY

The rationale and aim of this research is to investigate challenges faced, provide in-depth information and guidance concerning the life satisfaction for both currently enrolled and prospective international students who wish to study in Azerbaijan. This information will also help government and private agencies in providing positive and effective support against the challenges faced by international students while they are pursuing their studies in Azerbaijan. The Azerbaijani language script matches neither matches native Persian and nor the soviet spoken Russian language. Due to its originality from the Altaic language, the vocabulary of Azerbaijani language contains many words from Turkish, Arabic, Persian, and European languages.¹⁷ Therefore, the Azerbaijani language structure differs from various participants' native language such as Swahili, Somali, Khmer, Persian, Arabic, French, Nepali, Urdu and others. Consequently, during their first year study, international students can face a lot of challenges. That is why this research could provide insights to reveal and resolve commonly occurring problems for international students and their university administrators. In this study, we came up with following three research questions that guided us in investigating the challenges faced by international students and their life satisfaction in Azerbaijan:

1. *How students feel socially challenged while communicating with natives?*
2. *What are the protruding daily life challenges while studying in Azerbaijan?*
3. *What is the life satisfaction of international students and how it affects their overall experience?*

METHODOLOGY

A mixed methods research was used as the methodology of this research, involving an integrated quantitative survey to know the life satisfaction values and qualitative interviewing to learn about the subjective problems of international students. By means of simple random sampling a sample population was chosen for conducting this study. The approach of the focus groups was phenomenological questioning, with an intentionality to know about their own experiences. The life satisfaction data was collected from a well-structured questionnaire with least Fifty (50) heterogeneous volunteer participants, comprising of males and females in different age groups, across a range of fields and a hailing from diverse cultural backgrounds. The data collected through forms was centered upon the personal discretion of the individual (completely voluntary in nature). While the collection process, participants were given basic instructions prior to the survey access and then left on their own to answer questions without any influence.

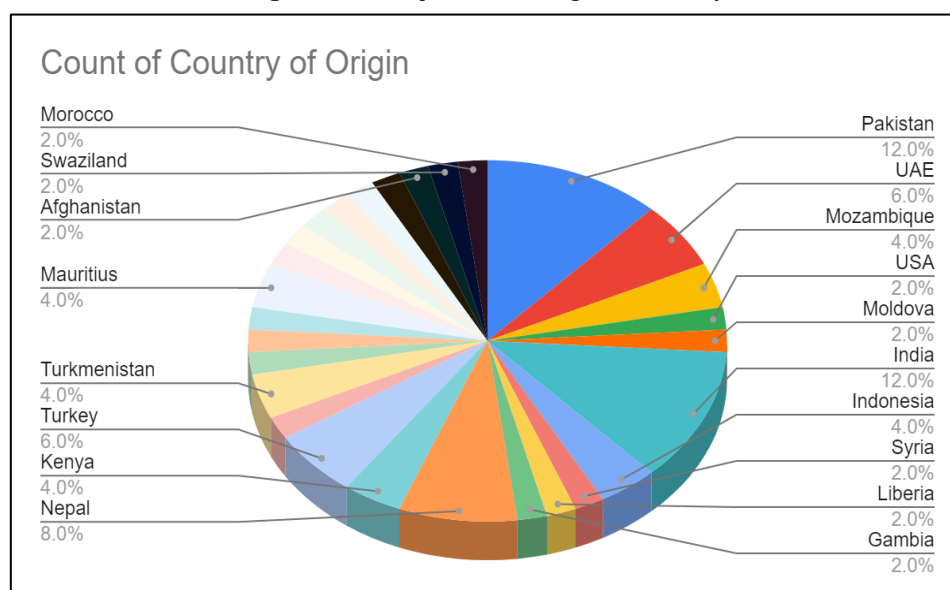
During the one-to-one interviews, students were engaged to share their experiences by identifying common student-life challenges in a new country i.e. Azerbaijan.

As we measured responses by an e-survey (google forms) which was security encrypted and shared specifically with our sample population, so it was a reliable tool because there is no way the form can be altered by anyone when filled and submitted. However, the reliability of the study statistics was estimated by (Number of agreed responses/ Total number of Agreed + Disagreed responses) * 100 formula (Mile and Huberman 1994: p. 64). In our case reliability of the responses was calculated to be 77% i.e. 50/65 * 100.

PARTICIPANTS

The participants of this research were international students studying at different universities in Baku, Azerbaijan. International students from at least ten (10) notable universities participated in the online survey, the rest from other universities gave their opinion by sharing subjective experiences. This study was gender-neutral; both males and females were involved (using a heterogeneous sampling approach). The sample population participants belonged had different nationalities, and it was aimed to make the study more diverse by engaging students from various countries. Students from twenty (20) countries contributed to the research (see Figure 1). One hundred (100) plus students were expected to participate in this research, but only 50-60 international students voluntarily expressed interest. The data were collected and analyzed by using frequency analysis.

Figure 1: Participants according to Nationality



Source: Authors' research data

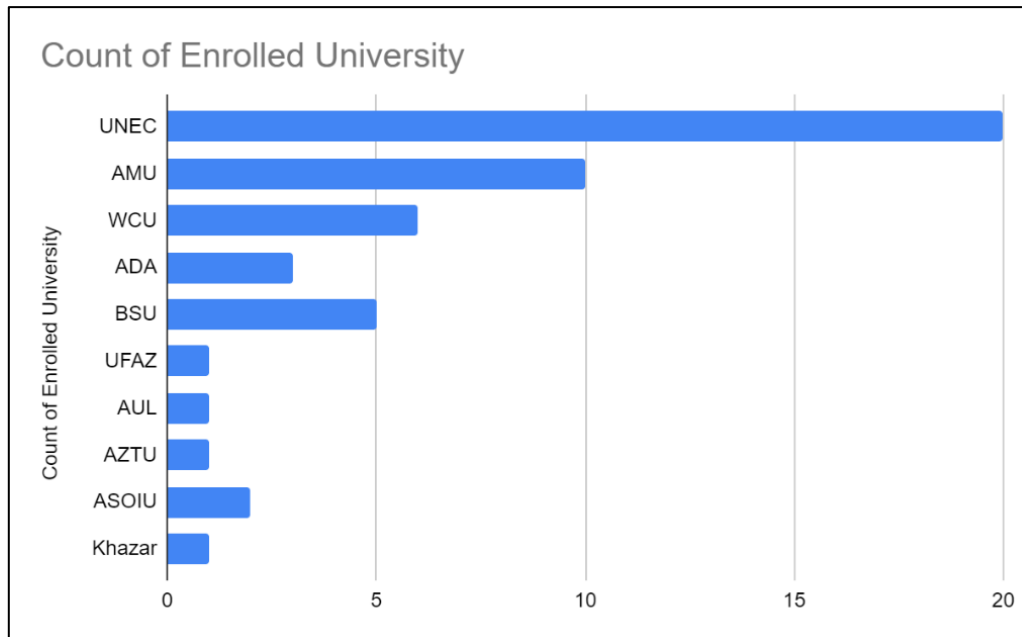
Out of the 50 survey participants: 23 were male and 27 were female; 48% of the participants belong to the 17-21 age group, 22% are 22-25, 30% are 26-30 years old respectively. Regarding their education level, 31 students were enrolled in Bachelor, 16 in Master, and only 3 in PhD programs. The data collected through interviews gave a picture of the challenges faced by the international student community, while the survey was a means to measure their overall living conditions and the life satisfaction levels.

FINDINGS

Findings are discussed on the basis of analyzed data, in order to get a clear picture about the situational challenges and corresponding life satisfaction levels of international students in Azerbaijan. The collected data reveals that we had students from ten (10) different universities

who participated in the survey; 40% of participants were from Azerbaijan State University of Economics (UNEC) (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Frequency of participants from each university



Source: authors' research data

Nearly all the participants answered in affirmation of the fact they face challenges while studying in Azerbaijan. Nearly all study participants indicated their high level of concern for language barrier, when it comes to socializing and everyday communication. Only, Turkish students somehow take the upper edge, as their language shares similarity with Azerbaijani language. One participant from Pakistan states: *"I cannot move around the city without google translate. I need it wherever and whenever I go out. The supermarket, the public transport and even in the university departments there is hardly anybody who could answer me in English"*. International students who volunteered for this research, reveal that initially they were so frustrated that they thought of giving up and going back. Participants said that while executing everyday errands sometimes it becomes so difficult explain a common English word that a person feels dumb in front of a local. Most of the participants said that in case of not having access to internet or translation applications they tried to communicate by means of gestures, symbols, and/or sign language. However that was not seen as a way out to their challenge. Another aspect of communication challenge was that international students could not socialize with local university fellows. Participants told that they wanted to strengthen friendly relations with their fellow Azerbaijanis but most of them could not. Making new friends or connections was subject to the condition that the second person understands English. But it is interesting to note that students enrolled in Bachelor program; studying compulsory language course (Azerbaijani), were able to maintain pace with their class fellows by learning common words. International Bachelor students said that the language course is a challenge in itself but was proving helpful for them in many aspects especially improving social skills.

Regarding the University, the students said that most of them were unable to follow the procedures and steps for instance the registration, paper obligations, and the migration requisites etc. because they were mainly in Azerbaijani. Pre-dominantly international Master students complained that they had a crucial time communicating their course queries and finding supervisors as their program managers lacked English language skills. Despite the daunting communication challenge, almost everyone had the unanimous opinion that their university's responsible staff offers them maximum help in school matters. An international student from the United Arab

Emirates stated *"My experience with the administration is very positive. Being a class representative, I frequently have to connect with the teachers and the Dean's office. Their behavior is friendly and assist when needed"*. The in-class experience was noted to be holistic and rich; as they were learning from well qualified and English speaking faculty. Nevertheless, a few students had subjective answers that the native teachers had an unusual English accent which was tough to decipher in-class. A Thai student exclaimed *"2 out of 5 professors I am learning from have very different pronunciation and it is not very familiar to me. So most of the time I cannot catch what words the teacher says"*. Concerning the daily life, many international students expressed their challenges in cultural practices, food, accommodation, health, and security. In terms of culture, half of the participants were of the opinion that compared to their home countries, 96% of Azerbaijan's population is nominally Muslim. Therefore, there is a cultural shift in food (dishes prepared from Halal meat), followed by greetings, holidays, practices and some religious activities. Like limited or no places for Christians, Hindus, and Buddhists to worship. Contrarily, participants who were practicing Muslims said that Azerbaijan is very convenient for them as they could easily locate a Mosque for praying.

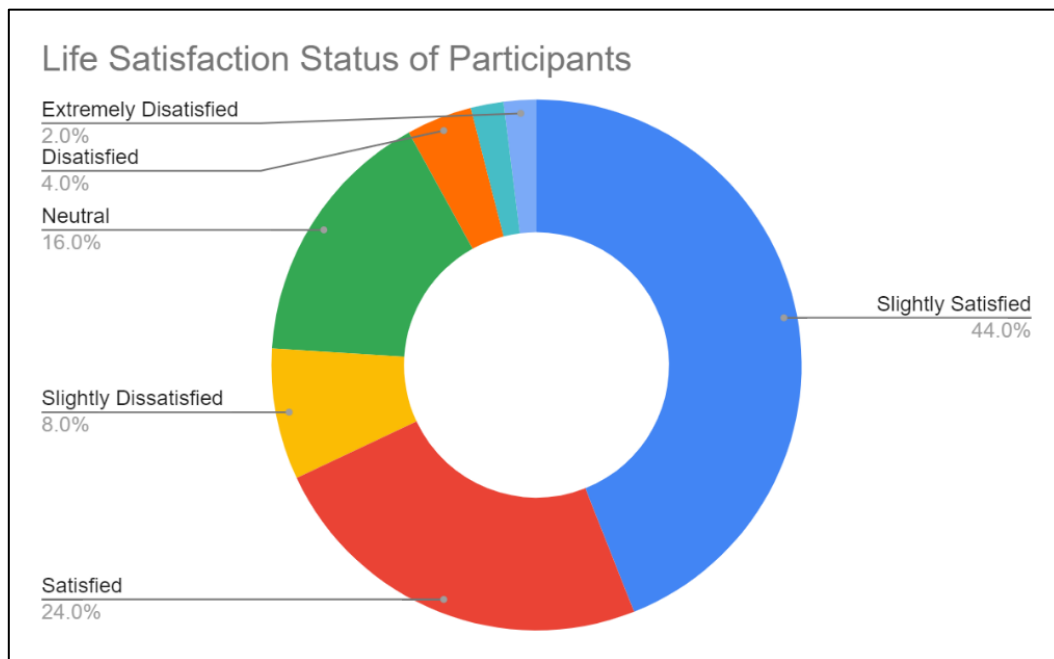
Participant students, living in the international dormitory told that eating the same repetitive menu made them annoyed at times. One student from the United States expresses *"I do not understand what I eat. I only eat for the sake of eating because I have no other option of searching for a flavorsome meal. My daily schedule is too busy and I seem to live with the available options"*. For international students adjusting to the local cuisine is one unresolved challenge. Belonging to different parts of the world they possessed varying food consumption habits. Participants from the Sub-continent craved for spicy dishes, East-Asians were inclined to Khmer cuisine, and the Africans' consumption centered on starches and had a preference for richness of exotic flavors.

In terms of the security, everyone was completely pleased. Most of the participants said that Azerbaijan, Baku specifically was safer than their own home countries. Even the female participants exclaimed that they could travel freely without any fear, be it midnight. Nonetheless, students expressed their concern that the migration process i.e. obtaining a residence permit was too challenging. For the new ones, and the continuing students alike. They said it was not a one-time pain procedure, *"We need to get it renewed every year. It does not make sense and is very hectic. They should issue it for our period of study and should not complicate the process, as we already registered in the beginning"*.

About the health and hygiene conditions, most of the participants adjusted to the conditions of the new place. Yet, some female participants complained that their dormitory roommates did not abide by cleanliness and manners. A Cambodian girl voices out her living challenge *"Two of my roommates are Arabic. I have major issues with them in terms of hygiene. I tell them multiple times, but they tend to ignore it. Neither do they have understanding with me nor with English language"*. Most of all, the students residing in the international dormitory 'UNIVERIUM' were happy with their dorm's strict compliance to health standards for both food and living.

We also measured their life satisfaction values, on a scale of 7-49 with seven determinants. The lowest score (extremely dissatisfied) was 7 for a Male student from Nepal pursuing a Master program at UNEC and the highest score was 45 (extremely satisfied) also for a Male student, belonging to Tanzania and studying Bachelor program at UNEC. The international students said that challenges apart they feel so welcomed in Azerbaijan that, according to interviews, when they were asked about the level of Life Satisfaction. Only 15% of the total participants had a feeling of dissatisfaction (see Figure 3), whereas 69% of the sample studied was on the whole satisfied with their conditions *'Life Satisfaction Survey for international students studying in Azerbaijan'* (Appendix).

Figure 3: Percentages of Life Satisfaction



Source: Authors' research data

Besides, the participants indicated that there should be an increased focus on minimizing all the challenges they face with immediate action. In this way, new students will be saved from trouble in the future.

CONCLUDING DISCUSION

This paper identified the challenges faced by international students who are pursuing their higher education in Azerbaijan's capital city, Baku. Through this research we can emphasize that if the challenges faced by international students are not resolved they can seriously hamper Azerbaijan's potential of hosting higher education candidates in the near future. The existing challenges can lead to disappointment, frustration, some students even return home. From life satisfaction survey it was revealed that higher percentage of the students are satisfied living in Azerbaijan. Personal income (earnings received from home and/or stipend) definitely impacts one person's living circumstances and overall contentment. However it is was interesting to note that life satisfaction level does not in all cases depend upon the personal income or monthly spending of participants. For instance, a student receiving 1300 AZN per month was noted to be slightly dissatisfied whereas student(s) with monthly allowance 200 AZN reported to be satisfied. The most formidable challenge for international students was communication; learning and coping with Azeri language, to maintain a survival in the country which has not still accepted English as a formal language. As Azerbaijan is a post-soviet country, English programs in universities were not well established until the last five years. Traditionally, in educational institutions including universities the language of instruction is predominantly Azeri or Russian. These language difficulties pose a settlement challenge for many international students, resultantly many fail to cope up with new learning methodology in the hosted university. Based on the country's official education language i.e. Azeri, there are lack of extra-curricular activities in English, thus international students have to make a compromise on the all-round experience of studying abroad.

When studying abroad, it is commonly reported that students experience culture shock and homesickness in foreign lands. According to Mukminin (2012) international graduate students experience culture shock through language gap, communication style, food, and lifestyle. But in our study it was noted from the participants that the teachers' behavior, good-natured locals and

hospitable culture of Azerbaijan helped them (students) to overpower their anxiousness and fear. Though living in dormitories brings unexpected problems. Nonetheless, many participant students living in Baku state dormitories expressed how they assimilated in the local lifestyle, made good connections and did not want to leave the place.

The number of international students coming to Baku each year is on the rise. Especially those gaining the AIDA (Azerbaijan International Development Agency) Scholarship, Erasmus and/or Mevlana exchange program. In this scenario, getting the medical clearance and obtaining a residence permit is a long and tedious process which raises concerns among the international students. As most of the students when faced with a health problem, need to get medication or treatment under their health insurance rules and regulations. This health card is only issued once the student has received the TRP (temporary residence permit). Therefore, to ease the international students the state migration service of Azerbaijan must introduce a fast track system to cater their registration and TRPs.

Constitutionally Azerbaijan does not declare any religion and the political parties are secularist; majority of the Azerbaijanis identify themselves as Muslim but nominally. There are 2166 mosques in the country today, 136 of them are in the city of Baku, but practice is limited. Moreover, there are 10 churches and 2 synagogues in Baku alone. The lack of somewhere to pray has been found to be a challenge for non-Muslims. Even some Muslims say that when they are outside it is hard to find a place to pray, and in their dormitory the conditions and attitude of people towards praying is not friendly. The universities and dormitories should cater to the individual needs of students, by dedicating prayer halls/rooms which could be used freely without any disregard.

Based on our discussion, it can be concluded that the challenges experienced by international students predominantly center on language, communication, culture, migration procedure, accommodation, health, and other social interaction, separation from families and friends, and academic structure. Security was found to have minimal intimidation, while language and communication seemed to be of greater risk. Additionally, the challenges differ subjectively, or on the difference of one nationality to another. Yet the Azerbaijani people and academicians' obliging attitude helps them manage to adopt the new practices.

This study shows that these challenges are arising on a relative pace (to international students' enrolment) and that extensive and immediate strategies should be implemented to resolve the prevalent issues. Nevertheless, a challenging environment broadens the perspective of students and also cultivates in them lifelong learning skills.

Limitations

This research was carried out on a limited scale. As only 50 international students participated voluntarily. We did not get a chance to interact with most university students as half of the forms were filled by referrals; partial or no one-to-one interaction. The findings and secondary sources show that majority of the students belonged to Azerbaijan State University of Economics (UNEC) however, to make the research more all-inclusive a proportionate ratio of students should be included from the listed universities. Thus, this type of research should be conducted by the Ministry of Education (Azerbaijan) in collaboration of the international department of each university to get a broad picture of the overall situation.

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