# THE RECRUITMENT OF ACADEMIC STAFF IN HIGHER EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS OF AZERBAIJAN

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## ABSTRACT

The foundation of an educational institution is the academic personnel. The process of recruiting academic staff in higher education institutions (HEIs) is an important step for future development as the chosen candidates provide students of said institutions with education, fulfilling the primary goal of any educational organization. The study analyzes the recruitment process of the academic staff in HEIs in Azerbaijan. The research examined some variables related to the recruitment process and recommended further improvements. A qualitative method and a diagnostic research design were used. The analysis found that different departments and approaches are utilized in universities. However, there are three key requirements of the recruitment process in all universities: universities' needs, labor code, and the regulations of the Ministry of Education. Additionally, the study revealed that while the HR department partakes in the overall recruitment process, in the majority of cases analyzed, they have virtually no say in the final hiring decision as it is made by the committee members, deans, and rectors. Agism and the inability to find the right candidates for the position were noted as challenges by the research participants. The study revealed that the main hindrances in the effective recruitment process are the vagueness of the recruitment announcement, the lack of well-developed procedure and cooperation between the departments. Research suggests the recruitment process of academic staff in higher education in the Republic of Azerbaijan to be coordinated between the universities as they can make the search for a good candidate run more smoothly.

**Keywords:** Recruitment, Academic staff, Higher education, Education management.

## INTRODUCTION

Recruitment is an essential process in organizations as it is not just for selecting employees but rather for shaping the effectiveness of the organization by getting in potential candidates and performing at a high level (Ballantyne, 2009). Achieving organizational objectives and outcomes depend on employee commitment and dedication; therefore, organizational competencies should be developed constantly, and obstacles need to be overcome. As Metcalf, Rolfe, Stevens, and Weale (2005) stated, recruitment is interconnected with the productivity of an organization, and there are possible hurdles that should be considered.

The problem in the current article is the extent to which the recruitment process of the teaching personnel is effective in Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs) in Azerbaijan. We aimed to investigate the recruitment process in several local universities and identify the management approaches, the factors that hinder the procedure of the recruitment, and suggest a plan with effective steps. Building a well-designed and planned recruitment strategy in Higher Educational Institutions in Azerbaijan is an important step for the future development not only for institutions and students but also for the national and local educational goals of the country. Therefore, the recruitment process is required to elaborate adaptability to globalization and should sustain the timeliness of the process (Metcalf et al., 2005).

According to Metcalf et al. (2005), Human Resources Management (HRM) functions to attract the best candidates and recruit them for the organization. There seems to be a lack of communication and uncertainty between the departments and HR managers. Sometimes university departments do not rely on HRM, and they get involved in the recruiting process. However, Metcalf and colleagues (2005) believe that this affects the transparency of the recruitment, as senior staff misuse their positions to establish certain candidates to apply for the vacancy and diminish the equal opportunity of applicants. The job description is very important for recruiting employees. The applicants should be aware of what position they apply to and which qualifications should they possess for being selected (Metcalf et al., 2005). The job content also influences the satisfaction of the candidate towards the institution as the organization mentions the main aspects such as workload, responsibilities of the position. Another issue stated by Metcalf et al. (2005) is that universities do not prefer advertising vacancies on more active social platforms, and the vacancies are not announced to more audiences. Among few applicants, it is hard to make the right choice and select the most prospective candidate (Metcalf et al., 2005).

The purpose of the study is to analyze the recruitment procedures of academic personnel in the HEIs in Azerbaijan. This study aims to explore some variables related to the recruitment process and produce a final product that will aid the academic staff recruitment process in Higher Educational Institutions of Azerbaijan. The recommendations which are included in the said final product are based on the practice of Higher Education Institutions that are considered to have an exemplary recruitment process.

*Research Questions*

1. What methods of recruitment do Higher Educational Institutions in Azerbaijan currently use?
2. What factors create a challenge during the recruitment process?
3. How can recruiting strategies be developed in the Higher Educational Institutions that will improve the performance of institutions?

Effective recruitment and selection have always been one of the most challenging and important tasks for the organizations in the educational sector due to the lack of any absolute methodology for attracting, screening, and finally finding the right person for the right job (Pounder and Young, 1996). According to Fullan (2007), in the pursuit of quality teaching, the institutions need to ensure that teacher recruitment and retention policies are focusing on the areas of greatest need as recruitment plays a significant role in the effectiveness of the institutions. Our study aims to determine current practices in the recruitment process of the academic staff to universities in Azerbaijan. Having determined effective and less than effective ways, we present a set of recommendations for universities to incorporate in their recruitment process. This study will help higher education institutions in the country willing to participate in the info session, which is the final product of this article, to adopt better recruitment strategies, which in its turn will lead to better student achievement, which is the main objective of any educational entity. The study will also serve as the precedent for future similar ones in the country, as it is the first one of its kind in the local context.

## 1. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 1.1. Human resource management

According to Boxall, Purcell and Wright (2007), five questions should be responded to by an educational organization to have an effective recruitment strategy to sustain in the competitive environment and pursue its success. Those questions are "Whom to recruit?", "Where to recruit?", "What recruitment sources to use?", "When to recruit?" and "What message to communicate?" (p.25). One of the tasks of human resources management is to understand whether the organization uses the proper recruitment policies during the employment of staff or not. The recruitment process starts with the announcement of the determined vacancies. Thus, the departments inform the HR managers to start looking for the eligible employee for the vacancy, and the Human Resources department proclaims the positions on the organization's website and other platforms. Then applicants submit their documents to the given addresses before the deadline. The HR Management decides on what kind of qualifications the candidate should have to be selected while the organization is focusing on recruiting high-quality applicants who also easily adapt to the organizational culture (Boxal and Purcell, 2011).

### 1.2. Factors affecting the recruitment process

We can divide the factors impacting recruitment into two parts: internal and external. One of the internal factors that affect the recruitment process is the existing uncertain techniques used by the institutions (Crothall, Callan and Hartel, 1997). The organizations in which the recruitment process is not well-designed face ineligible applicants that are not capable of filling the vacant positions. Therefore, many organizations invest in creating and designing recruitment systems for attracting potential employees (Branine, 2008). Finding the best employee among the candidates for the vacancy is considered the most challenging part of recruitment (Metcalf et al., 2005). Recruitment is mostly done by HR managers in organizations. However, in some enterprises, non-HR specialists take part in the decision making of whom to recruit, and this internal factor prevents the effectiveness. Mullins (2010) mentions that the Human Resources Manager should be more than an advisor and supervise the process. HRM should function consistently to achieve the organizational aims and consult with faculties while recruiting the employees. Another internal factor is the discrimination while recruiting teachers

based on ethnicity or gender that affects the quality and efficiency of universities. Lack of equal opportunities for the candidates, such as focusing on academic inbreeding, overlooking to recruit teachers from outside the institution, and gender imbalance form an unfair environment (EACEA, 2017). Furthermore, the external factor that influences the process of recruitment is attracting proficient applicants from outside the organization. Advertising vacancies is the most used and effective way of recruitment, and internet sites, social media platforms such as Facebook, Linked-in are more preferred by modern organizations (Cober and Brown, 2006). The publicity of the vacancies in Higher Educational Institutions is also influenced by the legislation of the countries. The labor legislation on the recruitment of academic staff in HEIs defines the main methods and selection procedures. For instance, in some European countries, such as Italy and Spain, top-level authorities regulate the recruitment process. On the other hand, some higher educational institutions like in the UK are given full autonomy to make a choice.

In Germany, the legislation requires the announcement of the vacancies and the selection of the candidates to be done publicly (EACEA, 2017). Regulations on the recruitment of the academic staff frame the autonomy of the educational institutions while guaranteeing key concepts such as transparency, accessibility, and equal opportunities. For Caucasian countries, the fall of the USSR brought independence after nearly 70 years of authoritarian control over the territories. The HEIs used to be dependent on the centralized system of the Soviet Union, but after independence, Georgia and Armenia have given autonomy to HEIs in the issues of defining positions, recruiting staff. In Georgia, the Senate of HEIs develops and approve the internal regulations such as designing the budget, selecting administrative and personnel staff (EACEA, 2017).

In the case of Azerbaijan, according to Law on Education (2009), the HEIs have full independence for financial and management matters. They have internal rights to plan and approve the recruitment process under the guidance of the Ministry of Education. The Ministry only defines the qualifications and criteria based on the selection of teachers. Qualifications for working in a teaching position at universities are designed by Law on Education (2009), for example, specialists with a master's degree can work at the "bachelor's" level of higher education, as well as in institutes, colleges, conservatories and other single-level institutions, as well as research centers and institutes, educational institutions of various levels. Highly qualified specialists who have completed their doctoral studies defended their doctoral dissertations in a specialized scientific council and received the degree of "doctor" can work at the "master's" level of higher education. Doctors also work in research centers and institutes, educational institutions at various levels and in other fields.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

### 2.1. Research design

A diagnostic research design has been chosen for this article. The diagnostic research design aims to examine factors that cause a certain situation and aids us in finding out the challenges, evaluating the issues, and giving recommendations (Creswell, 2014). This research design is the best fitting for our project as we too are analyzing the methods of recruitment of academic personnel at local higher education institutions as well as the challenges they face in the process and providing a set of recommendations on conducting an effective recruitment process based on the best practices as a part of the final product – an info session.

## *2.2. Sampling*

In order to analyze the case, qualitative data was collected with the help of purposeful sampling. Qualitative data is non-numerical data and is obtained by researchers from interviews, observation, recordings, and questionaries (Creswell, 2014). Qualitative data is helpful in investigating the case and developing ideas regarding the responses of the participants (Creswell, 2014). Purposeful sampling helped us select our population in a non-random way and explore people's perceptions and experiences regarding a specific situation (Privitera and Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2018). Thus, the research focuses on the HEIs and the HR departments and the target population was selected considering the research's criteria to ensure the data is manageable to collect and suitable for its objectives. HR managers, HR department staff, and other departments that participate in the recruitment process were considered our target population. Overall, nine people from six higher education institutions were interviewed. These included HR specialists, HR and Academic Administration directors. The researchers informed the participants about the purpose of the study to gain support.

## *2.3. Sources of data*

An instrument was developed to collect data necessary for the given research. The instrument itself was a semi-structured interview with nine open-ended questions (See Appendix A). This type of interview was chosen as it allows the researcher to further explore participants' feelings and beliefs and leaves room for follow up questions, and overall, further look into each individual case with participants (Privitera and Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2018). Each question served the purpose of finding out the answers to our research questions and identifying the key variables. Questions relating to who conducts the recruitment when, how, and why were asked from the participants. They also were asked to justify their means of recruitment, identify key players in the process, as well as suggest improvements. An independent expert's opinion was taken on the developed instrument in order to ensure its validity.

Additionally, we conducted desk research through official websites of the institutions and asked for official documents from the interviewee, such as recruitment protocols, university mission documents, and any other documents they mentioned during the interview to play a role in the recruitment process at their institutions.

## *2.4. Data collection procedure*

We got in touch with nine participants and asked for their consent (See Appendix B) to be interviewed and recorded. After formal consent was obtained, the meeting date was agreed upon to meet online or in person. The online meetings were held in ZOOM or in-person in the universities' campuses and were recorded for further analysis. The interviews lasted for approximately 40 minutes -1 hour. Overall, almost eight hours of interviews were conducted.

The majority of interviews were conducted in Azerbaijani, participants' native language, for avoiding misinterpretation. However, one participant requested the interview to be done in English and was accommodated accordingly. The transcript from the interview was then translated into Azerbaijani to initiate the coding process as all the other interviews were in Azerbaijani and were coded in Azerbaijani as well. For our project, we used job descriptions and requirements as a document and asked interviewers to provide us with any other official documents. According to Guba and Lincoln (1981), any written material other than a record that was not prepared particularly in response to some inquiry from the researcher is considered to be a document. Additionally, we checked the official website of the Higher Institutions for finding and checking official job announcements.

*2.5. Data analysis*

After collecting data, one of the crucial parts of the project is to analyze all gathered qualitative data and make an accurate interpretation for finding answers to the research questions of the project. The first step of the analysis was transcribing and typing all collected data into a computer. The next step was coding the data for developing a more general picture of the data and themes about central phenomena. Since we did not have a large database and were able to easily keep track of files, be close to the data, and recorded interviews, we used manually coding. According to Creswell (2014), the hand analysis of qualitative data means reading the data, marking it by hand, and dividing it into parts. After these steps, we could build answers to our research questions. Describing and developing themes from the data consist of answering the main research questions and forming a detailed understanding of the central phenomenon, according to Creswell (2014).

*2.6. Validating the findings*

Throughout the data collection and analysis, a researcher should ensure that the findings and interpretation of the research project are accurate, as stated by Creswell (2014). For validating findings and setting the accuracy and credibility of our findings, we used several steps, one of which was triangulation. According to Creswell (2014), using triangulation means that data is collected from multiple sources of information, individuals, or processes. In this project, the data from different individuals (HR specialists, HR and Academic Administration directors) and methods of data collection (official documents and interviews) for developing credible and accurate findings were used. Also, to accomplish triangulation, interviews were conducted by all group members, and the same data were analyzed by different group members, the documents were collected from the universities and compared with the interview data and data on their official websites. For ensuring validation of this project data was collected not from faculty or administrative staff but directly from the HR staff of the universities, who were truly representatives involved in the recruitment process.

*2.7. Limitations*

The limitations of the study were connected to the sampling size and the lack of prior local studies on this topic. The sample size was limited due to the number of HEIs in Azerbaijan and how many of them agreed to be interviewed. Although we reached out to a large pool of universities, only a few of them agreed to be interviewed, and even fewer actually followed through with the interview. Additionally, some participants failed to provide some documents despite multiple requests from the research team to do so. Larger sample size would provide more information and lessen the level of uncertainty (Privitera and Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2018). Additionally, the article focused on worldwide research as there is not any eligible study of the case that has been done in our or neighbouring countries. As such, we have nothing prior to base our research on, which greatly limits the literature review when it comes to the local context.

## 3.   FINDINGS

After interviews with five public and one semi-public university, obtained data will be discussed according to the emerging themes from the variables stated in the literature review. Figure 1 shows three major requirements based upon which the recruitment process is formed.

HRM department staff, Rector or Vice-Rector, Faculty members, Faculty Affairs, and Special Committee are playing considerable roles in the recruitment process of teaching personnel.

The HR department is more involved in announcing vacancies, receiving CVs, relevant documents, and contacting the applicants to invite them to the interview, demo lessons, or tests. This is supported by a participant who stated that the main function of the HR department is providing the institution with staff by announcing vacancies and accepting the applications of everyone who is suitable for the position and directing these applicants to the appropriate committee. Decision-making is done by Committee members, deans, and finally by Rector. Public HEIs prefer announcements on their official websites, national newspapers such as *Khalq*, *Azerbaijani Teacher*, and other social webpages.
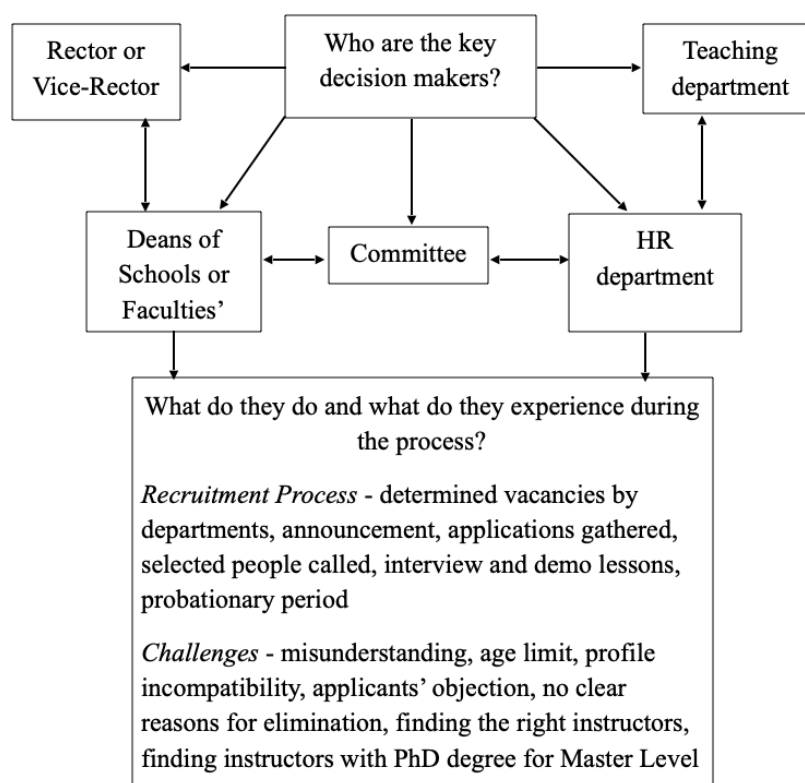
**Figure 1.** Recruitment process based on three major requirements.



Although at least one of these options was mentioned by all the participants, some claimed to post announcements on multiple virtual spaces at once. A participant said that their institution posts vacancy announcements on their website or the *Khalq* newspaper on a monthly basis. One participant mentioned that the final decision is made by the Rector, even though the prior decision-making regarding the candidates is done primarily based on the results of an interview. The people responsible for the interview are the committee members and the chairman. Said committee members are appointed by the scientific council of the institution. Another interviewee stated that the key decision-makers are the school themselves due to them being the experts in their field in each of the fields. They select among the applications following which the interview is organized. Applicants successful at this stage are then invited to conduct a demo class. The schools' faculty recruitment committee makes the most important decision.

On the other hand, semi-public university advertises the vacancies on local and international job search websites and contact with international and national organizations to inform more people. The interviewee mentioned that "HR posts them on XX website, social media, and any other websites which are considered relevant for this type of announcements. We also do international announcements. As we have a centralized email address, the schools try to post these vacancies and send out them through their list serves through their networks". Overall, recruitment procedure is applied: first, the faculties determine the vacant seats and share them with the HR department. HR staff works on clarifying the positions, deadlines, and the available number of places. Till the given deadline, the information of applicants is gathered, and relevant candidates are selected to be called for the next stage.

**Figure 2.** Administrative Structure



The next stage mostly concerns itself with conducting interviews with the candidates who give demo lessons. The candidates who pass all the stages are given three or more months of a probationary period, and if they successfully complete the probationary period, they sign a contract with the HEIs. When it comes to the relationship between recruitment and the effectiveness of the teachers, as seen by the participants of this article, many mentioned that they consider the two to be connected. One interviewee stated, "*these two are very much interrelated because the more effective you conduct your faculty recruitment, the fewer surprises you will face later while dealing with this teacher... So yes, these two processes are very much interrelated and at these stages, especially in the case of international recruitment. This is very important in terms of that you have to pass different procedures for international candidates. Taking into consideration all these additional expenses and taking into consideration all of these additional procedures related to international candidates, you have to be even more attentive to all details and to figure out all the important tax and all the nuances about the candidate before making your final decision to not face any surprises during the contract period*". A different interviewee mentioned that "*the documents and indicators required from applicants are related to the knowledge and skills they will apply in the educational process and that is why the recruitment process should be well-developed to be able to find out these skills*". Several participants highlighted the importance of the demo lessons in the recruitment process in order to hire the best-suited candidates for the job.

Certainly, the HR specialists face different types of challenges during the process, and we can divide them into two types: internal and external. Internal challenges are the limitation for age and work experience, eligibility, and assessing the effectiveness of the recruited teachers. On the other hand, external ones are profile incompatibility and misunderstandings of candidates. Age discrimination is mentioned by some universities that for certain positions, there are eligibility restrictions due to the university guidelines. When the position is higher, the

minimum age and years of experience of teaching also get increased. In addition to this, some candidates apply to the higher positions for which they are not qualified, and this forms complicated situations for the recruiting staff, as well as the candidates. For instance, one of the HR managers stressed it: "*As I mentioned, the recruitment of teachers (teachers, headteachers, associate professors, professors) in the educational institution is competitive, so it's sometimes that many applicants are not aware of the recruitment process for pedagogical activities. Some candidates apply for the position of Head Teacher without having any teaching experience*". In other cases, the HEIs cannot find the right people for the vacant positions even after weeks of announcements. This is especially the case when it comes to finding academic staff who hold a PhD degree and are qualified to teach at the master's level. One of the interviewees stated that "*We can sometimes find very good candidates, but their English language level, unfortunately, is not at the level that we would like to see. So, this complicates the English language abilities of faculty members. Another difficulty is to find the right faculty members with PhD degree because, as you know at Master Level, we should recruit teachers who have a PhD degree in Azerbaijan*".

The collected data showed that the main reasons behind the stated problems are vagueness in the vacancy announcement, having not a well-structured procedure of recruitment, and a lack of cooperation between HR departments of HEIs.

### 3.1. Professional development

To be more transparent and objective in deciding on criteria of vacant positions, the HEIs should define the minimum eligibility criteria of each vacancy and announce it. Then it will be much easier for candidates and recruiting staff to consider whether there is consistency between applied teachers' qualifications and university required criteria or whether they meet the expected qualifications. When the candidates are aware of their chances to be selected, the recruitment process becomes more transparent. This is called the "Person-Job Fit Approach" which explains the institutions should determine the required qualifications of the candidates and specify it in announcements (Carless, 2005). Additionally, for being transparent in recruitment, the institutions should be responsive to the applicants and provide clear messages about selection, elimination, and being waitlisted.

Another factor is the quality assessment of teachers – taking into account the students' feedback. Each of the HEIs has its own way of evaluating the teachers. However, it would be better to have a systematic assessment of the teachers mainly from the perspective of students. Instructors are the core assets of the institutions that have undeniable value. Therefore, the assets should be managed and evaluated appropriately to optimize and support the mission and the vision of the university (Sunandar et al., 2016). Thus, after recruitment of the candidates to make sure that the selected teachers are the right decision, after all, the university should take feedback from students regarding teaching methods, techniques, and their satisfaction level during the probationary period. In accordance with the Labor Code (1999), a probationary period is used to assess the professional qualifications of employees, see if the candidate is a good fit for the position and organization, and decide to terminate or extend the contract.

HEIs can cooperate with each other to give a reference of their graduates to the offered positions by other institutions. Each Higher Educational Institution has its own specialized majors and alumni. When there is a vacancy for a specific position at one of the universities, the HR department of the institution can recommend eligible graduates as teaching candidates to them. Carless (2005) talks about the "Person-Organization Fit Approach", which points out

that the candidate's needs, interests should match the mission, values, and culture of an institution. So, there should be a fit between individuals' and organizations' values to fight for the same goals. The collaboration of seeking for the right persons and recruiting them to make the university recruitment and hiring system more coordinated and cooperative. This way of promoting the graduates will also be motivating and encouraging for the current students to study better.

## CONCLUSION

In this study, we have examined the recruitment process of HEIs in Azerbaijan and determined the current challenging factors to make recommendations for the further development of the strategies. The study revealed that most public HEIs of Azerbaijan implement a similar recruitment process, but with some inevitable problems. The age and work experience limitation, teacher evaluation, student satisfaction, finding the right candidate that is compatible with the requirements are more frequently mentioned factors by the interviewees.

According to the findings, the current study recommends having an information session plan (See Appendix C) with representatives of the departments involved in the process of hiring academic staff in public universities to support the recruiting system of institutions. The info session will cover how to make recruitment more effective while preparing a model of the recruitment process. The steps will start from welcoming the audience, will follow with a description of vacancies, requirements, recruitment process, and end with questions and answers. The question and answer's part will minimize misunderstanding and negative impressions after the recruitment process. Additionally, this will make recruiters' jobs easy and save time. These information sessions will help eliminate the problems that occurred during the recruitment process. To implement the info session with the teacher candidates, we have sent the final products and information to the interviewed HEIs. Additionally, we suggested them to be present in this process with their allowance. As a sample of invitation to the info session, one flyer is designed for ADA University and mentioned date can be changed. To assist the HRM department and staff, we provide them with the leaflet (See Appendix C) that covers the steps of recruiting the teaching personnel. The leaflet is based on the findings of our research and additional information from the cited resources.

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