

Ranking Pressures and Research Quality: Internationalisation Challenges in the Azerbaijani Higher Education System

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Abstract

This paper examines how ranking-driven internationalisation policies shape research capacity and quality in Azerbaijani higher education. In resource-constrained systems like Azerbaijan, internationalisation often prioritises visibility in global rankings over long-term investment in staff, infrastructure and academic development. Drawing on policy analysis (1992–2023) and ten semi-structured interviews with academic and administrative staff at two public universities, the study applies Steiner-Khamisi's (2014) policy borrowing framework and Vogel's (2012) model of research capacity building to explore the tension between global aspirations and local capabilities. Findings reveal a persistent mismatch between national ambitions for global recognition and institutional realities of limited funding, training and autonomy. Ranking-linked incentives have sometimes encouraged superficial compliance and ethically sensitive practices, such as publication outsourcing, honorary authorship and reliance on predatory journals. These dynamics may shift attention away from teaching quality and research integrity, echoing concerns raised across other Global South systems where borrowed reforms outpace institutional capacity (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Chankseliani, 2023). The paper argues for more context-sensitive approaches to internationalisation that align global engagement with local realities. It recommends three priorities: establishing dedicated research funding and staff development programmes; reforming incentive systems to reward quality over quantity; and promoting equitable international partnerships that build sustainable capacity. These findings contribute to broader debates on how metric-based policies reshape academic values and governance in developing higher education systems.

Keywords: internationalisation, higher education, research capacity, Azerbaijan, Global South

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Introduction

The internationalisation of higher education is often linked with collaboration, innovation and global visibility. However, as Altbach and Knight (2007) and Knight (2008) argue, the process is also shaped by unequal flows of knowledge and power between systems with differing resources. In the Global South, Chankseliani (2023) highlights that the pursuit of international visibility through global rankings often clashes with limited institutional capacity.

Since independence, Azerbaijan has strived to align its higher education system with international standards. After joining the Bologna Process in 2005, successive state programs promoted global integration through student mobility, international partnerships and performance indicators linked to global rankings. However, as Abbasov and Jafarli (2022) observe, many of these reforms were borrowed from global models without adequate consideration of the local institutional context, creating tension between ambition and feasibility. This study explores how ranking-based internationalisation affects research quality and ethical practice in Azerbaijani higher education institutions (HEIs). It focuses on the ways in which imported metrics interact with domestic capacity constraints, shaping how universities define and measure academic excellence.

Policy Context

Azerbaijan's policy trajectory reflects an evolving yet fragmented approach to internationalisation. The Law on Education (1992) was a turning point as the country shifted from the Soviet model to a system encouraging autonomy and diversification. Later, the 2007–2015 State Program for Education Abroad aimed to strengthen research capacity by funding international study, requiring graduates to return and contribute domestically. However, the program lacked mechanisms for reintegration, leaving many returnees without institutional pathways to apply their expertise.

The 2009 revised Law on Education and the 2016 Law on Science formally recognised universities as research institutions but offered limited financial or structural support. The 2019–2023 State Program on Enhancing International Competitiveness further intensified ranking pressures, mandating universities to align performance indicators with global ranking systems and prioritising publication in Scopus-indexed journals. These initiatives demonstrate a clear intention to increase global recognition but have also produced a dependency on external benchmarks rather than locally grounded measures of quality. As Hazelkorn (2015, 2018) argues, ranking-driven policies tend to reshape institutional behaviour by encouraging short-term performance and output-based incentives. In Azerbaijan, these pressures have manifested as a focus on quantity over quality in research production and have diverted attention from broader missions of capacity building, ethical scholarship and teaching enhancement.

Theoretical Framework and Methodological Overview

The study adopts Steiner-Khamsi's (2014) framework of policy borrowing, which explains how global education models are transferred across contexts and often reinterpreted to serve national or political goals. This framework helps illuminate how Azerbaijan's reforms adopt international practices without adapting them with its institutional structures. In parallel, Vogel's (2012) model of research capacity building provides a complementary perspective, emphasising that sustainable research development depends on coordinated investment in human, institutional and systemic resources. The interaction between these frameworks allows

the analysis to capture both the symbolic and structural dimensions of Azerbaijan's internationalisation process.

Empirically, the study draws on qualitative analysis of policy documents and ten semi-structured interviews with academic and administrative staff across two public universities. The interview data are used illustratively to reflect policy reception and institutional experience, triangulated with documentary analysis to ensure validity while preserving detailed data for ongoing doctoral research.

Preliminary Findings and Discussion

Analysis of policy documents and early interview data suggests that current internationalisation reforms of Azerbaijan have evolved at the intersection of global aspirations and local constraints. The following three key themes illustrate both progress and ongoing challenges.

The Gap Between National Ambition and Institutional Capacity

Azerbaijan's higher education policies, particularly the 2019–2023 State Program on Enhancing International Competitiveness, mainly deliver an ambitious message to support the local universities to become globally ranked, research-intensive universities. However, a lack of funding and institutional capacity prevents the implementation of these ambitious goals. This mirrors how Steiner-Khamsi (2014) describes policy borrowing without contextual translation, where global models are adopted symbolically rather than through sustained adaptation. Other post-Soviet systems also faced similar challenges, as the aspiration to become "research universities" (Abbasov & Jafarli, 2022) is not always matched by the institutional and financial support required for the necessary transformation.

Metric-Driven Incentives and Changing Academic Values

Ranking-linked incentives play a key role in institutional performance. The emphasis on Scopus-indexed publications, citation counts and international visibility has reshaped academic behaviour, which prioritises measurable numbers over long-term research development. Hazelkorn (2015, 2018) emphasises how these ranking pressures redefine quality by narrowing academic priorities. Despite the drive for increased productivity in Azerbaijan, this effort led to tension in balancing international visibility against the need to maintain research integrity and relevance to national priorities. This tension, as noted by Stein (2017), results in a paradox of internationalisation where efforts to achieve greater global prestige may unintentionally restrict local autonomy and the freedom of critical thought.

Systemic Barriers to Sustainable Capacity-Building

Despite formal recognition of research universities in the Law on Science (2016), the absence of stable funding and administrative support continues to constrain research development. Vogel's (2012) framework on capacity building emphasises that genuine research growth depends on coordinated investment at the individual, institutional and system levels. Furthermore, interviewees described persistent bureaucratic procedures, limited access to international grants and heavy administrative workloads. These issues align with Chankseliani's (2023) observation that much of the Global South's visible research output relies on external donors rather than national systems, which underscores the importance of strengthening domestic research ecosystems.

These patterns, when considered together, reveal the difficult trade-off between ambition and capability. Azerbaijan's commitment to international engagement is clear, yet its internationalisation efforts are met with inherent difficulties within a resource-limited setting. As Altbach and Knight (2007) and Hudzik (2015) argue, internationalisation must be viewed as a process of situated adjustment rather than mere replication. By illustrating how ranking-focused strategies can both promote and obstruct institutional growth, the Azerbaijani experience offers a valuable data point for the wider discussion on developing more responsive and capacity-aligned internationalisation models.

Implications and Conclusion

These preliminary findings underline the need for a shift from symbolic compliance toward meaningful capacity building. Policymakers should establish coherent strategies that align international aspirations with domestic realities, setting realistic timelines and designing ethical incentive structures that reward research quality rather than output volume. Universities require dedicated funding, training in academic writing and ethics and support for developing English proficiency and research infrastructure. International partners, in turn, should focus on collaborative models that strengthen local ecosystems rather than reproduce dependency.

The Azerbaijani case illustrates a broader dilemma across the Global South, where borrowed reforms risk overshadowing context-specific needs. By grounding internationalisation in sustainable institutional development rather than in ranking performance, higher education systems can pursue global engagement that is both ethical and equitable. These early findings contribute to ongoing debates on the future of internationalisation and set the stage for a more extensive doctoral analysis that will explore these dynamics across multiple institutional and policy levels.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The author declares that Grammarly AI was used to assist with language editing and proofreading. The use was limited to improving clarity and consistency. All ideas, analyses and interpretations are original and derived from the author's own research.

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