

AZƏRBAYCANDA DÖVLƏT İDARƏÇİLİYİ YÖNLÜ BAKALAVR İXTİSASLARININ DÖVLƏT QURUMLARINDA KARYERA İMKANLARI İLƏ UYĞUNLUĞUNUN TƏHLİLİ

RAMİL MƏMMƏDOV, ADA Universitetinin Təhsilin idarə edilməsi ixtisası üzrə magistri.
E-mail: rmammadov18781@ada.edu.az | <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-3534-0933>

SAAD HƏSƏNOVA, ADA Universitetinin Təhsilin idarə edilməsi ixtisası üzrə magistri.
E-mail: shasanova13172@ada.edu.az | <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-0411-313>

SOLMAZ CAHANGİROVA, ADA Universitetinin Təhsilin idarə edilməsi ixtisası üzrə magistri.
E-mail: sjahangirova14799@ada.edu.az | <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-8869-8758>

AYDAN MƏMMƏDZADƏ, ADA Universitetinin Təhsilin idarə edilməsi ixtisası üzrə magistri.
E-mail: amammadzada14891@ada.edu.az | <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-5543-0074>

AYSEL ALLAHVERDİYEVA, ADA Universitetinin Təhsilin idarə edilməsi ixtisası üzrə magistri.
E-mail: aallahverdiyeva7671@ada.edu.az | <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-5503-3688>

Məqaləyə istinad:

Məmmədov R., Həsənova S.,
Cahangirova S., Məmmədzaadə A.,
Allahverdiyeva A. (2026).
Azərbaycanda dövlət idarəçiliyi
yönlü bakalavr ixtisaslarının dövlət
qurumlarında karyera imkanları ilə
uyğunluğunun təhlili. *Azərbaycan
məktəbi*. № 3 (716), səh. 23–38

DOI:

10.30546/32898065.2026.3.6544

Məqalə tarixçəsi

Göndərilib: 01.06.2026

Qəbul edilib: 22.07.2026

ANNOTASIYA

Bu tədqiqat Azərbaycanda dövlət idarəçiliyi yönlü bakalavr ixtisasları ilə dövlət qurumlarında mövcud vəzifələrin tələbləri arasındakı davamlı uyğunsuzluğu araşdırır. Keyfiyyət yönlü tədqiqat dizaynından istifadə olunaraq məlumatlar yarı-strukturlaşdırılmış müsahibələr vasitəsilə toplanıb. Müsahibələr müvafiq ixtisasların müəllimləri, məzunları, fakültə dekanı, Dövlət İmtahan Mərkəzinin (DİM) nümayəndəsi və nazirliyin insan resursları üzrə məsul əməkdaşı daxil olmaqla, on iştirakçı ilə aparılıb, əlavə olaraq müvafiq sənədlər nəzərdən keçirilib. Tədqiqatın nəticələri göstərir ki, sözügedən ixtisasların tədris proqramlarında nəzəri biliklərə praktik bacarıqlarla müqayisədə məhdud diqqət yetirilir. Bundan əlavə, dövlət qulluğu imtahanı yanaşması ilə bu ixtisasların təlim nəticələri arasında uyğunsuzluq mövcuddur. Məzunlar güclü nəzəri bazaya yiyələndiklərini vurğulamaqla yanaşı, yumşaq və texniki bacarıqların çatışmazlığını da qeyd ediblər. Müsahibələrdə iştirak etmiş işəgötürənlər və məzunlar tədris proqramlarının mütəmadi yenilənməsinə ehtiyac olduğunu, müasir texnologiyaların tətbiqinin kifayət qədər olmadığını və proqramda təkrarlanan və ya aidiyyəti olmayan fənnlərin mövcudluğunu qeyd ediblər. Həmçinin işə qəbul prosesləri, xüsusilə də DİM-in imtahan sistemi, vakant vəzifə ilə bağlı bacarıqları kifayət qədər yoxlamadığı və praktik bacarıqlardan daha çox nəzəri biliklərə əsaslandığı da tədqiqata cəlb olunan müsahiblər tərəfindən davamlı vurğulanıb. Tədqiqat praktikaya əsaslanan təlimin integrasiyasının, universitet-dövlət orqanları əməkdaşlığının gücləndirilməsinin və müvafiq proqramların təkmilləşdirilməsinin vacibliyini ön plana çıxarır.

Açar sözlər: Dövlət idarəçiliyi yönlü bakalavr ixtisasları, dövlət qulluğu üzrə vəzifə tələbləri ilə akademik proqramlar arasında uyğunsuzluq, Azərbaycanda dövlət qulluğu imtahanları, dövlət qurumlarının işə qəbul yanaşmaları, dövlət universitetlərində tədris proqramlarının uyğunluğu.

AN ANALYSIS OF THE ALIGNMENT BETWEEN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION UNDERGRADUATE PROGRAMS AND CAREER OPPORTUNITIES IN GOVERNMENT INSTITUTIONS IN AZERBAIJAN

RAMIL MAMMADOV, Master of Arts in Educational Management, ADA University.
E-mail: rmammadov18781@ada.edu.az | <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-3534-0933>

SAAD HASANOVA, Master of Arts in Educational Management, ADA University.
E-mail: shasanova13172@ada.edu.az | <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-0411-313>

SOLMAZ JAHANGIROVA, Master of Arts in Educational Management, ADA University.
E-mail: sjahangirova14799@ada.edu.az | <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-8869-8758>

AYDAN MAMMADZADA, Master of Arts in Educational Management, ADA University.
E-mail: amammadzada14891@ada.edu.az | <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-5543-0074>

AYSEL ALLAHVERDIYEVA, Master of Arts in Educational Management, ADA University.
E-mail: aallahverdiyeva7671@ada.edu.az | <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-5503-3688>

To cite this article:

Mammadov R., Hasanova S., Jahangirova S., Mammadzada A., Allahverdiyeva A. (2026). An Analysis of the Alignment between Public Administration Undergraduate Programs and Career Opportunities in Government Institutions in Azerbaijan. *Azerbaijan Journal of Educational Studies*. Vol. 716, Issue III, pp. 23–38

DOI:

10.30546/32898065.2026.3.6544

Article history

Received: 01.06.2026

Accepted: 22.07.2026

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the persistent mismatch between public administration undergraduate programs and the competency requirements of positions in government institutions in Azerbaijan. Using a qualitative research design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews. A total of ten participants were interviewed, including faculty members from the relevant programs, graduates, a faculty dean, a representative of the State Examination Center (SEC), and a human resources officer from a ministry. In addition, relevant documents were reviewed. The findings indicate that the curricula of these programs place greater emphasis on theoretical knowledge than on practical skills. A misalignment also exists between the public service examination system and the intended learning outcomes of these academic programs. While graduates reported acquiring a strong theoretical foundation, they also highlighted deficiencies in both soft and technical skills. Employers and graduates consistently emphasized the need for regular curriculum updates, greater integration of modern technologies into teaching, and the removal of repetitive or irrelevant courses. Furthermore, interview participants noted that recruitment processes, particularly the public service examination administered by the SEC, do not adequately assess the competencies required for vacant positions, relying more heavily on theoretical knowledge than on practical skills. The study underscores the importance of integrating practice-based learning, strengthening collaboration between universities and government institutions, and improving public administration academic programs.

Keywords: Public administration undergraduate programs, mismatch between academic programs and civil service competency requirements, civil service examinations in Azerbaijan, recruitment practices in government institutions, curriculum alignment in public universities.

INTRODUCTION

Higher education plays a key role in shaping a skilled workforce that supports the effective functioning of public institutions and contributes to national development (Cleary & Van Noy, 2014; Varona Cervantes & Cooper, 2020). When academic curricula misalign with labor market needs, especially in the field of public administration, graduates may struggle with employment readiness, reducing their ability to contribute meaningfully to public service (Allen & van der Velden, 2001; Green & McIntosh, 2007). The World Bank (WB, 2024) emphasizes that aligning graduates' skills with the operational needs of the public sector is critical to improving the effectiveness and sustainability of public services.

In Azerbaijan, undergraduate programs such as "Public and Municipal Administration" are designed to equip students with knowledge of the unified system of governance and the interaction between state and local self-governance bodies (Azerbaijan State University of Economics [UNEC], 2025). According to the Ministry of Science and Education of the Republic of Azerbaijan (n.d.), higher education institutions (HEIs) are expected to align their academic programs with labor market demands, foster innovation, and prepare highly qualified specialists to ensure international competitiveness of the national education system and workforce. To achieve the mentioned objectives, the Ministry of Science and Education of the Republic of Azerbaijan adopted the State Program on Increasing the International Competitiveness of the Higher Education System (2019–2023), focusing on developing the curricula of HEIs and forming human capital via quality education.

This research aims to study the alignment between undergraduate public administration programs and career opportunities within Azerbaijan's governmental bodies, with a specific emphasis on central executive authorities (Dövlət Xidmətləri Portalı, 2024).

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

In Azerbaijan, the State Examination Center (SEC) plays a central role in the recruitment process for government positions in the public sector (Azərbaycan Respublikası Dövlət İmtahan Mərkəzi publik hüquqi şəxsin Nizamnaməsi articles 1, 2, and 3). The SEC is responsible for conducting and overseeing competitive examinations that assess candidates' qualifications and readiness for various administrative roles, from leadership positions to specialized technical roles (State Examination Center [SEC], 2025). The recruitment framework is organized to ensure that candidates meet the educational and professional requirements relevant to their roles within governmental bodies. As outlined in Article 28 of the Law on Civil Service of the Republic of Azerbaijan (2000), the recruitment process for civil service positions consists of two stages: a standardized test examination and an interview. According to Article 28.3 of the Law on Civil Service of the Republic of Azerbaijan (2000) and the Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Azerbaijan (2017), candidates for administrative roles must pass a standardized test to obtain a certificate that is valid for five years. Only those who hold a certificate are eligible to proceed to the interview stage (Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan on Civil Service, 2000). These stages apply to Class A (administrative-leading) and Class B (administrative-executive) civil service roles. The test examination assesses candidates through questions, prepared by the SEC, on four key topics: the Azerbaijani language, legislation, information technologies, and logical thinking, ensuring they possess the knowledge and skills required for government positions (State Examination Center [SEC], 2025).

According to the Statistical Yearbook on Civil Service Recruitment and Examinations, in 2023, out of 16,200 candidates who took part in the civil service entrance exams conducted by the State Examination Center, only 4,709 candidates demonstrated successful results. Emphasizing the importance of university education, the

State Examination Center noted that the candidates who passed the exams and received a certificate were mostly graduates of Baku State University, Azerbaijan State University of Economics, and Nakhchivan State University, which were ranked in the top three (State Examination Center [SEC], 2024).

Moreover, the preliminary survey results, conducted prior to this research project, reveal that a significant portion of respondents who graduated from public administration-focused programs feel underprepared for their current jobs (see Chart 1). The survey was conducted among people who graduated from public administration-focused programs of public universities in Baku, Azerbaijan, in the last five years. The participants were involved through the snowball sampling technique, as we invited relevant candidates whom we already knew, and then they forwarded the survey to the relevant candidates they knew. The survey consisted of five questions related to the candidates' educational background and professional experience, and their perceptions of the alignment between those two aspects. The overall number of survey participants was 35, and 24% of them considered that the knowledge and competencies gained during their bachelor's degrees were not beneficial in their careers in the governmental bodies. Reportedly, 62% of respondents

considered the same knowledge and competencies to be somewhat beneficial, while only 14% considered them beneficial. This probably indicates a strong need for improving the alignment between academic programs and the skills required for job positions by the governmental bodies.

According to Amirova and Valiyev (2021) and Alakbarova (2024), a persistent mismatch exists between university curricula and labor market requirements in Azerbaijan. This gap is particularly evident in public administration, where graduates often lack soft skills such as analytical thinking, problem-solving, and communication (Amirova & Valiyev, 2021). According to AmCham (2024), broader labor market assessments highlight weak coordination between universities and employers in curriculum development, contributing to soft-skill gaps among university graduates.

Considering the SEC statistics (State Examination Center [SEC], 2024), preliminary survey findings, and recent research on skills mismatches in Azerbaijan's labor market (Amirova & Valiyev, 2021; Alakbarova, 2024; AmCham, 2024), this study is guided by the following questions:

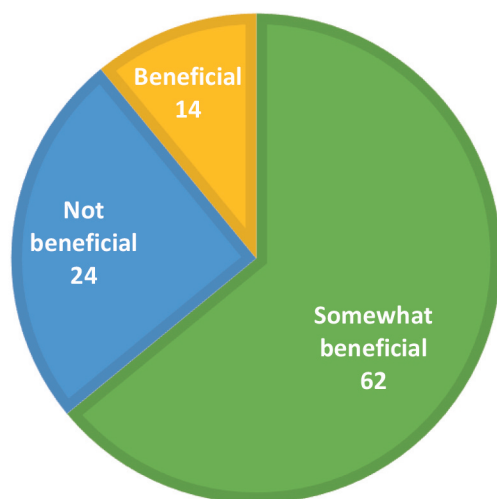
1. How are public administration-focused undergraduate programs aligned with the competencies required or expected by the governmental bodies in Azerbaijan?

SUB RQ1. How do recent graduates of public administration-focused undergraduate programs perceive the alignment of their academic programs with career requirements in governmental bodies in Azerbaijan?

SUB RQ2. What key competencies do governmental bodies in Azerbaijan expect from the candidates to fulfill their job responsibilities?

2. How should the recruitment process be designed to reflect the skills of the graduates of public administration-focused programs?

Chart 1 Results of the Preliminary Survey



PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to explore the alignment between public administration-focused

undergraduate programs of public universities and the career requirements of governmental bodies in Azerbaijan from three aspects. We explored the first aspect of alignment through the perceptions of graduates of public administration-focused undergraduate programs. Those graduates were the people who intended to work or had already worked in the governmental bodies. Based on our preliminary data and SEC statistics, we assumed that graduates of the mentioned programs perceive that they lack the skills and competencies to meet the career requirements in governmental bodies, and comprehensive research was necessary to approve or disapprove our assumptions. Then we explored the second aspect of alignment through the SEC civil service exam questions and the curricula. Therefore, we have endeavored to identify if the SEC civil service exam questions reflect the skills and competencies of the candidates who hold a bachelor's degree from public administration disciplines at Azerbaijani public universities. Finally, we explored the third aspect of alignment through identifying the key competencies that governmental bodies expect from job candidates to effectively fulfill their responsibilities. Additionally, the study provides some suggestions or recommendations on improving the curricula of public administration-focused undergraduate programs to meet the evolving career demands in governmental bodies in Azerbaijan.

SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDY

The significance of the study lies in examining the level of alignment of the skills and competencies gained throughout the public administration-focused undergraduate programs with the job requirements in the public sector entities. The study provides evidence to inform curriculum development in higher education institutions and may assist policymakers who aim to enhance the pertinence and effectiveness of public administration-focused higher education programs.

The research findings could encourage universities to review and improve the curriculum

content of the programs, instructional strategies, and competency acquisition quality to better prepare graduates for positions in governmental bodies. The findings can also help public organizations recognize the strengths and weaknesses of the higher education programs in terms of job requirements. This may also contribute to updating recruitment and workforce development approaches.

Furthermore, the study may contribute to bridging the literature gap regarding the alignment of the educational programs and job requirements at governmental bodies in Azerbaijan.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

To let insights and meanings come out straight from the participants, this research applied a qualitative research method (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This method was selected to identify the details of the alignment between academic undergraduate programs and job position requirements in governmental bodies, and to apprehend the participants' experiences and explanations, instead of measuring variables (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Qualitative approaches also ensured flexibility to adjust to the findings acquired in the study (Patton, 2015). Semi-structured interviews and document analysis were utilized for data collection.

The study, guided by the interpretivist paradigm, sought to investigate the graduates' perceptions about how well undergraduate programs in public administration prepare them for job positions in governmental bodies. The interpretivist paradigm helps to comprehend social realities by means of the participants' perspectives (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020). The target population in research refers to all individuals or organizations the researcher aims to study to address the research questions (Creswell, 2012). Specifically for this research, the target population comprises graduates of bachelor's programs in public administration disciplines of the Azerbaijani public universities. This group also includes stakeholders such as the dean and professors of a public

administration faculty from one of the public universities, HR representatives from a ministry involved in the government recruitment process, and professionals from the State Examination Center (SEC), who are mainly in charge of designing the state examinations for civil service positions in governmental bodies.

Both convenience and purposive sampling have been applied to identify at least ten participants: five graduates with a relevant bachelor's degree, one dean, two course instructors, one professional from the SEC, and one HR representative. The graduates had been selected based on their availability and willingness, while the dean, two course instructors, one professional from the SEC, and one HR representative from a ministry involved in the government recruitment process, were deliberately selected based on their institutional roles. Qualitative studies typically use small sample sizes, as the focus is on collecting in-depth information rather than broad generalizations. Data collection continues until data saturation is achieved, meaning no new themes emerge (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Maruyama and Ryan (2014) emphasize that the strength of qualitative research lies in the depth of analysis, compensating for its smaller scope.

The participants' context were investigated across four sites related to their education and organizations with which they were affiliated. First, we interviewed graduates of public administration disciplines in private educational centers that prepare them for civil service examinations. These centers form a link between students' education and governmental employment and hence play a very vital role for the participants, as Merriam and Tisdell (2016) asserted about the importance of transitional contexts. Second, to get a better understanding of the curriculum and academic aims of these programs, the dean and instructors of the public administration faculty have been interviewed at one of the state universities. Lastly, the professional context included an HR representative of a ministry and a relevant professional from the SEC.

To recruit participants, bachelor's degree graduates were identified through an exam preparation center that prepares candidates for civil service exams, and contacted via e-mail, which included a cover letter explaining the study's aims and voluntary participation. This aligns with Creswell's (2012) suggestion that in accessing a specific population, the use of formal networks is appropriate. To recruit the students from the educational centers, the researchers collaborated with the course directors, who helped to distribute recruitment letters to their students. Invitation letters were also mailed to the dean, the instructors, the professional from the SEC, and the HR representative from a ministry. Such specific recruitment tactics make it possible to obtain access to people with immediate involvement in public administration education and government employment, which is in line with Schutt (2012), who calls for institutional affiliation in participant recruitment.

In this study, semi-structured interview materials and document analysis were incorporated as the primary data sources. The interviews were conducted virtually or in person, in each interview, an exploration of curriculum alignment, skill gaps, and recruitment expectations has been done through 8 to 10 open-ended questions. The interview sessions have been audio-recorded with the participants' written consents through which they were informed of their rights, including withdrawal at any stage. The interviews were complemented by document analysis, with a focal point on the curricula and relevant government documentation, involving samples of the exams, descriptions of jobs, and frameworks of competency, to capture patterns and alignment gaps. To ensure transparency and consistency, the collection of the data was carried out through systematic and replicable procedures. Through the data analysis process, as suggested by Creswell and Creswell (2018), we have transcribed the recorded interviews, collected from the participants, in every detail, and coded the data utilizing many categories. This helped us to identify and express

data models (visual representations) and themes from the participants' perspective. Throughout the data analysis process, the data, categorically and chronologically, have been organized, reviewed again and again, and coded continually. A catalog of main concepts that emerged has been described (Merriam, 1988, as cited in Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Trustworthiness is highlighted as the most crucial element of research, regardless of whether someone directly conducts a study or uses another researcher's work in his or her study (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). It refers to validity, reliability, and ethical concerns in research. It is proposed that qualitative researchers, in any given study, should use at least two of the eight suggested verification approaches (Creswell, 1998, as cited in Anfara et al., 2002).

Credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability are considered key criteria for assessing the quality of qualitative research (Guba & Lincoln, 1982, as cited in Anfara et al., 2002). In this research, trustworthiness was mainly ensured by credibility and transferability. As well as credibility, which enhances internal validity and participants' accurate representation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, as cited in Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), was secured with member checking and triangulation. Particularly, data triangulation was carried out by utilizing various data sources for validating the findings (Denzin, 1978, as cited in Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Concerned with the applicability of the findings to similar contexts, transferability has been ensured through providing a thick description of the study setting and participants. This enables readers to check the applicability of the findings in their own contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, as cited in Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

To address ethical concerns, the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2024) guidelines for educational research were followed. Study acceptance was secured before data collection, and the permissions were obtained from participating organizations.

RESULTS

While the interviews aimed to answer the research questions, they also shed light on the two assumptions we made before. Those assumptions are listed as follows:

1. There is a potential skills and competency misalignment between public administration programs and job requirements in governmental bodies in Azerbaijan.

2. The SEC civil service examination could better reflect the knowledge and competencies developed through undergraduate public administration education in Azerbaijan.

THEMES

This research study explores the multifaceted issues contributing to the alignment between university graduates' skills and competencies and the evolving demands of careers in governmental bodies in Azerbaijan. Based on the data analysis, we retrieved four main themes and eight sub-themes from the collected data from the interviews. Theme 1 addresses the misalignment between graduates' skills and competencies and career requirements, focusing on both the theoretical-practical gap and the pervasive skill deficiencies among the graduates of public administration-focused bachelor's programs. In response to these challenges, Theme 2 highlights the need for the improvement of the mentioned academic programs, emphasizing the enhancement of program delivery methods, curriculum development, and the integration of modern technologies into teaching practices. Furthermore, Theme 3 involves existing recruitment process gaps, particularly the limitations of the current recruitment system led by the SEC, and highlights the need for competency-based hiring. Finally, Theme 4 focuses on collaboration between governmental bodies and universities that offer public administration programs, emphasizing the importance of strategic partnerships and the role of internships and practical training in preparing students for real-world professional

environments. Overall, these themes provide a comprehensive framework by analyzing and addressing key issues in graduate employability and educational reform.

The list of the main themes and their sub-themes is as follows (see Table 1).

Misalignment between the graduates' skills/competencies and career requirements

The first theme and its sub-themes have been retrieved from interviews with the SEC professional, HR representative of a ministry, and the graduates of the public administration programs. According to the SEC representative, although the theoretical foundations are solid,

applicants often lack real-world practical experience. Internships, mentorships, and practical assignments are obviously needed. This interviewee noted the following points:

"We often see that candidates have difficulty with analytical thinking and decision-making during the stages of assessment."

"The curricula provide a general understanding of public policy, but many graduates do not have enough practical administrative knowledge. Many potential employees have strong theoretical knowledge but lack soft skills, including communication, teamwork, and adaptability."

The HR representative from the ministry identified significant competency gaps among applicants, particularly in analytical thinking

Table 1 Themes and Sub-themes from Qualitative Data Analysis

Main Theme	Sub-theme	Description
Misalignment between the Graduates' Skills/Competencies and Career Requirements	1. Misalignment between Theory and Practice	There is a gap between the theoretical academic knowledge provided by the public universities and the practical skills needed in the job positions.
	2. Skill Deficiencies Among Graduates	Graduates often lack essential soft and technical skills, which are required by governmental bodies for job positions.
Improvement of the Programs	1. Curriculum Improvement	Updating course content and structure to reflect current career demands in governmental bodies.
	2. Involving Modern Technologies	Integrating digital tools, software, and technological advancements into educational programs.
Recruitment Process Gaps	1. Competency-Based Recruitment	Emphasizing skills and competencies in recruitment rather than solely relying on theoretical academic knowledge.
	2. Challenges of the SEC Recruitment System	Difficulties and inefficiencies in the centralized recruitment process managed by the SEC.
Collaboration between the Universities and Governmental bodies	1. Strengthening the Connection between the Universities and the Government	Enhancing dialogue and strategic partnerships between HEIs and governmental bodies.
	2. Practical Exposure through Internships and Training	Providing students with real-world experience through structured internships and professional training.

and foreign language proficiency. Many candidates struggle to evaluate complex issues or communicate effectively in international contexts. These findings reflect a disconnect between the academic preparation offered by universities and the expectations of government employers, highlighting a misalignment with expected soft and technical skills. The HR professional accordingly noted: “The most common competency gaps among candidates applying for government positions are analytical thinking and foreign language proficiency.”

This finding echoes Amirova and Valiyev (2021), who highlight a widespread mismatch between university graduates’ competencies and labor market expectations in Azerbaijan.

Improvement of the programs

While every higher education program requires periodic improvement from time to time, the study participants addressed specific points that could help the public administration programs to better align with the career requirements in the governmental bodies. One of the important aspects the interviewees touched on was improving the curriculum in the first place. The participants raised concerns about the overly theoretical nature of university programs. The HR representative from the ministry expressed concern that universities tend to emphasize theoretical knowledge while neglecting practical learning. “Many universities primarily focus on theoretical knowledge and do not emphasize leadership, analytical thinking, and problem-solving.”

This aligns with findings by Silva and Garcia (2019), who argue that traditional academic models in many countries fail to prepare students for the evolving needs of the public sector.

Moreover, the research participants who graduated from the public administration-focused programs emphasized that new courses should be included in the educational programs, and technology should be utilized more while delivering the courses. The next excerpts are from the interviews with the graduates of the

given programs: “I would like communication skills courses to be included in the curriculum. It would also be great if the existing courses were delivered in a more practical way and organized through discussions based on real-life situations.”

In my opinion, the best practices of international universities should be studied and comprehensively applied at our universities. At the same time, the rapidly changing nature of state and public relations should be thoroughly analyzed, and outdated Soviet-era models should no longer be taught.

“I would like the organization of education to be more digitalized and for online tools to be used more extensively. I also wish greater attention would be paid to the development of students’ Information and Communication Technology (ICT) skills.”

On the other hand, the Dean of the faculty noted that the curriculum has already been updated to adapt to the new reforms. “For example, when the government introduced new reforms in civil service digitalization, we quickly adapted our curriculum to include relevant tools and approaches.”

The dean also added that the educational programs for the public administration discipline already involve practice-based learning, saying the following:

We integrate policy labs, case studies, simulations, and project-based learning into the curriculum. Our leadership modules often include workshops, seminars, and role-play exercises. When it comes to digital governance, we work with national platforms to expose students to e-government tools and digital innovation projects being implemented in Azerbaijan. We also invite experts from ministries and the ICT sector to engage with students directly.

Additionally, the professors of the public administration faculty emphasized that some of the courses should be excluded from the higher educational programs by saying:

Some subjects are being taught that are not really necessary. For example, Azerbaijani history is taught continuously from the first to the

eleventh grade. It should be taught in such a way that there is no need to study it again at university. A student should know their national history well, but in my opinion, repeating the same subject at the university level is unnecessary.

For example, do students in public administration programs need to study logarithms, the cosine theorem, or Lagrange's theorem? There is no real need for these. Students become overwhelmed, and when they sit for the civil service exam, they find that the questions they face are entirely different from what they studied.

The SEC representative also agreed that some important updates on the curriculum of the public administration-focused programs are needed by expressing the following thoughts: "Integrating policy analysis, budgeting tools, and e-government systems into the curriculum would enhance graduates' preparedness."

Recruitment process gaps

While discussing the SEC civil service exams, a variety of aspects were mentioned by the participants in terms of changing and improving the current recruitment system. The SEC representative shared the following thoughts on the improvement of the examination process: "To better evaluate graduates, exams could consist of simulations or tasks that mirror real government work scenarios. However, the exam content is partly based on real job tasks, but there is room to consider more applied and case-based evaluations."

The challenges of the recruitment process are shared by the participants who graduated from the given programs and the professors of the programs at one of the sampled universities. While one of the former students of the public administration-focused programs mentioned that they needed to go to an educational center to prepare for the exam, the other interviewee talked about the difficulties in choosing appropriate educational material to prepare for the exam. One of the interesting statements on the current recruitment system was as follows:

"I want a placement of students in relevant governmental institutions based on official referrals, not with any SEC exams like the current procedure." This suggests that the referrals should be made by universities.

The participants who graduated from the public administration faculty also addressed some issues and challenges that the candidates possibly face during the recruitment process. Those issues and challenges include nepotism and a lack of transparency in civil service interviews. One participant articulated the concern, stating, "With the points collected, it is not possible to get a job. To get a job, someone should recommend you." The claim points to the perception that recruitment decisions can be significantly affected by personal ties and weigh more than the examination results. Also, another participant stated:

In civil service, graduates take an exam and come for an interview to be hired. However, even though the interview is conducted, it is already known in advance that the candidate will not be hired. Therefore, it is important to conduct these interviews transparently.

The statements indicate the participants' concerns, suggesting the interview results can be decided beforehand, so degrade trust in the hiring pipeline.

Collaboration between the universities and governmental bodies

The last theme and sub-themes mainly consider the recommendations on how to more deeply connect the universities that offer public administration-focused programs and the governmental bodies in Azerbaijan. In this manner, the SEC representative suggested the following statement by addressing the misalignment between the skills that the public administration discipline provides and the skills required for a career in the governmental bodies: "Internship programs or mentorships could limit the gap between education and practical skills."

The HR professional called for stronger ties between academia and public institutions,

suggesting that more interaction would benefit students and government alike: “Increased interaction with the governmental bodies will enhance students’ practical skills, deepen their understanding of public sector work, and reshape their perceptions of government jobs...” “Early engagement with students would allow governmental bodies to identify and attract motivated and talented individuals before they graduate...”

Similar concerns were raised in a position paper by the American Chamber of Commerce in Azerbaijan (AmCham, 2023), which highlighted weak coordination between universities and employers as a key reason for skills mismatch in Azerbaijan.

Moreover, the Dean of the public administration faculty talked about the current situation in terms of the collaboration between the university and the governmental bodies by expressing the following sentences: “We have formal agreements with numerous public bodies that host our students for internships. These are not just observational, as they involve active participation in real projects.”

Finally, we reviewed documents that were provided by one of the public universities that offer public administration-focused programs. The findings retrieved from the document, where all the major and technical subjects were listed, can be considered surprising when compared to the findings from the interviews. As such, a communication skills course is included in the public administration programs in Azerbaijani and in English, namely “Business and academic communication in the Azerbaijani language” and “Business and academic communication in English”. However, all parties in the interview process mentioned that the graduates of public administration programs lack communication skills.

DISCUSSION

In the study, the emerging patterns illustrate that the alignment of the public administration-focused programs and career requirements

at the governmental bodies in Azerbaijan is yet insufficient in spite of reforms carried out, so far, to optimize the quality and content of higher education and public service. The public administration-focused educational programs are expected to educate graduates, equipping them with theoretical knowledge, critical thinking, and professional communication skills. However, the findings of the study indicate that the graduates are not sufficiently equipped with the competencies that are demanded by the job positions of civil service. This aspect resonates with earlier findings by Amirova and Valiyev (2021), which suggest a broader misalignment between the university programs and labor market demands.

Focusing on the mismatch of the graduates’ acquired competencies and the job position requirements in the civil service at governmental bodies, the first theme of the findings clearly illustrates this shortage. This becomes more noticeable in terms of critical thinking, professional communication, and using a foreign language, especially English, for professional purposes. The previous view by Bromell (2010) and Edwards et al. (2012) also supports this point, which suggests that university public administration programs should sufficiently equip graduates with both theoretical and transferable skills, considering that job positions of governmental bodies demand candidates who can handle intricate information, communicate effectively and efficiently, and make informed and rational decisions in real-world situations. Looking from the graduates’ perspectives, which persistently stress the graduates’ shortcomings in these competencies, signals that the undergraduate programs are experienced mostly in classrooms and lead to insufficiency in terms of real work experience. The finding also has similarities with the earlier points made by Silva and Garcia (2019) and Amirova and Valiyev (2021), which drew attention to the alignment of theory and real-world experience.

The assumed mismatch is particularly noteworthy in the Azerbaijani context, while the governmental organizations themselves are in

a transformation process, trying to respond to technological and management reforms. According to Khalilov and Huseyn (2022) and the World Bank (2023), the Azerbaijani public sector is facing a significant demand for enhancing operational performance and accountability, which requires cadres who can make initiatives, demonstrate flexibility, and apply theoretical knowledge appropriately. Approaching the discourse from this angle, the identified skill gaps that the participants have drawn attention to is also a governance concern, besides education. As Edwards et al. (2012) and Khalilov and Huseyn (2022) discussed the point as well, failing to prepare graduates appropriately leads to affecting the functions and quality of performance of governmental bodies.

Logically following the first theme, program improvement emerges as the second theme. Accordingly, participants argue that curriculum revision should be carried out, and more practical learning components should be included in it. They have also pointed to enhancing the application of modern technologies in the education process. These findings resonate with Cleary and Van Noy's (2014) and Silva and Garcia's (2019) opinions, which suggest that public administration education programs should be transformed to align with the public sector's needs. Especially, the findings illustrate that the educational programs stay mainly theory-based, and the insufficiency of the curriculum content surfaces. However, in this regard, the way of teaching and evaluating the content is proportionally crucial as well. As also discussed by Edwards et al. (2012) and Bromell (2010), even if HEIs incorporate pertinent subjects in their curricula, it should be ensured that they are delivered in an appropriate way to develop graduates' transferable skills in accordance with factual knowledge. Also, the analysis of relevant documents sheds light on a crucial nuance that supports this theme. Although the curricula incorporate some critical thinking and professional communication courses in Azerbaijani and English, the research participants persistently highlighted the transferable skills

as a significant shortcoming for the graduates. Such inconsistency brings to attention the fact that it is not just about the lack of or surplus of relevant courses in the curricula, but also about instructing and assessing them in an effective way.

The findings' third emerging theme sheds light on gaps in the recruitment process at the governmental bodies in Azerbaijan. It points to the misalignment between what is taught in the public administration-focused undergraduate programs and the requirements of the civil service examination for hiring. As determined by the Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan on Civil Service (2000), the Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Azerbaijan (2017), and SEC (2025), the civil service recruitment approach, which is legally in the responsibility of the SEC and implemented through testing and interview stages, is formally merit-based. Yet the interviewees argued that the existing examination approach is not sufficiently effective to adequately assess the competencies required for the civil service positions. As well as the representative of the SEC interviewed stressed the importance of incorporating real-world work simulations into the exams to enhance the effectiveness of merit-based selection, which draws attention to the same point. Similarly, the importance of this aspect is discussed by the OECD (2020), which suggests that merit-based approaches can be more effective if they appropriately evaluate candidates' transferable skills in addition to technical or theoretical knowledge.

The view that the graduates strongly need to go to private preparatory centers to prepare to be successful at the SEC exams is predominant among the participants. This notion raises serious questions about alignment between the competencies taught in the undergraduate public administration-focused programs at the universities and the quality of teaching and assessing them as well. Furthermore, if the graduates predominantly need external training to pass both the testing and interview stages of the civil service examination, this points to an

alignment gap between the competences offered by the universities and the requirements of the civil service job positions.

Collaboration between HEIs and governmental bodies is discussed under the fourth theme. It suggests an insightful mechanism to advance with. The importance of internship and mentorship programs and of more effective cooperation between universities and governmental bodies emerges from the data. This notion also echoes the suggestions made by Cleary and Van Noy (2014), which emphasize the necessity of sustained cooperation between universities and governmental institutions to enhance the alignment of educational programs with the requirements of job positions at those institutions. The dean interviewed stated that they have agreements with governmental organizations to organize and regulate internship programs. This resonates with the findings by Mammadov (2019), which emphasize ongoing efforts to enhance collaboration between universities and governmental bodies in Azerbaijan. He also argues that internships, development programs, and research projects have become more common, providing students with significant experience in government agencies. Although this is a positive sign, the remarks made by the graduates point to the need to intensify and broaden the process to enhance alignment of the learning outcomes and job requirements and to support students' preparedness for real-world professional assignments. The argument is also supported by AmCham's (2023) findings, which articulate weak coordination between HEIs and employers as a key reason for skills misalignment in Azerbaijan.

Bringing together the data sets, it seems that the misalignment is a series of partial shortcomings rather than a one-sided insufficiency within the education system, recruitment process, and education-industry or education-employer relationships.

Furthermore, the study points to competency gaps; however, it does not systematically evaluate the graduates' performance through observation or real-time observations; instead, it is mainly

based on the data self-reported and perceived by the participants. This interpretive procedure is reliable within qualitative frameworks but curbs some claims' empirical validity.

The findings of the study have crucial implications for tertiary education policy, recruitment reforms in governmental bodies, and curriculum development in public universities. Primarily, universities could review the content of the curriculum, enhance the effectiveness of delivering it, exclude outdated subjects, and incorporate skills-based, experiential learning relevant to real-world experiences. Improvement of the faculty members' practical and technological competency and skills will be one of the vital points in this regard. Second, the recruitment approach, which is carried out by the SEC, should be improved toward a more practical, skills-based model. Involving applied simulations, case-based evaluations, and pre-regulated internships as a part of the hiring pipeline could increase fairness and readiness of the candidates for the positions. Third, there is a significant need to enhance institutionalized cooperation between HEIs and governmental bodies. Multi-agency curriculum committees, guest lecturers from governmental organizations, long-term internship schemes, and systems for tracking graduates may facilitate continuous alignment between tertiary education and job position requirements of the governmental bodies.

The strength of the study lies in its usage of various qualitative informants, such as the graduates, faculty members, the dean, the HR professional, and the SEC representative, which enhances the findings' credibility. Implementing triangulation through interviews and document review also added depth to the data, enabling it to make a comparison between institutional purposes and perceptions of real-world experience.

LIMITATIONS

Nevertheless, the study's relatively small sample size brings limitations to its generalizability. In addition, the selection of participants

was limited to a small number of institutions, which potentially overlooks variations or reforms being implemented in other HEIs. On the other hand, social desirability bias could have an impact on responses from representatives of the institutions, especially when discussing the effectiveness of the curriculum or efforts for collaboration.

Also, the study has not touched on the content, structure, and other possible details of the 2nd phase of the civil service examination (interview phase) and has only explored the 1st phase, which was about the standardized test exam. Therefore, it has limited insights into the effectiveness of the examination.

The study has been conducted only in one educational setting to understand how public administration-focused undergraduate programs are established. This means the data we have collected is less likely to depict a general picture of the Azerbaijani higher education system regarding the given undergraduate programs.

Considering the interviewing process has included only one hiring person from one ministry, the collected data is less likely to apply to all the government bodies. More precisely, in the hiring process, each state entity may have specific expectations for its future employees.

Future studies can examine disparities in graduate preparedness at a broader number of HEIs, assess the curriculum reform implementations, and evaluate the outcomes of internship programs on employment practice at governmental bodies in Azerbaijan.

CONCLUSION

This study provides substantial insight into the alignment between public administration-focused bachelor's programs and the competency requirements of governmental bodies in Azerbaijan. All primary research questions have been addressed effectively through qualitative interviews with graduates, faculty, and representatives from governmental bodies, including an HR representative from a ministry and a SEC representative.

The study demonstrates a misalignment between the academic preparation offered by public administration-focused programs and the practical competencies expected by employers in governmental bodies, thereby affirming the first assumption of the researchers. The data revealed that graduates often lack crucial soft skills such as communication and practical administrative abilities, despite having a strong theoretical foundation from their bachelor's degrees. This gap between theory and practice underscores the need for enhanced practical training and curricular reforms. Moreover, the study emphasizes significant shortcomings in the current recruitment system. The participants, particularly graduates, voiced concerns about the SEC examination system, citing issues with its transparency and fairness. They indicated that the SEC civil service examination does not sufficiently reflect the competencies developed during their university education. To address this issue, the recruitment design should adopt competency-based evaluations, more real-world simulations, and strengthen university–public employer collaboration or, more broadly, university–labor market collaboration. In conclusion, the data collected not only answers the research questions but also supports the initial assumptions, painting a clear picture of opportunities and challenges for better alignment between public administration discipline students' academic preparation and employment requirements in governmental bodies. Therefore, strategic reforms in curriculum design and institutional collaboration are crucial aspects for bridging this divide.

References

- Alakbarova, Z. (2024). *Soft skills and youth employability in Azerbaijan: The role of formal and non-formal education* (Master's thesis, Lund University). Lund University Publications. <https://lup.lub.lu.se/luur/download?func=downloadFile&recordId=9170226&fileId=9170228>

- ² Allen, J., & van der Velden, R. (2001). Educational mismatches versus skill mismatches: Effects on wages, job satisfaction, and on-the-job search. *Oxford Economic Papers*, 53(3), 434–452.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/oep/53.3.434>
- ³ Alharahsheh, H.H., & Pius, A. (2020). *A review of key paradigms: Positivism vs interpretivism*. *Global Academic Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 2(3), 39–43.
https://www.gajrc.com/media/articles/GAJHSS_23_39-43_VMGJbOK.pdf
- ⁴ American Chamber of Commerce in Azerbaijan (AmCham). (2023). *Doing business in Azerbaijan: A guide for investors*.
<https://amcham.az/uploads/publication/ab143e95b8d444cab1933dd8003a4370.pdf?v=1706873629>
- ⁵ American Chamber of Commerce in Azerbaijan (AmCham). (2024). *Position paper on mismatch between education and employment*.
<https://amcham.az/uploads/publication/ab143e95b8d444cab1933dd8003a4370.pdf?v=1706873629>
- ⁶ Anfara, V.A., Jr., Brown, K.M., & Mangione, T.L. (2002). Qualitative analysis on stage: Making the research process more public. *Educational Researcher*, 31(7), 28–38.
<https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X031007028>
- ⁷ Amirova, G., & Valiyev, A. (2021). Do university graduate competences match post-socialist labour market demands? Evidence from Azerbaijan. *Journal of Teaching and Learning for Graduate Employability*, 12(2), 332–347.
- ⁸ Azerbaijan State University of Economics (UNEC). (2025). Dövlət və bələdiyyə idarəetməsi ixtisası [Public and Municipal Administration specialty].
<https://unec.edu.az/4444-dovlet-ve-belediyeye-idareetmesi-ixtisasi/>
- ⁹ Azərbaycan Respublikası Dövlət İmtahan Mərkəzi. (2024, July 23). *Azərbaycan Respublikası Dövlət İmtahan Mərkəzi publik hüquqi şəxsin Nizamnaməsi* [Charter of the State Examination Center of the Republic of Azerbaijan]. Prezident.az.
<https://president.az/az/articles/view/66544>
- ¹⁰ British Educational Research Association. (2024). *Ethical guidelines for educational research* (5th ed.).
<https://www.bera.ac.uk/publication/ethical-guidelines-for-educational-research-fifth-edition-2024>
- ¹¹ Bromell, D. (2010). The public servant as analyst, adviser, and advocate. In J. Boston, A. Bradstock, & D. Eng (Eds.), *Public Policy: Why ethics matters* (pp. 55–78). ANU Press.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt24h2rv.8>
- ¹² Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Azerbaijan. (2017, March 10). Resolution No. 87 on approval of the form of the certificate on passing the test exam for civil service positions.
<https://e-qanun.az/framework/35053>
- ¹³ Cleary, J., & Van Noy, M. (2014). *A framework for higher education labor market alignment: Lessons and future directions in the development of jobs-driven strategies* (Working paper). John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development, Rutgers University.
<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED565469.pdf>
- ¹⁴ Creswell, J.W., & Creswell, J.D. (2018). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (5th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- ¹⁵ Creswell, J.W. (2012). *Educational Research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research* (4th ed.). Boston, MA: Pearson.
- ¹⁶ Creswell, J.W., & Poth, C.N. (2017). *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- ¹⁷ Creswell, J.W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- ¹⁸ Denzin, N.K., & Lincoln, Y.S. (2018). *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research* (5th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- ¹⁹ Dövlət Xidmətləri Portalı. (2024). *Dövlət orqanları* [Government agencies].
<https://www.dxr.az/dovlet-orqanlari?lang=az>
- ²⁰ Dövlət qulluğu haqqında Azərbaycan Respublikasının Qanunu [Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan on Civil Service] No. 926-IQ. (2000, July 21). *E-Qanun.az*.
<https://e-qanun.az/framework/4481>

- ²¹ Dövlət qulluğu vəzifəsinin tutulması məqsədi ilə müsahibə keçirilməsi Qaydası'nın təsdiq edilməsi haqqında Azərbaycan Respublikası Prezidentinin Fərmanı [Decree of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan on Approval of the Rules for Conducting Interviews for Holding Public Service Positions], 21 iyun 2017-ci il, No. 1480. <https://e-qanun.az/framework/35861>
- ²² Edwards, M., Halligan, J., Horrigan, B., & Nicoll, G. (2012). Dimensions of Governance for the Public Sector. In *Public Sector Governance in Australia* (pp. 9–34). ANU Press. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt24h92b.6>
- ²³ Green, F., & McIntosh, S. (2007). Is there a genuine under-utilization of skills amongst the over-qualified? *Applied Economics*, 39(4), 427–439. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00036840500427700>
- ²⁴ Khalilov, B., & Huseyn, A. (2022). Civil service reform in the Republic of Azerbaijan. In *Public administration and policy in the Middle East and North Africa* (pp. 49–69). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-16-2462-9_3
- ²⁵ Mammadov, O. (2019). *Constitutional and legal support of civil service relations in the legislature: Azerbaijani experience* (Report). Azerbaijan State University of Economics. <https://unec.edu.az/application/uploads/2019/09/Memmedov-Oruc.pdf>
- ²⁶ Maruyama, G., & Ryan, C.S. (2014). Research methods in social relations.
- ²⁷ Merriam, S.B., & Tisdell, E.J. (2016). *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*. John Wiley & Sons. 4th ed.
- ²⁸ Ministry of Science and Education of the Republic of Azerbaijan. (2019). *State program on increasing the international competitiveness of the higher education system in the Republic of Azerbaijan for 2019–2023*. <https://edu.gov.az/en/programmes/2019-2023-dovlet-proqrami>
- ²⁹ Ministry of Science and Education of the Republic of Azerbaijan. (n.d.). Higher education. <https://edu.gov.az/en/higher-education>
- ³⁰ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2018). *Benchmarking civil service reform in Kazakhstan* (OECD Public Governance Reviews). OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264288096-en>
- ³¹ OECD. (2020). *OECD public integrity handbook*. OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/ac8ed8e8-en>
- ³² Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative Research & Evaluation Methods: Integrating Theory and Practice* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- ³³ Schutt, R.K. (2012). *Investigating the social world: The process and practice of research* (7th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- ³⁴ Silva, M.C.V., & Garcia, A.C.M. (2019). The role of education in the world of work: Fostering learning organisations. *Journal of Siberian Federal University. Humanities & Social Sciences*, 12(2), 231–246. <https://elib.sfu-kras.ru/bitstream/handle/2311/109546/Silva.pdf;jsessionid=4751F1D8D6DFF78BF991BBF394ABADC2?sequence=1>
- ³⁵ State Examination Center. (2024, April 3). In 2023, a total of 16,200 candidates participated in civil service exams [News release]. <https://dim.gov.az/az/metbuat/xeberler/2023-cu-ilde-dovlet-qullugu-imtahanlarinda-umumli-kde-16200-namized-istirak-edib>
- ³⁶ State Examination Center. (2025, January 2). Electronic services for the civil service: Programs for the civil service entrance test stage. <https://exidmet.dim.gov.az/dqq/Elan/TestImtProq>
- ³⁷ State Examination Center. (2025). Public sector recruitment process. <https://www.dim.gov.az/en/fealiyyet/dovlet-qullugu/dovlet-qulluguna-qebul>
- ³⁸ Varona Cervantes, C., & Cooper, R. (2020). *Labor market implications of education mismatch* (Working paper No. 28169). National Bureau of Economic Research. https://www.nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w28169/w28169.pdf
- ³⁹ World Bank. (2023). *Employment outcomes in Azerbaijan* (Report). World Bank. <https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/559691547017409165-0080022019/original/ENG2ndsessionLireErsa-doEmploymentoutcomes.pdf>
- ⁴⁰ World Bank. (2024). *Strengthening the impact of public spending in Azerbaijan*. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/azerbaijan/brief/strengthening-impact-of-public-spending-in-azerbaijan>