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ABSTRACT

of the dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

THE SYSTEM OF DEVELOPING COMPETENCIES IN STUDENTS IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE REQUIREMENTS OF THE LABOR MARKET (ON THE SPECIALTY OF REGIONAL STUDIES)

Speciality:	5802.01 – "Organization and planning of education"
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GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE RESEARCH

Relevance and degree of development of the research. The socio-economic trends currently observed in the labor market are driving significant changes – namely, the emergence of a new set of values and the development of behavioral patterns among young people that align with the demands of the times. A student's activities within a higher education institution profoundly shape their perspective on the labor market and influence their future success within it. The need for both formal technical knowledge and social and cognitive competencies – essential for gaining a competitive edge in the labor market – exerts a major influence on how students conduct themselves during their university studies. This specific integration of "hard" and "soft" skills effectively meets the requirements placed upon the new generation of professionals. It should be noted that in the modern Republic of Azerbaijan, the demand dynamics for specialists in certain fields of the labor market often contradict the traditional system of professional preparation. The adaptation of university graduates to the labor market and the issues of competitiveness are organized in accordance with state educational standards for each particular specialty, which at times may not coincide with the quality expected by the employer.

A review of Azerbaijani pedagogical literature shows that although certain aspects of this issue have been the subject of research, the topic of developing labor market–oriented competencies in students majoring in regional studies has not yet been explored in a comprehensive way. The current reality requires students in the field of regional studies to possess a wide range of integrated knowledge. However, the methodology for forming competencies among students of regional studies has not yet been clearly defined.

In the modern era, globalization, the dynamic development of the labor market and technological transformations create new challenges for the higher education system. Within this context, one of the primary objectives of higher education institutions is to ensure the preparation of specialists who meet the requirements of the labor market. Particularly for a multifaceted and practically oriented field

such as regional studies, the proper and purposeful development of students' professional competencies is a crucial factor for their successful integration into the labor market.

Specialists in the field of regional studies work in various areas such as public administration, international relations, economics, culture and social policy.

Thus, this dissertation meets the contemporary requirements of aligning the education system with labor market demands, organizing competency-based education and applying a systematic approach to the training of specialists in the field of regional studies.

Degree of studying of the problem. A review of Azerbaijani pedagogical literature shows that a number of researchers in this field have chosen various aspects of competency issues in education as the object of their studies. Among them, we can mention such researchers as M.I.Ilyasov, A.O.Mehrabov, S.S.Aliyeva, M.A.Hamzayev, S.F.Amiraslanova, P.B.Aliyev, G.Bandaliyeva and I.H.Jabrayilov.

Researcher M.I.Ilyasov devoted extensive attention to the issue of fostering competencies in teacher training in his monograph titled *"Teacher professionalism and modern problems of pedagogical competency"*. He emphasized the importance of a teacher's high professional preparation in the process of developing essential competencies among learners. Focusing on matters such as teachers mastering and applying new technologies and constantly improving themselves, the researcher does not address the requirements of the labor market in his scientific works but examines the problem within the framework of a competency-based approach in teacher preparation.

A group of researchers who focused on this issue conducted studies in the field of student-teacher relations within the educational process. In Azerbaijani pedagogical studies, the joint research work of M.A.Hamzayev and S.F.Amiraslanova on communication culture and its successful establishment can be cited as an example. In their book, the authors dedicated a separate chapter to the socio-psychological aspects of pedagogical communication, directing attention to the obstacles encountered by teachers in their communication with learners, the methods of overcoming these difficulties and the determination of the teacher's position in this process.

Researcher S.S.Aliyeva, while emphasizing that competencies such as critical thinking and logical reasoning will gain increasing value in the modern labor market, does not address the methods through which these competencies can be developed among students.

P.B.Aliyev, conducting more in-depth research, analyzed existing concepts on this topic. The author's most significant conclusion is the emphasis on the responsibility of higher education institutions in ensuring that graduates find their place in the labor market and advance in their professional careers, as well as the necessity of developing the required competencies among learners.

The dissertation analyzes the works of scholars such as P. Griffin, J. Van Merriënboer, A. Stoof, T. Bastiaens, and R. Martens, as well as Arthur, B. Lorens, D. Holl, V. Nikitenko, A. Lakeeva, N. Serbina, A. Borisova, Y. Glushkova, I. Sigankova, V. Nikitenko, and others. It should be noted that documents revealing the goals, objectives and essence of university education, such as the Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan "On Education", the State Standards of Vocational Education, as well as many international scientific projects related to the topic have also been included in this research.

The object and subject of the research. The object of the research is students studying in the field of regional studies at higher education institutions and the organization of their preparation for the labor market.

The subject of the research is the level of participation of teachers and learners in the process of developing professional competencies among students of regional studies in accordance with labor market requirements, the pedagogical and psychological analysis of this process, the role of the personal qualities of both parties in it, as well as the tools and methods determined for this purpose.

The aim and objective of the research. The objective of the dissertation is to identify the competencies that will ensure the adaptation of students majoring in "Regional Studies" at universities of the Republic of Azerbaijan to the labor market and to develop a systematic approach for forming these competencies.

During the study, efforts were made to fulfill the following tasks:

1. To theoretically substantiate the organization of forming competencies in students of regional studies in accordance with labor market requirements.

2. To confirm the process of developing essential competencies through experimental methods and to identify its technological conditions.

3. To examine the concept of "soft skills" in the context of higher education institutions and to identify the relevant "soft skills" to be developed among regional studies students.

4. To design an instructional method for developing competencies in students of regional studies.

5. To analyze the significance and interrelation of professional knowledge, skills and professional competencies in the higher education process.

Research methods. The following methods were used in solving the assigned tasks:

1. Comparative analysis, synthesis and generalization of local and foreign scientific literature reflecting the theoretical and practical application of the competency-based approach in higher education.

2. Theoretical analysis and study of philosophical, pedagogical, psychological, sociological and scientific-methodological literature.

3. Collection of information through the study of dissertations, curricula, observation, questionnaire surveys and document analysis.

4. Organization of a pedagogical experiment and modeling of educational and production situations.

5. Statistical processing of experimental data.

The main provisions for the defense:

• Identifying existing barriers in the process of developing professional competencies among students and determining ways to overcome them play a positive role in the professional life of future specialists.

• The application of various non-instructional methods has a significant impact on the development of general competencies among undergraduate students. Moreover, the use of case methods plays an important role in students' learning through creative activities and their participation in the teaching process as facilitators.

• Today's graduate, as a future specialist, must be solution-oriented and possess functional competencies to effectively address problems that may arise in various situations.

• Each higher education institution has its own main competency framework adapted to its teaching and learning process. In this framework, professional competencies hold a leading position and correspond to the requirements of the labor market and society.

• The preparation of professional teaching staff responsible for developing general and professional competencies among students is one of the important issues of pedagogy. The proper organization of methodological work aimed at forming essential competencies necessitates the creation of a new model of psychological and pedagogical competency for teachers.

• To ensure the success of learners in acquiring 21st-century skills, professional cooperation between institutions should be expanded, and close partnerships must be established between employers and universities that train specialists in relevant fields.

• Considering the employment opportunities that may arise abroad, special attention should be paid to the formation of such competencies as professional individualization, leadership qualities and professional business communication ethics in the training of students majoring in "Regional Studies".

Scientific novelty of the research. During the research, the representation of the process of developing competencies in undergraduate students majoring in "Regional Studies" in accordance with the conditions, opportunities and requirements of the current labor market was examined in scientific literature across various universities in the country. A competency-based teaching and assessment model grounded in modern educational standards applicable to higher education institutions was developed. The state of the labor market and the factors influencing professional success were studied through empirical research. The curricula and methodological approaches in the experience of local and foreign universities were compared, and factors supporting motivation and personal development were identified. Based on these findings,

practical recommendations for the organization and assessment of competency-based education were proposed.

Theoretical and practical significance of the research. The theoretical significance of the dissertation lies in the fact that the problem of "developing competencies in students of regional studies" was extensively examined during the research, and the existing pedagogical, psychological and economic approaches in this field were systematized. The process of forming competencies in accordance with the requirements of the labor market was theoretically and empirically substantiated. The generalizations and scientific conclusions reached at the end of the research can serve as a scientific basis for updating the content of educational programs, organizing and improving relevant specialized courses, and preparing scientific-methodological materials in the pedagogical faculties of universities, particularly in the field of "Regional Studies".

In addition, the research materials expand the scientific foundations of the competency-based approach in higher education, contribute to the formation of a conceptual framework that can be applied in the training of future specialists in regional studies and create a sustainable scientific basis for further studies in this field.

The practical significance of the research is that the results obtained will contribute to the more effective design of curricula in higher education institutions that offer education in regional studies. Furthermore, they will support achieving the strategic objective of higher education, preparing graduates with professional competence that meets the requirements of the labor market.

Approbation and rusult. The content of the research, the core scientific ideas, and the results obtained are reflected in 9 articles published by the applicant (including 3 articles published abroad) and 7 conference papers (including 3 conference papers published abroad).

Institution where the dissertation was carried out. The work was performed at the Department of Economics and Management of Education of the Institute of Education of the Republic of Azerbaijan.

Structure of the dissertation. The dissertation consists of an introduction, 3 chapters – each containing 10 sections – a conclusion, a list of references, and appendices.

MAIN CONTENT OF THE RESEARCH

In the introduction of the dissertation, the relevance of the topic is explained, the degree of its scrutiny is examined and the object and subject, objectives and tasks of the research are defined. The research methods are presented, the main provisions for defense and the scientific novelty of the study are substantiated, and information is provided about its theoretical and practical significance, approval and application, the name of the institution where the work was carried out, its structural divisions, as well as the overall volume of the dissertation.

The first chapter of the dissertation, titled **"Theoretical foundations of developing competencies in bachelor's students in accordance with the requirements of the labor market",** explores the essence and significance of competencies in its first subsection, ***"The nature and importance of competencies".*** This part discusses the influence of the transition to a multi-level higher education system and the impact of the digital world's growing demands on state education standards, as well as the resulting significant changes. It examines the crucial role of competency theory in the new educational concept, emphasizing that its application in education fosters flexible thinking, mobility, the development of necessary professional skills and the emergence of various abilities among learners. Currently, the issue of professional competencies, which holds an important place among the pressing problems of pedagogical sciences, remains relevant due to the contradictions faced by university graduates in the labor market and the difficulties they encounter in starting professional activity amid socio-economic changes. In this subsection, the concept of the "competent professional," which has recently gained more attention in pedagogical literature, is analyzed scientifically. As a necessary theoretical framework, it is underlined that instilling competencies in the teaching-learning process is a key factor in improving the quality of education. If a university graduate can quickly adapt to the social environment and successfully begin professional activity, it means that the competency theory has been properly implemented in the educational process.

Within the framework of the competency-based approach, the skills acquired in the teaching process encourage each individual toward self-improvement, self-discipline and self-organization, as well as the enhancement of knowledge. They guide the learner to plan and implement tasks effectively and to focus on personal development. In other words, the process of developing competencies inspires the acquisition of a key competency, the ability of a person to further improve their own "self". This serves as a foundation for the development of any ability and ensures the learner's success in both educational and professional life.

The second subsection of Chapter I, titled ***"Pedagogical, psychological and economic aspects of the problem",*** states that the preparation of university teachers for the task of developing general and professional competencies in students is among the important practical issues of pedagogy. The organization of methodological work, as well as the scientific and instructional-methodological support for forming these competencies in students, requires determining the scope of a modern teacher's knowledge and skills and creating a model of their psychological and pedagogical competency. The analysis of scientific literature and pedagogical practice shows that the development of these competencies among students is achievable only through the teacher's creative approach. This part examines several pedagogical approaches to teaching and upbringing within the higher education system.

Continuous improvement of a future specialist, both professionally and personally, is one of the essential issues. Having knowledge alone is not sufficient; it is necessary to be able to manage it and to build an information environment. In addition to professionalism, a young specialist must be responsible and psychologically prepared to face various complex situations. These qualities are given particular attention in the process of developing competencies among bachelor's students.

In the third subsection of the discussed chapter, the author focuses on one of the most relevant issues of pedagogy and attempts to define ***"The place of 21st-century competencies in education".*** It is noted that possessing universal competencies that meet the

demands of the 21st century is an essential requirement for future professionals, the individuals of the post-industrial era. The issue of cultivating these skills among learners was first raised in the International Scientific Project held in 2010. The project, known as ATC21S (Assessment and Teaching of 21st Century Skills), was led by researchers who presented the proposal that graduates should possess universal skills as a global concern. The problem of teaching and assessing 21st-century skills has attracted the attention of many prestigious higher education institutions around the world.

In this part of the chapter, the differences between the education of the previous century and that of the 21st century are analyzed, and the obtained results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1.3.1

Differences between 20th and 21st century education

20th century education	21st century education
Classroom participants are almost of the same age and knowledge level.	Classroom participants are of different ages and possess varying levels of knowledge.
Teaching is offered according to the class structure.	The educational plan is designed individually.
The teacher's role is limited to transferring ready-made knowledge to learners.	The teacher acts as a guide, organizing the information and learning environment.
The sources of information are limited.	The sources of information are numerous and unlimited.
The educational environment is created by the teacher.	There exists an educational environment jointly created by the teacher and the learner.
Learners receive pre-prepared information and knowledge.	The learner approaches learning from an independent standpoint.
Knowledge is reflected in textbooks and curricula.	Knowledge is constantly updated, obtained from various sources and based on observation.
Already known knowledge, skills and competencies are transmitted.	The learner creates their own individual world of knowledge, developing their skills and cultural level.

As can be seen, there is a significant shift in the roles of teachers and students between 20th and 21st century education. In educational materials, critical thinking, the development of creativity and the application of analytical reasoning in problem-solving have taken a leading position, while the need to organize interpersonal relations logically has become more evident.

The second chapter of the research, titled **"The influence of the labor market and employment prospects on the development of students' competencies",** is divided into four subsections. The first subsection, ***"The impact of the global economic situation on the development of competencies",*** explores how the world labor market, along with the markets for goods, services and capital, is gaining increasing importance. It is noted that in the context of globalization and the acceleration of production internationalization, the labor market no longer represents a mere collection of national markets but reflects a new and more advanced stage of global market development. When young specialists who have graduated from universities enter the labor market, they face various difficulties. In this regard, researchers analyzing the state of the labor market, considering the employment challenges of young professionals and the high level of youth unemployment, draw attention to the problems they encounter. According to these researchers, one of the main challenges faced by university graduates lies in the mismatch between the competencies they have acquired and those required by the labor market.

Young people entering the labor market for the first time, who lack work experience and sufficient professional qualities, are considered part of the more vulnerable social groups of the population. Therefore, the preparation of highly qualified specialists capable of mastering advanced technologies and adapting quickly to the conditions of the market economy can be included among the key strategic objectives. Following this strategy ensures the enhancement of state competitiveness and guarantees rapid economic development.

The second subsection of the chapter, titled ***"The influence of the labor market of the Republic of Azerbaijan on the development***

of competencies", highlights the extent to which the requirements of production enterprises are taken into account in the higher education process, as well as the issues of cooperation between enterprises and universities. It is noted that in many countries, processes of economic recession and deepening inflation hinder the development of the global market, while the increasing use of artificial intelligence and rapid digitalization are eliminating the demand for traditional professions. The changes taking place in the global labor market inevitably affect the Republic of Azerbaijan as well, prompting the state leadership to develop a number of progressive projects in the field of labor resources. Naturally, creating opportunities for the advancement of human capital and introducing digital elements into various sectors of the economy contribute to the socio-economic development of any country. The measures taken in our republic to ensure employment, the allocation of part of the budget for this purpose and the development and implementation of large-scale projects stem from the necessity of integration with the global labor market. It should be noted that the employment of young people to be involved in production concerns not only state institutions but also the private sector, and significant administrative reforms are being implemented in this direction.

In the third subsection of Chapter II, the issues of ***"The influence of competencies on students' success in professional life: the development of leadership, communication, critical thinking and creative reasoning"*** are examined. It is emphasized that the preparation of a competent specialist capable of proving themselves in their chosen field is one of the main and strategic objectives of today's higher education system. Modern companies striving to maintain their reputation and remain competitive set various requirements for potential job candidates, focusing not only on deep professional knowledge but also on advanced professional skills. Potential candidates must possess flexible thinking abilities, be constantly ready to learn and adapt quickly to changing conditions. Employers, when selecting staff, often prefer candidates with "soft skills", which, though not directly related to job responsibilities, make them stand out as excellent professionals. To succeed in

recruitment, students and graduates must keep up with new labor market requirements, understand that acquiring soft skills often takes more time than developing technical ones and strive to master a broader range of competencies during their studies. Along with emphasizing the importance of developing competencies in young specialists, it is also necessary to address the challenges encountered on the way to achieving desired outcomes. The absence of a step-by-step development system in organizing students' activities, as well as the lack of effective tools for assessing the level of these competencies, can be considered among these challenges.

The fourth subsection of Chapter II analyzes the issues related to ***"The role of higher education institutions in the systematic development of competencies"*** and evaluates the performance of universities in this field. Higher education plays a foundational role in the development of both individuals and society, ensuring the evolution of moral and productive potential. The period of university education greatly influences young people's socialization, the establishment of their life strategies and plans and the implementation of the knowledge they acquire.

Through the application of various forms and methods in higher education institutions, the integration of both professional and universal competencies contributes to the preparation of innovative specialists suitable for an innovation-based economy. By mobilizing all the resources of the university environment and designing a flexible, complex and diverse system of competencies, we enhance the potential for training professionals capable of applying new technological solutions, possessing systematic and critical thinking, managing projects and working effectively in teams. In the education and upbringing of students, great responsibility falls on the teaching staff, university scholars and academic group supervisors. In our opinion, the implementation of the following conditions can lead to a more advanced form of the learning process:

- ensuring staff provision by highly qualified pedagogical personnel (for example, in technical, economic and medical universities, not all teachers possess pedagogical education; therefore, organizing psycho-pedagogical courses for them is advisable);

- continuous improvement of teachers' pedagogical culture through the organization of pedagogical forums, conferences and similar events;

- implementation of the principles of pedagogical collaboration and student participation in scientific research and public activities;

- improvement of the student self-governance system;

- provision of a comfortable cultural and educational environment aimed at developing students' personalities;

- organization of students' leisure time and support for the all-round development of each member of the student community.

The implementation of the above-mentioned measures will contribute to the development of students' social and cultural competencies, helping future specialists take a worthy place in life and become valuable individuals for society and the state.

The third chapter of the research, titled **"Possibilities and way of developing competencies in students majoring in regional studies",** consists of three subsections, the first of which is ***"Possibilities of developing students' competencies during the learning process and extracurricular activities".*** In this subsection, it is emphasized that in addressing educational and upbringing issues within the instructional process, such qualities as the level of social adaptation, personal and moral values, degree of creative potential, civic position and sense of responsibility cannot be overlooked. At the same time, it is essential for the student to understand their social essence, to approach education purposefully and to be formed as a hardworking individual. For a young specialist entering the labor market to achieve success in professional life, several essential skills must be represented at the highest possible level, among which the most significant can be distinguished as follows:

- to be able to comprehend, generalize, analyze information, set goals and determine ways to achieve them;

- to have fluent speech and express well-reasoned, logical thoughts;

- to be ready for friendly communication with colleagues;

- to approach oneself critically, accurately assess one's strengths and weaknesses and be inclined toward self-improvement.

General scientific competencies influence the formation of understanding the social significance of the specialty. Therefore, attention should be paid to the following:

- enhancing the level of professional ethics and self-awareness;
- developing the ability to use methods and fundamental principles of the humanities, economics and social sciences in solving social and professional issues;
- continuously acquiring new knowledge through the use of modern educational and information technologies. In the context of a vast amount of information obtained, including from the internet, it is important to navigate correctly and distinguish accurate data from false or unnecessary information.

In the first subsection of the third chapter of the dissertation, the opportunities created for the development of students' competencies in the teaching process of Azerbaijani universities are examined and experiments conducted to study learners' attitudes toward the disciplines included in curricula are discussed. The survey involved students majoring in regional studies of Eastern countries at Baku State University, and the responses were presented in tabular form.

The second subsection of the chapter attempts a scientific analysis of ***"Ways of developing competencies among bachelor's students".***

Several of the competencies included in the structure of professional competencies are, in fact, multi-level and complex. Their acquisition requires not only linguistic but also a range of other humanities-related disciplines to be studied. For this reason, during the preparatory stage at university, the ways of developing the necessary competencies should be examined. It is considered that one of these ways is the application of innovative methods, their types and technologies in the teaching process. Some of them are presented below:

Agreeing with the view that problem-based learning in the instructional process strongly contributes to the development of various competencies among students, it should be noted that this type of learning focuses on solving theoretical and practical problems and tasks by engaging learners in created problem situations. The

"internalization" of an objective problem situation can be considered one of the central aspects of problem-based learning. To identify the relationship between labor market demands and graduates of the "Regional Studies" specialty, as well as to reveal the potential resources of professional education in this field, a survey was conducted by the author. Graduates specializing in "Foreign Regional Studies" were included in the study. In order to analyze the situation in the labor markets of both Azerbaijan and the world, the survey involved graduates with degrees in "Regional Studies" from higher education institutions of the Republic of Azerbaijan, as well as from various countries offering the same specialty. The Azerbaijani respondents who participated as experts in the survey had more than two years of work experience, seven of whom had begun their careers with bachelor's degrees and eleven with master's degrees. The survey included graduates from Azerbaijani universities offering the "Regional Studies" specialty: 3 from Baku Slavic University, 4 from the University of Tourism and Management, 1 from Azerbaijan University, 5 from Baku State University, 2 from ADA University and 3 from Azerbaijan University of Languages. From other countries (Russia - 4, Kazakhstan - 3, Türkiye - 5, Sweden - 1, China - 1, Canada - 2), a total of 16 specialists with 2–3 years of work experience participated in the electronic survey. Among the respondents were individuals working at European Union delegations, departments of Ministries of Foreign Affairs, international organizations, state institutions and those engaged in teaching. All experts reflected on the questions "Which competencies from the list of professional competencies were most required during employment?" and "Which competencies were insufficiently developed within the framework of professional education?". According to the results, graduates from Azerbaijan, Russia and Kazakhstan stated that having fundamental knowledge and competency in preparing official and business documentation (including electronic correspondence) in the language predominant in a specific region was among the most essential requirements for employment. Specialists from Türkiye, Sweden, Canada and China emphasized that possessing knowledge of social methods, the ability

to plan for specific regions and readiness to conduct research on objects in real market conditions were considered key requirements. All respondents noted that in-depth understanding of the political culture and mentality of the peoples residing in a given region, as well as the distinctive features of their historically developed socio-political and legal systems, was regarded as a fundamental prerequisite.

Among Azerbaijani universities, a survey was conducted mainly among third- and fourth-year students of the "Regional Studies (European Studies)" faculty at Khazar University, which is known for its European-oriented approach. The purpose of the survey was to identify the factors influencing the formation of professional individuality among bachelor's students in international-profile higher education. The questions proposed to the students included the following:

1. To what extent do language courses influence professional individualization?

2. Can the inclusion of individuals with work experience in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs among the teaching staff have a positive impact on professional training?

3. Can internships at foreign organizations have a more effective impact?

4. How significant are the lectures delivered by specialists with work experience in international relations?

5. Would you like to see an increase in the number of lecture hours (courses) devoted to the development of practical knowledge and skills?

6. What other factors would you like to see emphasized to enhance professional individualization?

7. What is your attitude toward the necessity of fostering patriotism and the sense of protecting national interests during the process of professional individualization?

Students demonstrated interesting approaches in their responses to the proposed questions. Differences were observed not only between the answers of third-year and fourth-year students but also in the way of thinking among students of the same year.

It is worth noting that students from both courses highly appreciated internships at foreign organizations (90% and 95%). This result created the necessity of conducting experiments related to internships at local institutions. The reasons why students refuse internships at local organizations can be considered one of the significant parts of the research. We decided to organize experiments involving students majoring in "International Relations and Regional Studies" from Baku Slavic University (5 interns), Western University (7 interns) and Azerbaijan University of Languages (11 interns), who completed their internships at the Institute of History named after A.A.Bakikhanov of the Azerbaijan National Academy of Sciences between March and May 2023.

The third subsection of Chapter III is titled "Organization, implementation and generalization of the experiment". The main objective of this research is to assess the level of development of skills aligned with labor market requirements among students majoring in regional studies and to analyze the extent to which these skills are enhanced through the educational process. Within the framework of the experiment, a survey was conducted among 178 students, 33 employers and 15 teachers, and the results were statistically analyzed and summarized.

The main method used in the study was a questionnaire survey. The questionnaire was designed based on nine key skills using a Likert scale (1 – very low, 5 – very high). Additionally, it evaluated students' perceptions of how effectively higher education develops these skills and whether they have prior work experience.

Table 3.3.1
Gender distribution of students participating in the survey

	Number	**Percentage (%)**
Female	110	61.8%
Male	68	38.2%

Note: Calculated by the author using the SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) program.

According to the results of the conducted survey, the gender distribution of the participating students is as follows: 110 participants, or 61.8%, were female, and 68 participants, or 38.2%, were male.

Table 3.3.2
Distribution of students participating in the survey by year of study

	Number	**Percentage (%)**
First year	45	25.3%
Second year	40	22.5%
Third year	50	28.1%
Fourth year	43	24.1%

Note: Calculated by the author using the SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) program.

According to the distribution of students participating in the survey by year of study, 45 students (25.3%) were from the first year, 40 students (22.5%) from the second year, 50 students (28.1%) from the third year and 43 students (24.1%) from the fourth year.

Table 3.3.7
Descriptive analysis of the results of students participating in the survey related to skills

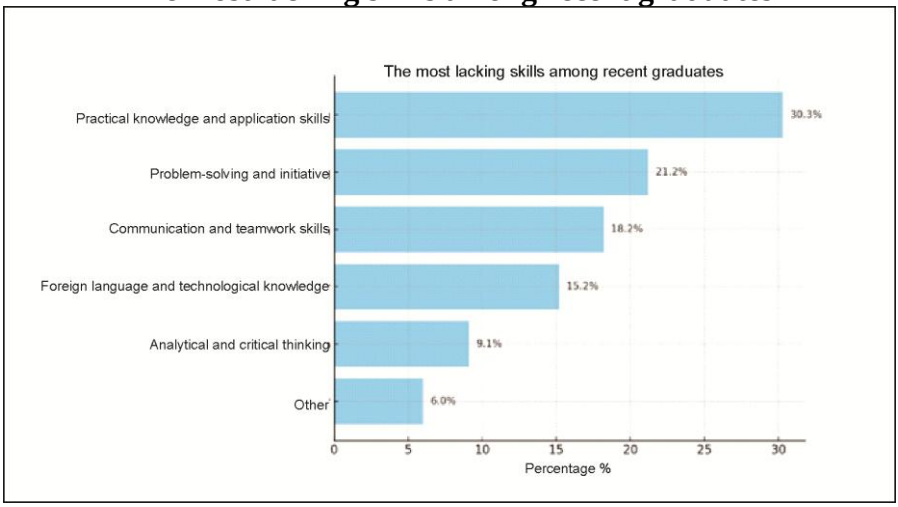
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Problem solving	2.94	1.44	1	5
Communication	3.12	1.41	1	5
Teamwork	3.01	1.38	1	5
Digital skills	3.01	1.42	1	5
Time management	2.94	1.40	1	5
Entrepreneurship	3.13	1.37	1	5
Foreign language proficiency	3.03	1.38	1	5
Critical thinking	2.90	1.43	1	5
Creativity	2.98	1.42	1	5

Note: Calculated by the author using the SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) program.

The descriptive analysis of students' self-assessment results regarding various skills reveals several observations (Table 3.3.7). The mean scores range between 2.90 and 3.13, indicating that students generally rated their skills at an average level. The standard deviations, ranging from 1.37 to 1.44, show a certain degree of variability in the responses, meaning that there are different levels of skill proficiency among students. **The highest averages** were recorded for entrepreneurship skills (Mean = 3.13) and communication skills (Mean = 3.12), suggesting that students considered themselves relatively stronger in these two areas. **The lowest averages** were found in critical thinking (Mean = 2.90) and problem solving (Mean = 2.94), which indicates that students may face greater challenges in logical-analytical and strategic thinking. Both teamwork and digital skills were rated with the same mean (Mean = 3.01), showing that students perceived themselves as neither weak nor highly proficient in these areas they evaluated themselves at a moderate level. For all skills, the minimum score was 1 and the maximum was 5, meaning that in every skill category, there were students who rated themselves as either very weak or very strong.

Diagram 3.3.1.

The most lacking skills among recent graduates

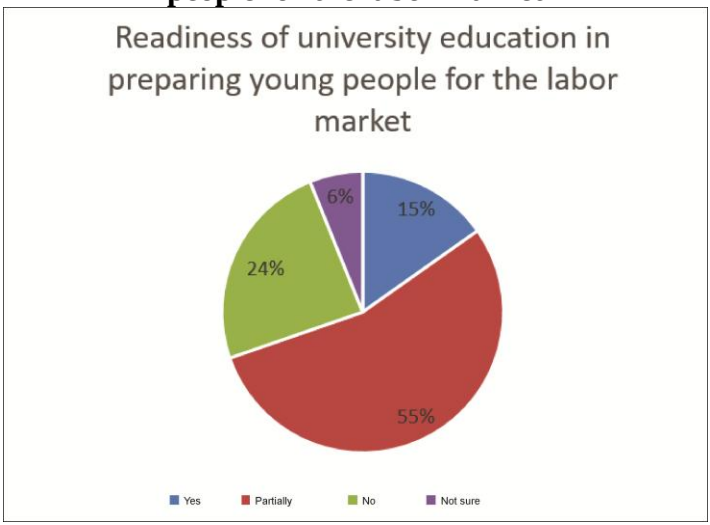


Note: Calculated by the author using the SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) program.

Practical knowledge and application skills (30.3%) were identified as the most lacking area. This indicates that graduates experience certain difficulties in applying their theoretical knowledge to real work environments, highlighting the importance of increasing the practical orientation of higher education. Problem-solving and initiative (21.2%) skills were also rated significantly low, showing the need to enhance graduates' ability to think independently and generate new ideas. Communication and teamwork skills (18.2%) emphasize the importance of collective work and effective communication in the labor market, underlining the necessity of improvement in this area. Foreign language and technological knowledge (15.2%) reveal that graduates have weaknesses in these fields under conditions of global competition, suggesting that special attention should be given to them in academic programs. Analytical and critical thinking (9.1%), though evaluated as a relatively less lacking area compared to other skills, still contributes to improving the quality of education when further developed.

Diagram 3.3.2.

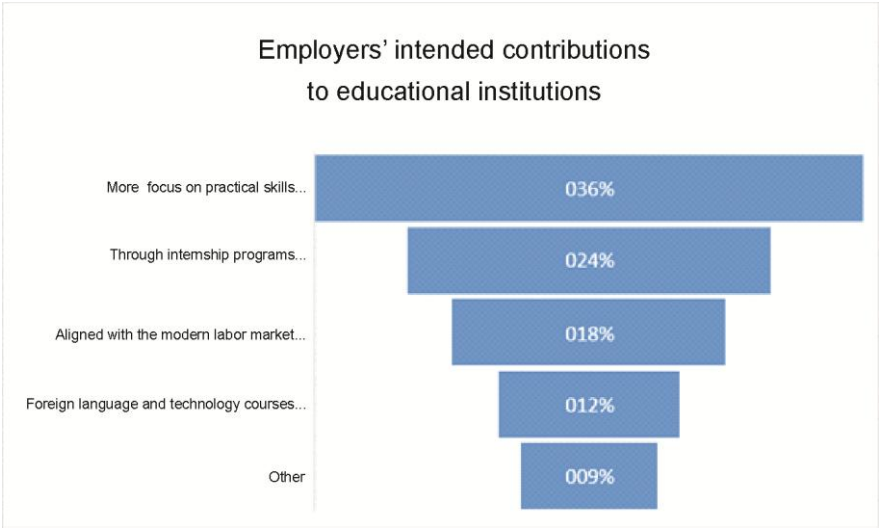
Readiness level of university education in preparing young people for the labor market



Note: Calculated by the author using the SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) program.

The majority of respondents (54.5%) stated that university education prepares young people for the labor market only partially. This indicates that while there are certain positive aspects within the education system, the overall level of preparedness remains insufficient. Only 15.2% of respondents believed that university education provides full readiness for the labor market. Although this figure is relatively low, it emphasizes that higher education does not yet fully meet market demands. Meanwhile, 24.2% of respondents considered university education inadequate in terms of labor market preparation, which highlights the need for significant improvement in existing educational programs. Additionally, 6.1% of participants were unable to express a definite opinion on the issue.

Diagram 3.3.3.
Employers' intended contributions to educational institutions

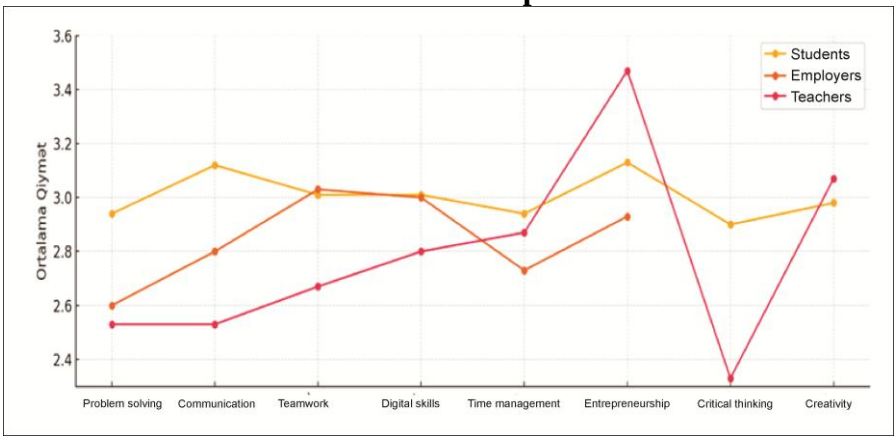


Note: Calculated by the author using the SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) program.

Prioritizing the development of practical skills (36.4%) was the most emphasized point among respondents. This indicates the need to strengthen not only theoretical knowledge but also the ability to

apply skills in real work environments within the educational process. Strengthening cooperation through internship programs (24.2%) highlights the importance of higher education institutions establishing closer connections with employers to provide students with opportunities for professional experience. The preparation of curricula aligned with the requirements of the modern labor market (18.2%) underscores the necessity of updating programs to ensure students' future career success. Increasing foreign language and technology courses (12.1%) is essential for enhancing competitiveness in the digital and global environment. Other recommendations (9.1%) cover additional areas and alternative approaches.

Diagram 3.3.4.
Comparison of skill assessments



Note: Calculated by the author using the SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) program.

In terms of problem-solving skills, students rated themselves higher than employers and teachers. Employers and teachers, however, gave lower ratings, which may indicate that students tend to be overly optimistic about their abilities in this area. Communication skills were also rated higher by students but somewhat lower by teachers and employers. This difference reflects the existence of an external perception that students' communication

skills are not sufficiently developed. Regarding teamwork skills, employers and students provided similar evaluations, while teachers rated them slightly lower. This suggests that teachers may perceive certain weaknesses in students' ability to work collectively. Digital skills showed the smallest variation among the three groups, although teachers still rated this area slightly lower than students. For time management skills, teachers rated students somewhat higher than employers did, while students themselves gave the highest scores. This indicates that students consider themselves quite capable in managing their time. In terms of entrepreneurship skills, teachers provided the highest ratings, and students rated themselves higher than employers did. The fact that employers gave lower ratings than the other two groups suggests that, despite entrepreneurship being emphasized by students and teachers, it is not fully appreciated in actual workplace conditions. Critical thinking and creativity skills were evaluated only by students and teachers. Both skills were rated higher by teachers than by students, which may suggest that teachers see greater potential in these areas or that students are more modest in their self-assessment.

Overall, students tend to rate their own skills higher compared to employers and teachers. Differences in evaluations between teachers and employers indicate the existence of diverse approaches to assessing how well higher education programs prepare students for real work environments. These variations underline the importance of strengthening the alignment between labor market requirements and the expectations of higher education institutions.

In the "Conclusion" section of the dissertation, the issues discussed in all three chapters are summarized and general conclusions are drawn regarding the research. It is stated that one of the main objectives of modern higher education institutions today is to prepare professional personnel and specialists who meet the needs of society and are capable of implementing comprehensive management in various spheres of economic, social and political life. These specialists must remain composed when facing challenges in the professional environment, think functionally and promptly, and be able to make accurate and well-timed decisions. They should act

with consideration of the socio-economic and political consequences of their decisions not only within their own country and region but also on an international scale. The preparation of such qualified personnel constitutes the fundamental mission of modern education.

In the era of globalization, the international integration of higher education will influence the development of scientific cooperation and increase the demand for specialists capable of representing their country with dignity abroad and demonstrating respect for the moral values of other nations. The successful implementation of these requirements is particularly relevant for the curriculum and academic programs of the "Regional Studies" faculty. A regional studies specialist must be trained to serve as an effective promoter of Azerbaijani culture, language and values.

The fact that employers often express dissatisfaction with graduates' communication abilities, analytical thinking and professional knowledge places significant responsibility on higher education institutions in this regard. Employers tend to prefer mobile, systematic and innovative specialists who are well-informed about different fields of life. Although changing individual characteristics is naturally difficult, a person can still develop and maintain these qualities. The unique personal traits and the level of development of "soft skills" among students play not only an important role in professional activity but also enhance their competitiveness.

When examining the problem of "what opportunities exist for developing competencies in students" at higher education institutions in the Republic of Azerbaijan that offer education in the "Regional Studies" specialty, the results obtained cannot be considered satisfactory. More than 50% of students from various years who participated in the survey on the "Regional Studies" specialty at Baku State University emphasized the insufficiency of core subjects and practical training. In addition, a comparative analysis of the curricula of three universities in the Republic offering the "Regional Studies" specialty revealed that not all of them include lectures such as "Critical Thinking" and "Soft Skills". However, these disciplines are essential for the development of competencies. This situation once again proves that one of the key conditions for solving the

problem is to fundamentally change the approach to the teaching process, to purposefully restructure the curriculum toward the application of creative forms and methods and to strengthen the active connection of education with the surrounding environment.

Recent university graduates who lack sufficient professional experience and are entering the labor market for the first time are considered the most vulnerable group among job seekers. Therefore, the preparation of specialists capable of successfully adapting to labor market conditions and mastering modern technological knowledge is a crucial strategic objective that will positively impact the competitiveness of states in both economic and international arenas.

The analysis of teaching issues and the system of developing competencies at higher education institutions offering the "Regional Studies" specialty necessitates considering several directions for solving this problem. For this purpose, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. It is advisable to involve students in scientific research activities to develop their communication skills and creative thinking.

2. To ensure that students grow into active and well-rounded professionals, it is recommended that they participate actively in the public life of their university and city, and volunteer in events held in various fields.

3. Close cooperation between employers and higher education institutions, adherence to the supply and demand principle, and aligning these with both quantity and quality can help universities avoid functioning as closed systems.

4. During the training of regional studies students, working on psychological endurance, stress resistance and stress management is beneficial for their ability to act more tolerantly in the demanding career environments they will face in the future.

5. To achieve the desired results in the development of complex competencies, it is advisable to deepen the content of educational materials, increase instructional hours and extend the duration of industrial internships.

6. Engaging practicing specialists in training sessions, strengthening supervision over the quality of education and ensuring the adaptation of taught disciplines to real-life contexts are recommended.

7. One of the specific features of the regional studies specialty is that future specialists must possess language proficiency. Having foreign language knowledge at an academic level is considered one of the most essential competencies of a regional studies professional. Developing this competency is important for a successful professional career.

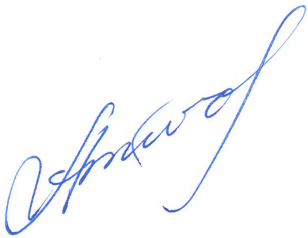
8. It is advisable for higher education institutions and employers to combine their efforts in preparing qualified personnel whose professional qualities meet labor market demands.

9. The results of the study showed that regional studies students and graduates should continuously develop themselves and consistently work on improving their knowledge to maintain competitiveness in a changing world.

The content of the dissertation is reflected in the author's following published articles:

1. Do university graduate competences match post-socialist labour market demands: Evidence from Azerbaijan // Journal of Teaching and Learning for Graduate Employability, - 2021. No. 12 (2), - pp. 332–347.
2. Challenges of online teaching // 4th International Novruz Conference on Scientific Research, - 2021, - p. 258.
3. Impact of teamwork and collaborative learning on leadership skills // 3rd International Conference of Khazar Scientific Research, - January 7–9, - 2022, - pp. 161–162.
4. Problems in the formation of professional competencies among bachelor's students // - Baku: ADPU "History, Man and Society" Scientific-Theoretical and Methodological Journal, - 2023. No. 1, - pp. 22–30.
5. The impact of teamwork on the development of students' communication skills // - Baku: Azerbaijan School, - 2023. No. 2, - pp. 73–79.

6. 21st-century competencies: expected outcomes // News of the Pedagogical University, Series of Humanities, Social and Pedagogical Sciences, - 2023. No. 2, - pp. 127–136.
7. The role of higher education institutions in formation of the skills demanded in the labor market // Global Science: Prospects and Innovations. Proceedings of the IV International Scientific and Practical Conference, Liverpool, United Kingdom, - December 1–3, - 2023, - pp. 387–393.
8. Public school rankings in Azerbaijan from education managers' perspectives // Proceedings of the XXV Republican Scientific Conference of PhD Students and Young Researchers (NASCO XXV), - 2023, - pp. 472–477.
9. Education of Professional Experts in the Modern Education System // - Baku: "Academic History and Thought", - 2023. No. 2(10), - pp. 545–554.
10. Employment issues of university graduates in the Republic of Azerbaijan // - Baku: Azerbaijan School, - 2023. No. 4, - pp. 65–71.
11. Formation of competencies in students majoring in regional studies // Scientific Works of the Institute of Education of the Republic of Azerbaijan, - 2024, No. 1, - pp. 84–90.



The defense will be held on December 18, 2026 at 14⁰⁰ at the meeting of the Dissertation council FD 2.49 of Supreme Attestation Commission under the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan operating at the Khazar University.

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