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MASTER'S THESIS

**THE IMPACT OF CAREER CENTERS ON STUDENT EMPLOYABILITY
IN AZERBAIJANI UNIVERSITIES**

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Over the past two years, the number of specialists who graduated from higher education institutions in Azerbaijan amounted to 48,421 (Republic of Azerbaijan, 2024). This surge of new graduates highlights the critical importance of graduate employability in the country. The successful transition of so many university graduates into the labor market is an important issue. Indeed, the topic of graduate employability has risen to prominence globally, becoming a central concern shared by universities, students, employers, governments, and society at large (Tomlinson, 2012) In response, universities have increasingly turned to career support services to bridge the gap between academic studies and the labor market. University career centers are recognized as key institutions that provide students with career advice, training, and opportunities to connect with employers, thereby playing a vital role in preparing them for the labor market. Studies have shown that students who actively engage with career center services tend to achieve better employment outcomes, including higher job offer rates, compared to their peers who do not use these services (Van Derziel, 2022).

The urgent need to strengthen graduate employability in Azerbaijan is further emphasized by recent data provided by the State Employment Agency. A digital platform—Graduate Employment Rating—has been introduced to monitor graduate employment outcomes (State Employment Agency). According to the data that covers graduates from 11 major universities between 2018 and 2021, only 57% registered in the system were employed under official labor contracts. Approximately 0.2% were classified as self-employed, while the remainder lacked any official employment indicator (State Employment Agency). These figures also varied across institutions, suggesting that some universities are more effective in preparing and supporting their students for the labor market. These differences also underscore the potential impact of career services on employment outcomes.

Research Aim and Scope

In this context, the present thesis examines effective strategies implemented by career centers at Azerbaijani universities to enhance students' career readiness and employability potential. This study analyses the strategies and practical activities of career centers at 15

universities in Azerbaijan. In addition to a broad analysis across higher education institutions, the research also includes a more detailed examination of the strategies implemented by three selected universities.

The combination of a general overview of career center activities with an investigation of best strategies turns this thesis into a comprehensive document that presents a broad and in-depth picture of the impact of career centers on students' transition to employment in Azerbaijani universities.

Research Objectives and Questions

According to the purpose of this research is to explore and evaluate the effectiveness of career centers in Azerbaijani universities in relation to student employability. Specifically, the study focuses on evaluation of career center effectiveness through accreditation data and obtaining more detailed information through interviews: Through these two approaches, the research aims to paint both a qualitative picture of the impact that career centers have on student employment prospects. The research question of the paper is:

What are the most effective strategies used by university career centers to enhance students' career readiness and employability?

Answering this question involves examining the extent to which career center initiatives contribute to positive employment outcomes for students and graduates and identifying which aspects of career center support are most beneficial in the Azerbaijani higher education context.

Significance of Study

This study holds both practical and scholarly significance. From a practical standpoint, its findings offer university career centers in Azerbaijan evidence-based insights, strategic recommendations, and illustrative examples of best practices to enhance their services. By identifying effective practices and elucidating the underlying factors contributing to their success, the research supports career center managers and university administrators in making informed decisions regarding resource allocation, program design, and service delivery aimed at improving graduate employability. In an era where higher education institutions are increasingly held

accountable for the employment outcomes of their graduates, such guidance is particularly valuable.

For example, previous studies have demonstrated that active engagement of employers and alumni in career center activities ensures alignment with labor market demands and enhances students' acquisition of relevant employability skills (Hanover Research, 2014). The recommendations derived from this study emphasize context-specific strategies suited to the Azerbaijani higher education environment, including the reinforcement of university–employer collaboration, the development of structured internship programs, and the enhancement of career counseling and job search training. Ultimately, the improved effectiveness of university career centers will support more successful employment outcomes for graduates, thereby benefiting not only the individuals but also contributing to national economic growth through the cultivation of a skilled and employed workforce.

From a scholarly perspective, this dissertation contributes meaningfully to the literature on career development and higher education policy in the context of emerging economies. While a substantial body of research exists on graduate employability and career services within Western higher education systems, relatively little is known about how such mechanisms function in Azerbaijan. This study addresses this gap by providing a systematic analysis of career centers within Azerbaijani universities, offering empirical evidence and interpretive insights relevant to both local and international academic discourse.

The findings have implications not only for institutional and national policy—particularly in guiding the Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (TKTA) and the Ministry of Science and Education in the development of accreditation standards related to career services—but also for comparative education researchers and international policymakers interested in how career center models may be adapted to different socio-economic and educational contexts.

The conclusion of the thesis reflects on the implications of the findings in relation to the existing literature and research questions. It offers strategic recommendations for university administrators and policymakers aimed at enhancing the scope and impact of career services, acknowledges the study's limitations, and proposes directions for future research.

Through this structure, the thesis constructs a coherent and evidence-based argument demonstrating how university career centers contribute to student employability in Azerbaijan and outlining the improvements necessary to maximize their effectiveness.

CHAPTER I LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1. The Emergence and Functional Transformation of Career Centers

It is widely accepted in global higher education that, alongside the acquisition of theoretical knowledge, the intellectual and personal development of students should be a core priority of higher education institutions. Nevertheless, the acquisition of non-academic competencies—such as interpersonal and communication skills—is at least as essential as academic knowledge and becomes even more urgent in the context of a rapidly changing labor market. In response to this challenge, the concept of the career center has begun to emerge as a formal institution within many universities worldwide (Popova-Hristova, 2018).

Universities worldwide are increasingly establishing career centers to bridge the gap between academic education and the labor market, assisting students in defining their career aspirations and acquiring relevant employability skills. These centers serve as vital intermediaries, offering services such as career counseling, job placement assistance, and skill development workshops. In the United States, university career centers primarily focus on post-graduation employment, aiming to align educational experiences with students' prospective careers (Manlagaylay & Anar, 2023). Conversely, in countries undergoing significant political and social transitions, career centers are still in developmental phases, with services that are less career-oriented and more focused on general guidance (Popova-Hristova, 2018). This disparity highlights the varying stages of career center evolution globally and underscores the importance of tailoring career services to meet the specific needs of students within different socio-economic contexts.

Historically, career centers were merely considered "placement offices" assisting with job matching for graduates (Dey & Cruzvergara, 2014). By the 1920s–1930s, however, these services evolved into broader vocational guidance programs, driven by the demand for professional workers resulting from industrial expansion (Bauer, 2022). In the mid-20th century, placement centers began to appear on campuses, particularly in response to the needs of veterans transitioning to civilian work life under the GI Bill following World War II (Bauer, 2022).

During the 1970s and 1980s, career centers expanded their scope to include career counseling services. The psychological theories of Bandura's self-efficacy and Holland's person-

environment fit emphasized the importance of aligning personal interests with career choices (Bauer, 2022). By the 1990s and 2000s, networking and employer engagement became key priorities, reflecting the growing role of social capital in job attainment (Bauer, 2022).

According to Terzaroli (2019), prior to the formation of Career Services, universities in the UK and the US operated Appointment Boards and Placement Offices, respectively. These earlier structures primarily focused on offering guidance or recommendations, and their services were generally limited to top-performing students.

In this broader understanding, career centers are now responsible not only for providing job search support but also for guiding students through their educational journey toward professional success (Popova-Hristova, 2018). The formation and development of career centers are largely shaped by shifts in the field of career counseling and by the socio-economic and educational environments in which they operate. For instance, in Malaysia, career services emerged after the end of British colonial rule in 1957 and expanded into the business and industrial sectors by the 2000s. This evolution illustrates how the organization and expansion of career services are closely tied to regional cultural and economic conditions (Pope, Bringaze, Musa et al., 2002).

Career centers offer services such as internships, job opportunities, and skill development programs to help graduates transition successfully into the workforce. Rather than requiring students to navigate the job market independently, these centers identify suitable job and internship opportunities on their behalf (Popova-Hristova, 2018). Given the increasing complexity of modern labor markets, universities can no longer guarantee employment based solely on academic credentials—skills development and career planning have become equally critical. For example, the University of London's Careers Group observed a significant rise in demand for career services in the 1960s, marking a growing integration of employability within higher education (The Careers Group, University of London, n.d.).

Dey and Cruzvergara (2014) note that the expansion of higher education and the increasing number of students have made personalized guidance more challenging, prompting a shift toward group-based services and employment-focused programming. Over time, career services have evolved from supporting personal development to facilitating students' transition to the labor market. Tight (2023) emphasizes that global business competition and political shifts have made graduate employability a core institutional priority, leading to a closer alignment between the mission of career centers and labor market outcomes.

In Azerbaijan, the development of career centers was initially slow, with mostly private and internationally oriented universities establishing career offices during the 2000s and early 2010s. A 2017 study of the national higher education system revealed that "few Azerbaijani universities have career centers," and career guidance was often decentralized, random, or conducted by academic departments (European Commission, 2017). By the 2020s, however, the Azerbaijani government and educational institutions began to actively promote the development of career centers. For example, between 2021 and 2024, the State Employment Agency implemented capacity-building programs aimed at establishing or strengthening career centers at several universities (APCDA, 2024). As of 2024, several higher education institutions, including major public universities, are involved in developing career centers with state support (APCDA, 2024). This shift marks a major transformation in the national higher education landscape—from an environment where career services were virtually nonexistent to the emergence of a network of centers aimed at enhancing student employability.

In conclusion, while career services have been integral to universities globally for over a century, Azerbaijani universities are only now entering the early stages of this evolutionary process, taking steps to align with labor market demands and national policy priorities.

1.2. Modern Functions and Directions of Career Services

Since their establishment, university career centers have undergone significant development. Career centers at universities play a crucial role in supporting graduates' career development and planning. One of the primary goals of these centers is to assist graduates in navigating the challenges of employment, particularly for those lacking work experience. By adopting best practices from international models, Russian universities are increasingly establishing Employment and Career Centers to facilitate this process. These centers aim to provide consultations from career experts, help in crafting competitive CVs, and assist in job searches, thereby enhancing graduates' employability and career readiness (Asaliev, A. M. et.al.2021).

These centers possess highly complex and multifaceted structures, and it is unrealistic to expect any single center to fully satisfy all user demands. Instead, each center evolves differently, shaped by its unique context, objectives, and environment. There is no singular or "correct" model; rather, diverse approaches emerge based on localized requirements and strategic goals.

The overarching goals of career centers include enhancing employability, providing tailored support for diverse student populations, and fostering essential skills for career advancement. These initiatives are critical in preparing graduates for successful transitions into the workforce.

At present, Europe lacks a unified organizational or legal structure for Career Services, largely because educational traditions and guidance practices vary significantly across member countries (Thomsen, 2014, p. 6). These services may be administered either centrally by the university or managed at the level of individual faculties or departments. They can also be delivered internally within the institution or outsourced to external organizations. Similar variations exist in terms of service scope, delivery methods, staffing, and funding models for career guidance units (Paviotti, 2015). On a global scale, Career Offices have historically been more extensively developed in certain nations, notably the United Kingdom and the United States (OECD, 2004).

Significant cross-national variation exists in the delivery of career services. For instance, research on Chinese universities has identified insufficient use of technology and misalignment between student expectations and industry demands, although emerging technologies like artificial intelligence and virtual reality present new opportunities (Xiaoqing & Noordin, 2024). In Vietnam, a structured career development program significantly improved students' self-perceived employability (Ho et al., 2022). Career guidance has gained global recognition as an essential component of higher education, playing a vital role in both the professional and personal growth of students. Research indicates that well-structured career support services not only improve graduates' employability but also contribute to their overall development by strengthening decision-making abilities, boosting self-confidence, and enhancing satisfaction with their educational journey (Smith & Patton, 2019). Moreover, with the continual transformation of the global job market, universities are increasingly encouraged to implement adaptable and comprehensive career services that respond effectively to these evolving challenges (Thompson & Roberts, 2018).

Modern university career centers provide a broad array of services aimed at improving employability. While traditional services such as one-on-one counseling, job fairs, and résumé support continue, there is an increasing emphasis on experiential learning and industry collaboration (Khurumova & Pinto, 2024). Core functions include support in self-assessment and career exploration, job search training, on-campus recruitment coordination, and connections with

alumni and employer networks. Centers also offer workshops on soft skills and share labor market intelligence. In essence, career centers act as intermediaries between academia and industry, helping students translate their education into employment opportunities.

Another key service provided by career centers is the facilitation of networking opportunities. Many professional opportunities are discovered through personal connections rather than job postings. In fact, effective networking is often more powerful than submitting applications blindly. The first step in networking involves seeking information through existing relationships—family, friends, classmates, and professors. Given the diversity of career paths, students are advised to reach out to individuals currently employed in fields of interest (Popova-Hristova, 2018).

1.3. Dynamics of Career Center Development in Azerbaijan

Career centers in Azerbaijani universities are relatively recent and remain in the developmental phase. Research shows that as of 2017, only a small proportion of universities in Azerbaijan had dedicated career offices (Valiyev & Babayev, 2021). Studies on Azerbaijani graduates reveal significant skills mismatches: a survey of 2,500 students reported a "large mismatch" between the competencies taught at universities and the expectations of employers (Amirova & Valiyev, 2021). Many essential soft and transferable skills are insufficiently addressed. Although the government has outlined broad youth employment objectives, implementation remains inconsistent. An analysis highlighted the high rate of NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) youth and concluded that government efforts to support this transitional phase have not been fully realized (Valiyev & Babayev, 2021).

At the national level, the State Employment Service proposed the establishment of a Career Centers Council to coordinate and support the activities of university career centers. This initiative aims to standardize services and enhance effectiveness (Asia Pacific Career Development Association, 2021).

1.4. Impact on Employability and Outcomes

The primary role of Career Services is not merely to assist students in finding their first job, but also to enhance their employability by developing the skills they acquire throughout their education—skills that help them adapt to the workplace and succeed in their professional careers (Yorke, 2006).

Over the past decade, research in higher education has increasingly focused on employability, particularly in the context of labor market changes and the massification of higher education. Tomlinson (2012) investigated key dimensions of employability and argued that the issue has become central to policy discussions, with graduate transitions shaped by complex interactions among personal, institutional, and economic factors. A longitudinal study in Vietnam confirmed that structured career development programs lead to improved long-term employment outcomes (Ho et al., 2022). In the United States, students who engaged with multiple career services received more job offers (VanDerziel, 2022). These findings suggest that well-designed programs, especially those combining personal counseling, employer networking, and practical training, can significantly enhance graduate outcomes.

According to recent statistics, 72% of education professionals consider it their responsibility to equip students with the skills needed to succeed in the workforce (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2024). Employability, from a labor market supply and demand perspective, can be categorized into four dimensions: understanding of external environments, career development skills, general (soft) skills, and professional competencies (Hongjie & Zhenjia, 2019).

Studies across countries confirm that students who engage with career services are more successful in finding employment. VanDerziel's (2022) research shows that students actively participating in counseling, workshops, and internships secure jobs more quickly and receive more offers. According to a large-scale Gallup survey, 61% of U.S. college graduates from 2010–2016 used their university's career services office—significantly more than previous generations (Auter & Marken, 2016). Those who rated the services as "very helpful" were more likely to believe that their institution prepared them well for post-graduation life and found quality jobs more rapidly (Auter & Marken, 2016). These results underscore the pivotal role career centers play in helping students translate academic knowledge into career success.

Career centers support student transition into the workforce by offering a wide range of services including career planning, résumé development, and job search guidance (Druzhinina & Asaliev, 2021). Using theoretical models such as Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT), these centers help students clarify their career goals and improve their confidence. Thompson, Fine, and Dent (2023) emphasize that understanding the factors that shape students' perceptions of support can enhance service effectiveness across diverse student populations.

Most career centers offer one-on-one counseling to help students explore career options, often using tools like the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator or the Strong Interest Inventory to guide students based on their personalities and strengths. In many European universities, career counseling is integrated with student support services and sometimes linked with psychological counseling (Frontiers, 2022). Advisors help students develop personal growth plans from the first year through graduation. Additionally, the growth of corporate partnership programs within career centers reflects a trend toward the commercialization of services. These programs provide companies with direct access to student talent, effectively outsourcing parts of the recruitment process to universities (Davis & Binder, 2016). Career centers often act as platforms connecting students with internships, volunteer work, and real-world experience. Studies show that work experience during university significantly increases post-graduation employability (Carnevale, Mabel, Campbell, & Booth, 2023). According to a 2021 labor market bulletin in Azerbaijan, only 41% of students participated in internships during their studies, with most securing these opportunities independently rather than through university support (APCDA, 2021). This highlights the need for career centers to play a more active role in organizing practical learning.

Advance HE (2019) advocates for the integration of employability into all academic and institutional experiences. Some universities now require students to complete internships or credit-bearing career development courses. For example, ADA University mandates a "Career Skills and Strategies" course and internship for all undergraduate students, directly embedding career services into the curriculum (ADA University, Academic Catalogue, 2023–2024).

The role of technology in career guidance continues to grow. In resource-constrained settings, computer-assisted career guidance (CACG) tools serve as valuable instruments for supporting students' career planning. These tools provide personalized advice and help students map out clearer career pathways (Herath et al., 2024).

One of the key areas where career centers influence employability is in addressing soft skill gaps. Employers often report that while new graduates possess strong theoretical knowledge, they lack practical soft skills such as communication, teamwork, and problem-solving. Career centers attempt to bridge this gap through workshops and individualized coaching. In China, Xiaoqing, Y., and Noordin, Z. M. (2024) found that career services typically cover three main areas: career education, skills training, and employment guidance—all crucial for improving students' employability. Students who engage in these services feel more confident in job searching and workplace behavior. In Azerbaijan, the documented mismatch between university programs and labor market demands has been a major catalyst for establishing career centers (AmCham Azerbaijan, 2018). Training in job interview techniques and essential workplace tools helps students acquire competencies not covered in academic programs—making them more "job-ready."

Advanced career centers are also beginning to offer more personalized services. In the "career communities" model, students are grouped by interest area and offered tailored events, job postings, and mentorship opportunities (Lee & Patel, 2019).

Career centers are also expanding their reach and efficiency through digital platforms—a trend accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic. A leading example is Stanford University's interactive career portal, where students can join career communities and receive personalized job recommendations. These technologies improve service quality and align with students' digital habits (Stanford Career Education).

1.5. Policy and Quality Standards

From a policy standpoint, graduate employability is increasingly viewed as a key indicator of institutional quality. In the United Kingdom, the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) includes graduate employment outcomes as an assessment criterion. Under the Bologna Process, universities are expected to ensure that graduates possess market-relevant skills (Bologna Working Group, 2007). The most advanced career centers monitor clear indicators such as the number of advising sessions, internship placements, and graduate employment rates. These metrics are used to improve services and justify resource allocation. VanDerziel (2022) argues that the impact of career services should be measured by outcomes rather than activity volume. A best-practice model

is the "career readiness competencies" framework, which evaluates students before and after intervention across core skills (e.g., teamwork, problem-solving). According to NACE (2022), about 29% of higher education institutions have adopted this approach.

CHAPTER II METHODOLOGY

In the first part of the study, accreditation documents from 15 universities were analyzed to determine the level of career services provided and to identify overarching trends in this area. The second part involved a more in-depth qualitative analysis of concrete strategies currently in use, based on interviews with university representatives.

2.1. Research Design

This study adopted a two-part qualitative research design. The first part was qualitative document analysis, which analyzes textual data from official records and the second part was a qualitative study which involved gathering primary data through interviews. This combined design provided both an objective review of institutional documents and a subjective understanding of how career center practices are implemented on the ground.

2.2. Institutional documents

Document analysis is a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents—both printed and electronic (computer-based and Internet-transmitted) material. Like other analytical methods in qualitative research, document analysis requires that data be examined and interpreted in order to elicit meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge (Bowen, 2009). The main purpose I chose to conduct the document analysis is because this method may reduce some of the concerns qualitative researchers frequently encounter, this approach is by no means free of issues researchers typically face. For example, when allowing outsiders to examine its documents, an organization can provide access only to content aligning with the values of its chief executives. McCulloch (2004) discusses the concepts of 'selective deposit' and 'selective survival,' noting that some documents are more likely to be preserved and accessible than others, which can introduce bias into research findings. To mitigate such concerns, the document analysis in this study was complemented by the second part of the design, in-depth interviews, to triangulate findings and provide additional perspectives.

2.2.1.Data Collection

For the first part of the research, data was collected from official documents. Karppinen and Moe (2019) note that in the context of higher education and public policy, official documents include legal texts, policy papers, protocols, and reports produced by government institutions or other stakeholders – essentially, documents that "influence the public decision-making process". In this regard, accreditation reports serve as official records of university quality indicators and are an ideal source for evaluating the performance of career centers. Taking it into consideration the institutional accreditation reports issued by the Education Quality Assurance Agency of the Republic of Azerbaijan (TKTA) were analyzed.

The TKTA document covers 30 criteria under 7 key areas and includes a total of 277 indicators. These criteria assess core university functions such as teaching and learning, scientific research, infrastructure and facilities, governance, internationalization, and student support services (TKTA, 2022). Each accreditation report outlines the extent to which the university meets these criteria. For the purposes of this research, special attention was given to Criterion 3.10 – "Career Services and Ongoing Contact with Alumni", as it directly relates to the functioning of career centers and alumni engagement, aligning closely with the research topic.

Criterion 3.10 – Career Services and Ongoing Contact with Alumni consists of five specific indicators that outline the expected provisions and activities a university should have in place. These were the focal points of the document analysis. The five sub-indicators (as defined in the accreditation criteria documentation) (TKTA, 2022) are:

3.10.1 – Existence of a Career Centre: Whether the university has established a dedicated career center that provides services to students and graduates.

3.10.2 – Provision of Career Guidance: The extent to which the institution organizes regular career counselling, career planning workshops, and other advisory services for students and alumni.

3.10.3 – Mechanisms to Monitor Alumni Employment: The presence of tools and processes (such as graduate tracking systems, employer partnerships, or career databases) to monitor alumni participation in the labor market and their employment status.

3.10.4 – Alumni Feedback on Programmed Quality: Whether the university gathers feedback from graduates – for instance through alumni surveys – to assess their satisfaction with the competencies acquired during their studies and the quality of the academic program.

3.10.5 – Sustained Alumni Communication: The existence of a system for ongoing contact with alumni, such as formal alumni networks, online alumni platforms, or regular alumni events, to maintain communication after graduation (TKTA, 2022).

The study reviewed the accreditation reports of 15 universities through the lens of Criterion 3.10 was examined to determine the presence and effectiveness of the career center, the services offered, and the mechanisms for tracking and engaging alumni.

2.2.2. Data Analysis

The collected documents were analyzed using Qualitative Document Analysis (QDA) techniques. QDA is a research method for rigorously and systematically examining the content of documents, often through coding and thematic analysis. It involves finding, selecting, appraising, and synthesizing information from texts (Bowen, 2009) treating the documents as data to be analyzed in much the same way as interview transcripts or observation notes. Within the scope of this study, each accreditation report was thoroughly analyzed, and content related to the criteria concerning career centers was contextually coded. Relevant sections of the reports (such as descriptions of career services, graduate employment statistics, and mechanisms or examples of alumni engagement) were identified and categorized according to the five sub-criteria of Criterion 3.10. The findings were systematically organized into an Excel table. For each sub-criterion, the status of the universities was classified using the labels "Relevant", "Mainly Relevant," "Partially Relevant" and "Not Relevant". In addition to Criterion 3.10, thematic coding was applied to the remaining accreditation criteria. For this method, information under each criterion was carefully read and coded based on recurring themes. This approach allowed for the classification and analysis of different universities' practices and strategies according to the themes identified.

As a result of the analysis, institutional performance indicators were synthesized and grouped thematically. A comparative analysis was then conducted to identify the strategic approaches adopted by different universities. These strategies were examined in relation to accreditation

outcomes, allowing for a cross-institutional evaluation of practices aligned with employability and career service effectiveness.

2.3.Interview Study

The second part of the research consisted of qualitative interviews to complement the document analysis. Qualitative research is a method of inquiry that seeks to understand social phenomena through the exploration of people's experiences, behaviors, and interactions within their natural settings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Unlike quantitative research, which focuses on numerical data, qualitative research aims to generate in-depth insights and contextual understandings of complex issues (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Researchers conduct qualitative studies to capture diverse perspectives, interpret meaning, and uncover patterns that may not be evident through statistical analysis (Silverman, 2021). Qualitative interviews are a primary data collection method used to explore individuals' experiences, perspectives, and meanings in depth within qualitative research (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). Researchers conduct qualitative interviews to gain rich, detailed narratives that illuminate complex social realities, emotions, or motivations not easily captured through surveys (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Ultimately, qualitative interviews help build theory, generate insights, and support decision-making in fields such as education, healthcare, and policy.

In this study, three universities were analyzed in greater depth using semi-structured interview methodology. These universities are ADA University, Khazar University, and the Azerbaijan State University of Economics (UNEC). The heads of the career centers at these institutions were interviewed as part of this phase. The rationale for selecting these universities stems from the findings of the Education Quality Assurance Agency's accreditation report, which indicated that the career center strategies at these three institutions were comparatively more successful. Accordingly, the directors of the career centers at two private universities and one public university were interviewed to enable a more detailed qualitative analysis.

2.3.1. Research participants

For the interview study the heads of the career centers were selected at the three universities. All three interviewees were senior staff members charged with planning and overseeing student career development programs and alumni relations at their institutions. Their job titles varied (e.g. Director of Career Services, Head of Career Center), but each had primary responsibility for coordinating career guidance activities, employer partnerships, and alumni outreach.

ADA University- Participant 1: 4 years of experience;

Khazar University- Participant 2: 2 years of experience;

Azerbaijan State University of Economics- Participant 3: 1 year of experience.

2.3.2. Data Collection

Each interview was conducted in person and adhered to a semi-structured protocol. The interview questions were developed in alignment with the overarching strategic orientations of the selected universities. Semi-structured interviews are particularly well-suited to exploring participants' perspectives in depth, as they offer a balance between consistent thematic guidance and conversational flexibility (Kallio et al., 2016). This methodological approach is especially valuable for investigating complex or sensitive subjects, as it fosters open dialogue and facilitates the generation of rich, context-specific insights (Gill et al., 2008). While ensuring that key predetermined themes are addressed, this format also allows participants to elaborate extensively on their experiences and viewpoints.

The primary objective of the interviews was to examine the practical strategies and initiatives employed by university career centers to enhance student and graduate employability. The interview questions were formulated based on insights derived from the analysis of institutional accreditation reports. For the leadership of each university, the interviews included both general and institution-specific questions. The latter were tailored according to the strategic elements identified in Part 1 of the study and reflected the unique practices implemented by each university. The principal aim of these individualized questions was to explore the specific strategies in greater detail and to understand the mechanisms by which they were operationalized.

Furthermore, the interviews investigated how career centers maintain ongoing relationships with alumni and utilize alumni networks to support current students. By engaging directly with those responsible for the management and delivery of career services, this component of the research produced nuanced and context-rich information regarding the implementation of employability initiatives—insights that could not be fully captured through the analysis of official documentation alone.

2.3.3. Data Analysis

I employed a coding-based analytical approach by reviewing recorded interview videos. Prior to analyzing each university's video, I revisited the corresponding accreditation report analysis presented in Part 1 of the study. Thematic analysis is a widely used method for coding online interviews, involving a structured process of reading interview transcripts, generating initial codes, identifying patterns and themes among those codes, and systematically organizing the findings (Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017). This methodological framework is equally applicable to video-based and online interviews, providing a rigorous and coherent approach to qualitative data analysis. In this study, I adopted thematic analysis to examine the interview data and to derive meaningful insights from the participants' responses.

2.4. Ethical Considerations

Prior to the interviews, participants were thoroughly informed about the objectives of the study, and their informed consent was duly obtained. To ensure confidentiality and promote an environment conducive to open and honest responses, both the identities of the participants and the institutions they represented were anonymized in the presentation of findings; individuals were referred to by the name of their university rather than by personal identifiers. Furthermore, the interview questions were shared with participants in advance to promote transparency and preparedness. The study was conducted in strict accordance with established ethical research standards. Formal permission to analyze internal data related to the activities of career centers and to conduct interviews with relevant personnel was obtained via email from the leadership of each university's career center. All data collection procedures adhered to the principles of voluntary participation and informed consent. During the document analysis phase, only publicly accessible accreditation reports were utilized, thereby ensuring that no organizational confidentiality was

compromised. The research process maintained ethical rigor through the acquisition of necessary permissions and the establishment of clear, transparent communication with all participants. Throughout the study, the rights, privacy, and confidentiality of all individuals involved were fully respected and safeguarded.

CHAPTER III FINDING & DISCUSSION

This study examines the impact of university career centers on student employability, drawing upon accreditation reports issued by the Education Quality Assurance Agency (TKTA) of the Republic of Azerbaijan, as well as interviews conducted with representatives from selected higher education institutions. The research findings and analysis are structured into two principal components: Part 1 – A document-based analysis of TKTA's institutional accreditation reports. Part 2 – Results of interviews with university representatives, with a focus on identifying career-oriented strategies.

The primary analytical framework for Part 1 is derived from Criterion 3.10 of TKTA's institutional accreditation standards, titled "Career Services and Ongoing Contact with Alumni." This criterion evaluates the existence and operational effectiveness of career centers, the diversity of services provided, and the institutional mechanisms for maintaining alumni engagement. The analysis is conducted with reference to five sub-indicators encompassed within this criterion. The findings corresponding to these five sub-indicators are presented as follows:

3.1. Criterion 1: Existence of Career Centers

This section analyzes the organizational presence of career centers at 15 universities based on their accreditation reports.

Table 3.1.1. The presence of Career Centers in Azerbaijani Universities

Compiled by the author.

University Name	Career Center Status
ATMU	Exists
WCU	Exists
BBU	Exists
ASOIU	Partially Exists

Khazar University	Exists
LSU	Partially Exists
AUAC	Exists
UNEC	Exists
AMU	Partially Exists
BEU	Exists
BSU	Exists
ATU	Exists
ASPU	Exists
ADA	Exists
SSU	Exists

According to the overall findings, fully operational career centers are present in 12 of the 15 universities examined (80%), while in the remaining three institutions (20%), career services exist only in a limited or fragmented capacity.

The analysis indicates that, in certain universities, career centers are either inadequately structured or not established as independent organizational units. For instance, at Azerbaijan State Oil and Industry University (ASOIU) and Lankaran State University (LDU), career-related functions are not managed within a dedicated center but are instead administered under other departments, such as public relations, internship coordination, or academic affairs. This arrangement results in fragmented service delivery and a lack of strategic focus.

Moreover, in some cases, staffing levels are insufficient to support effective operations. At Western Caspian University (WCU) and Azerbaijan Medical University (ATU), the presence of only one staff member significantly restricts both the scope and continuity of career services.

In addition, student awareness of career center services is notably low in certain institutions. For example, a student survey conducted at WCU revealed that 75% of respondents had never utilized

the career center's services. This finding raises concerns regarding both the visibility and operational effectiveness of the center.

3.1.2.Criterion 2: Provision of Career Counseling Services to Students and Graduates

Based on the data presented in the accreditation reports of 15 universities:

Table 3.1.2. Analysis Results of Azerbaijani Universities Based on Criterion 2
Compiled by the author.

University Name	Accessibility of the Career Center	Teaching career-oriented courses	Organization of internship programs	Conducting job fairs	Organization of training, seminars and meetings
ATMU	Relevant; The Career and Communication Department provides support for the career development and employment of students and graduates at all levels of higher education.		Relevant; The department collaborates with other structural units, state and executive bodies, municipalities, non-governmental organizations, tourism companies, as well as international organizations. The university has also created a registration platform on its	Relevant; With the support of the State Employment Agency, job fairs are organized once or twice a year for the university's students and graduates, involving reputable and well-known companies	Relevant; Throughout the year, a wide range of training sessions and events are organized. Some of these are recurring annual events (such as job fairs, excursions, company visits, training, etc.), while others are newly introduced activities (including conferences, symposiums,

			official website for students and graduates who wish to receive career counseling or support in finding employment.	from across the country.	academic seminars, and meetings with industry representatives).
WCU	Partially relevant; The Center for Student and Graduate Internships and Development operates with only one staff member. According to survey results, 62% of students are unaware of the existence of such a center, and 75% reported that they have not utilized its services.	Partially relevant; It has been reported that the implementation of courses such as "Career Planning," "Soft Skills," and "Hard Skills" is being planned. In some specialties, the inclusion of these subjects within internship programs has been observed.	Relevant; Active cooperation agreements have been signed with 60 companies. One such collaboration includes a Memorandum of Understanding reached between QCU and Sumgayit Technologies Park.	Relevant; It has been reported that job fairs are held annually or every two years, with the participation of at least 40 companies at each event.	Relevant; In 2023, a training session on "Emotional Intelligence – Soft Skills" was organized, conducted by Tabriz Hacinski, the founder of CIBS Europe Psychology and Training Center.

BBU	Relevant; The center ensures the participation of relevant stakeholders in its activities.		Relevant; The center carries out activities in several areas, including working with students, working with alumni, engaging with labor market representatives, and organizing internship programs.	Relevant; The center carries out activities related to the organization of job fairs.	Relevant; During designated career counseling hours, the center provides guidance to students and graduates, organizes trainings, seminars, and career fairs. Meetings with alumni are also arranged, and they are invited to participate in university events, trainings, and job fairs.
ASOIU	Partially relevant: It is recommended that counseling services be organized in a more structured manner and made accessible to a larger number of graduates.		Partially relevant; It is advisable to separate the functions related to alumni engagement and job fairs from the Public Relations and Marketing Department. There are no specific programs in place to support the employment of graduates or to	Partially relevant: Alumni job fairs are organized; however, their outcomes should be enhanced through thorough analysis. These fairs should aim to expand	

			prepare students for professional life.	graduates' career opportunities and address the real demands of employers.	
Khazar University	Relevant; Students are introduced to the activities of the Career Center starting from their first and second years. They are informed about the center's core principles and participate in events organized by the center when needed.		Relevant; Students are involved in internship programs. They are engaged in internships at companies that collaborate with the Career Center. Starting from the fourth year and after graduation, students can apply to the Center for assistance with job vacancies.	Relevant; Career fairs are organized by the Center. Within one year after graduation, students can contact the Career Center to explore job vacancies that match their knowledge and skills.	Relevant; Starting from the third year, students receive consultations to prepare their CV profiles and get ready for job interviews, along with a series of professional development trainings. Within the framework of the Erasmus+ UniLab project, the UniLab National Conference was held at ASOIU. The conference featured panel discussions on various career-related topics..

LSU	Partially relevant: Due to the absence of a dedicated Career Center, there are no available reports on the regular provision of career counseling to students.		Relevant; There is close cooperation with the State Employment Agency and relevant government institutions. Pedagogical and industrial internships are organized for students in accordance with their respective fields of study.	Relevant; Graduate job fairs are organized regularly every year. Despite the university's regional location and the Partially relevant interest from labor market representatives, the participation of both employers and graduates in these fairs is successfully ensured.	Partially relevant: Students' career-related inquiries (verbal or online) are addressed individually or in groups. It has been stated that efforts are planned to strengthen activities in order to provide more effective career counseling services.
AUAC	Partially relevant: The center's material-technical resources and the skill level of its staff were insufficient for effectively		Partially relevant: It was identified that the center does not collaborate with key organizations such as the National Confederation of Entrepreneurs (Employers)	Partially relevant: Although it is reported that the center organizes career fairs annually, with participation from around 70	Partially relevant: It is recommended to regularly utilize the services of specialized consulting companies for matters such as CV preparation and interview readiness. It was

			Organizations of the Republic of Azerbaijan, the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of the Republic of Azerbaijan, the Association of Construction Materials Manufacturers, or leading HR companies.	organizations offering over 600 job opportunities in total, no statistical data has been provided regarding the outcomes of these fairs.	found that simulation, testing, and analysis methods for interview preparation are not conducted at all.
delivering information about job market vacancies to students and graduates.					
UNEC	Relevant: The Career Center supports the career development and employment of students and graduates at all levels of higher education.	Relevant: Courses such as "Career Planning," "Soft Skills," and "Hard Skills" are taught.	Relevant: Memorandums of cooperation have been signed with 27 major holdings and companies. Internship programs have been implemented with "Azerbaijan Railways" CJSC, and students have been involved in non-industrial internship programs at "Coca Cola" Bottlers LLC. Based on results	Relevant: In 2021, 3; in 2022, 3; and in 2023, 4 international education exhibitions were attended. Within the framework of the UNEC Career Fair, 120 companies registered through the virtual "Endless Fairs" platform and actively	Relevant: On the initiative of the Career Center, 72 internship programs and seminars were organized. Trainings were conducted in collaboration with the State Employment Agency on the topic of "Eliminating Informal Employment." An info session was held at the office of Pasha Life

			obtained one month after the job fair, 708 graduates had the opportunity to become interns, and 564 graduates were employed.	offered job opportunities to 4,002 participating graduates.	Insurance, and a project for the establishment of a Digital Research Center was developed at UNEC's Building No. 3.
AMU	Partially relevant: A "Department for Work with Alumni" currently carries out the functions of a Career Center. As the department is newly established, no formal introduction has been made to students.	Not Relevant; It is recommended to conduct awareness-raising activities for students on topics such as "Career Planning," "Job Application Procedures," and "Evaluation of Job Opportunities Relevant to Specializations."	Not Relevant: The Career Center has not signed any memorandum of understanding with medical institutions or employers.		Relevant: Face-to-face meetings and online communication have been conducted with graduates by the head of the department.

BEU	Relevant: Effective coordination exists between the department and academic chairs. Information about meetings for students and graduates is disseminated via email, through academic departments, and on social media platforms to ensure students have accessible information.		Relevant: Significant work has been carried out in the area of career development in cooperation with the Internship Department. The department participates in the organization, supervision, and coordination of pre-graduation industrial and pedagogical internships for bachelor's final-year students, as well as research and pedagogical internships for second-year master's students.	Relevant: To prepare students for the labor market, representatives of major companies are invited through bilateral initiatives. Career fairs are also organized regularly.	Relevant: Regular meetings, masterclasses, scholarship program presentations, and info sessions on student internship programs are held with representatives of local and international companies. Training programs are conducted on CV writing, job searching, job application processes, and related topics.
BSU	Partially relevant: The "Career and Alumni Relations" sector has a comprehensive strategic plan			Partially relevant: Within the framework of collaborations with employers, career-related	Relevant: Due to insufficient IT skills and Partially relevant experience in CV writing, regular

	for the establishment of a "Career and Alumni Center." However, there is a need to equip the structure with a professional team to achieve its strategic goals.			events at Baku State University (BSU) organized by representatives of local and international companies are currently Partially relevant in scope and are only offered to enrolled students.	trainings, seminars, and meetings are organized to address these gaps.
ATU	Partially relevant: There is a need to improve the functioning of the center in order to enhance its overall efficiency. Although some work is being carried out with alumni, it has been revealed that these efforts are not		Relevant: There are Memorandums of Understanding with organizations such as Sumgayit Technologies Park, Azeristiliktechizat, AzerGold, and the State Employment Agency. However, the areas of cooperation have not been	Partially relevant: The main services provided by the center have consisted of inviting graduates to job fairs and offering support in preparing their CVs. However, the submitted CVs have not been tracked or followed up	

	conducted in a systematic manner.		systematically implemented through activity plans outlining specific measures.	during the fairs, and feedback from partners on this matter has not been collected.	
ASPU	Partially relevant: It is recommended that the center's staff participate in exchange programs with foreign universities and establish connections with international career centers in order to expand the scope of the center's activities.	Not Relevant;It is advised to implement training programs and initiatives focused on CV writing, soft skill development, management competencies, and the enhancement of social skills and habits, as these are currently lacking.			Relevant: Trial exams are organized to prepare students for the Teacher Recruitment (MIQ) exams. Meetings are also held with renowned educators, scholars, and other prominent figures.
ADA	Relevant: A faculty-oriented center is available and physically accessible.	Relevant: The course "Career Development Skills and Strategies" is	Relevant: A compulsory internship program is implemented for all students.	Relevant: During "Career Preparation Week," career fairs are	Relevant: Various workshops, trainings, and meetings are organized for students. As part

		a mandatory subject.		organized, and job vacancies are shared through the "Career Link" electronic platform.	of Career Week, a career fair was held with the participation of more than 130 companies.
SSU	Relevant: The center employs four staff members and provides advice and guidance to senior students at SDU (Sumgayit State University) to help them plan their careers and prepare for the professional world.		Relevant: It supports the organization of specialization-oriented internships for bachelor's and master's students and assists graduates in finding employment.	Relevant: Job fairs are mainly organized by the Employment Service. The center ensures the participation of graduate students in these fairs to support their employment.	Relevant: Career counseling and guidance are provided to senior students throughout the week, including regular meetings aimed at preparing them for the labor market.

This section presents a comprehensive analysis of the organization and delivery of career counseling services across Azerbaijani universities, based on the evaluation of activities falling under Criterion 2 of institutional accreditation standards. Through a qualitative document analysis

of accreditation reports and supplementary data sources, five key areas of career services have been identified as critical indicators of effective institutional support for student employability. These areas were coded during the analytical process as follows: "Accessibility of the Career Center," "Teaching Career-Oriented Courses," "Organization of Internship Programs," "Conducting Job Fairs," and "Organization of Trainings, Seminars, and Meetings."

In several universities, career counseling is delivered through fully established, independently operating career centers that actively engage with students and graduates. Institutions such as ADA University, the Azerbaijan Tourism and Management University (ATMU), and the Azerbaijan State University of Economics (UNEC) are notable examples of this model. These career centers provide a variety of personalized and group services, including one-on-one counseling sessions, thematic seminars, skills workshops, and facilitation of internship placements. Such services are instrumental in guiding students through their career planning processes and in supporting their transitions from academic environments to the labor market.

Conversely, in other institutions, career services are either not institutionalized within a dedicated unit or are implemented in a relatively ad hoc and underdeveloped manner. In these cases, the absence of formal career support structures contributes to inconsistencies in service provision and limits the potential for students to benefit from systematic career guidance.

A common and increasingly important strategy observed across multiple institutions is the establishment of formalized collaborations with private sector companies, public enterprises, and other labor market stakeholders. These partnerships are designed to enhance students' exposure to real-world employment contexts and to bridge the gap between academic instruction and industry needs. For instance, during the 2021–2022 academic year, UNEC entered into cooperation agreements with 27 prominent national companies and holdings, thereby expanding internship and employment opportunities for its student body. Similarly, Western Caspian University reported having active agreements with more than 60 companies, reflecting a proactive approach to employer engagement.

Other universities such as Baku Business University (BBU) and Sumgayit State University (SDU) have adopted multifaceted strategies that involve students, graduates, and employers in career-related activities. SDU, for example, has built relationships with key organizations such as "Azerikimya," "Azerenergy," and Baku Metro, through which it supports the employment of its graduates in these institutions. Most universities prioritize the provision of practical learning

opportunities, including internship programs and job fairs, which are integral components of career service delivery. These activities not only facilitate students' professional development but also help them establish early connections with prospective employers.

A particularly effective practice is the mandatory internship model implemented by ADA University, where all students are required to complete an internship prior to graduation. The university's Career Center plays an active role in assisting students who encounter difficulties in securing placements. At UNEC, the scale of internship programming is notably extensive, with more than 72 internship programs and career seminars organized in a single academic year. This level of activity reflects both institutional commitment and operational capacity.

Job fairs represent another prominent method used by universities to provide students with direct exposure to labor market opportunities. Institutions such as ADA, BBU, the Baku Engineering University (BEU), ATMU, UNEC, and Khazar University organize job fairs either independently or in collaboration with external partners. These events are typically held annually or biannually and showcase a wide array of job vacancies and employer presentations. For example, ATMU's Career and Communication Department organizes career fairs one to two times per year with participation from well-known companies, while UNEC hosted a large-scale job fair in early 2023. Sumgayit State University also facilitates the participation of its senior-year students and recent graduates in job fairs organized by the State Employment Agency, ensuring that students benefit from national employment initiatives.

Training sessions, workshops, and seminars aimed at developing students' soft skills and enhancing their career readiness form another cornerstone of effective career services. These sessions address critical employability competencies such as communication, teamwork, leadership, and emotional intelligence. Baku Business University conducts such training regularly as part of its professional development agenda, and BEU offers focused sessions on curriculum vitae (CV) writing and effective job searching strategies. Khazar University, as part of its "Professional Development Training" series, offers seminars that supplement students' academic learning with career-specific content.

Although Baku State University (BSU) and Azerbaijan Technical University (AzTU) have also introduced career-oriented training activities, these efforts are often limited in scale and reach, with sessions engaging only a subset of the student population. In contrast, ADA University has institutionalized career education through a mandatory undergraduate course titled "Career

Development Skills and Strategies." The course is compulsory for all third-year students across disciplines and must be successfully completed to satisfy academic requirements. Topics include labor market research, networking techniques, emotional intelligence, and CV writing. This structured and credit-bearing approach ensures that all students receive formal training in essential career development skills and reflects a strong commitment to student employability.

In addition to ADA, both UNEC and Western Caspian University have incorporated courses such as "Career Planning" and "Soft Skills" into their academic curricula. However, ADA's approach is comparatively more structured and mandatory, offering a model for best practice in embedding career readiness into higher education.

There are also notable institutional variations in how career centers operate and integrate with academic services. At Khazar University, the career center provides not only employment-related support but also guidance on academic pathways, thereby serving as a hybrid unit for both academic and career counseling. This integration allows for a more holistic approach to student support. Moreover, Khazar has implemented a distinctive "1-Year Graduate Support" system through which it continues to support alumni during their first year after graduation. This post-graduation follow-up mechanism is rare in the local context and signals a commitment to long-term student outcomes.

It is worth highlighting that some newer or private universities tend to adopt more modern, flexible, and student-centered approaches to career service provision. Institutions such as ADA University, Khazar University, Western Caspian University, and BBU implement career services through systematic and innovative models. For example, BBU organizes high-impact events that engage a large portion of the student body—reaching nearly 5,000 participants—and underscores its strategic prioritization of student employability. By contrast, more traditional public universities, including BSU, are still in the process of developing comprehensive career service frameworks and exhibit fewer innovations in their current practice.

Several key explanatory factors underline the differences observed across institutions. First, the organizational capacity and human resource qualifications of career centers significantly influence the quality and consistency of service delivery. Second, institutional linkages with the private sector and government agencies enhance the ability of universities to provide students with relevant employment and internship opportunities. Third, the student population size and profile also play a critical role: larger and academically prestigious universities tend to face greater

pressure to deliver high-quality support services, while smaller or regionally located institutions often operate with more constrained resources and limited outreach capacity.

The findings also reveal that only a limited number of institutions promote internships and job opportunities. This situation highlights a key limitation of the study, prompting the question of whether simply posting job openings on a website or portal can truly be classified as functioning Career Services. As Whiston and Rose (2013, p. 250) point out, there is ongoing debate about which kinds of offerings genuinely qualify as career support or guidance services.

In summary, the analysis reveals a lack of systemic consistency in the delivery of career counseling services across the Azerbaijani higher education landscape. While some universities have clearly developed and institutionalized practices that align with international standards, others continue to operate career services on a largely formal, non-strategic, or underdeveloped basis. The disparities identified present opportunities for policy intervention, knowledge sharing, and capacity building aimed at strengthening institutional capabilities and promoting more equitable access to quality career guidance for all students nationwide.

3.1.3. Criterion 3: The Status of Mechanisms for Monitoring Graduates' Participation in the Labor Market

This section presents a detailed and comprehensive analysis of the mechanisms employed by Azerbaijani higher education institutions to monitor and evaluate the labor market participation of their graduates, as documented in institutional accreditation reports issued by the relevant national agency. The findings, based on document analysis, reveal a considerable degree of variation among universities in terms of the rigor, structural sophistication, and practical implementation of their graduate tracking systems. These differences underscore the diverse levels of institutional capacity and strategic prioritization associated with alumni employment monitoring within the Azerbaijani higher education landscape.

While a number of universities have succeeded in establishing systematic, well-structured, and institutionally embedded mechanisms for tracking alumni career trajectories, several others continue to rely on rudimentary, informal, or sporadic methods. These latter approaches are generally insufficient for generating meaningful or actionable insights that could inform institutional planning, policy development, or curricular reform. As a result, the extent to which

Azerbaijani universities are able to assess the employability outcomes of their graduates—and subsequently align educational provision with labor market demands—varies significantly.

ADA University represents a notable example of best practice in this regard. The institution has implemented a structured, periodic system of alumni surveys, administered at multiple points following graduation—specifically at six months, one year, two years, and three years post-completion. These surveys are designed to go beyond the mere collection of employment status data. In particular, they aim to evaluate the extent to which graduates' current occupations correspond with their academic fields of specialization. This analytical focus allows the university to assess not only overall employment rates but also the relevance and effectiveness of its academic programs in preparing students for specific sectors and roles within the national and international labor markets.

Similarly, the Azerbaijan State University of Economics (UNEC) has adopted a differentiated and methodologically robust approach to employment analysis. The university disaggregates labor market data by academic level, conducting separate evaluations for bachelor's and master's degree programs. This disaggregation facilitates a more granular understanding of program-specific outcomes, thereby enabling the identification of particular strengths and weaknesses within individual academic offerings. UNEC further enhances the depth and reliability of its analysis by utilizing digital infrastructure. It maintains a "Virtual Labor Exchange" portal to facilitate data collection and employment tracking. Moreover, the institution supplements its internal datasets with official data obtained from the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection of the Population. This integration of government-generated information significantly improves the comprehensiveness and accuracy of its graduate employment assessments.

Khazar University has also institutionalized the practice of conducting regular graduate surveys as part of its employment monitoring activities. These surveys are conducted on an annual basis and are structured to collect detailed information regarding alumni workplaces, the relevance of their current employment to their academic backgrounds, and the overall progression of their professional careers. The data collected is systematically categorized and analyzed to inform institutional planning and strategic decision-making. Nevertheless, it is recommended that Khazar University further develop its analytical framework to derive deeper and more nuanced insights from the data. Such enhancements would allow for a more accurate and comprehensive assessment of its graduates' positions and success within the labor market.

In contrast to these institutions, a number of other universities are still at an early stage in the development of structured and effective graduate monitoring systems. Institutions such as the Azerbaijan Tourism and Management University (ATMU), Lankaran State University (LDU), Azerbaijan Technical University (AzTU), and the Azerbaijan State Oil and Industry University (ADNSU) exemplify this group. In these cases, the current mechanisms for alumni tracking are limited, informal, and often inconsistent. Employment information is typically gathered through unofficial and non-standardized channels, such as faculty-maintained WhatsApp groups, social media platforms, or sporadic outreach efforts conducted by individual academic departments. These practices are not supported by institutional frameworks or technological systems, and they lack the methodological rigor required for meaningful analysis. Furthermore, where alumni surveys do exist, they are often narrow in scope and are not subjected to systematic analysis. Consequently, the data collected is rarely used to inform institutional decision-making or to enhance career services and academic program design.

A key factor underlying these disparities across institutions is the availability and quality of technological infrastructure. Universities such as ADA and UNEC have made significant investments in the development of purpose-built digital systems and platforms that enable the professional collection, storage, and analysis of employment data. These technological tools not only improve operational efficiency but also facilitate comprehensive data analysis and reporting. In contrast, universities with limited financial resources or technological capacity continue to rely on traditional, manual methods, which severely restrict their ability to monitor graduate outcomes in a reliable and scalable manner.

In addition to technological capacity, the commitment and strategic orientation of institutional leadership also play a crucial role in determining the quality and effectiveness of graduate tracking systems. In universities where graduate employability is recognized as a strategic institutional priority, career services and employment monitoring receive sustained administrative support, adequate funding, and dedicated personnel. These institutions view alumni tracking not merely as a formal requirement for accreditation, but as an essential component of their broader mission to enhance educational quality and labor market relevance. Conversely, in institutions where graduate monitoring is approached primarily as a procedural obligation, the systems in place tend to be superficial, inconsistently implemented, and of limited strategic value.

Equally important is the way in which the data collected from graduate tracking systems is utilized. Merely collecting data on alumni employment outcomes is insufficient to effect meaningful institutional improvement. To generate real impact, such data must be thoroughly analyzed and used proactively to inform institutional decision-making. Specifically, the findings should be leveraged to revise and update academic curricula, identify gaps in student competencies, and develop more targeted and effective career support services. Employment statistics should serve as a key input into curriculum development processes, guiding academic departments in aligning their offerings with the evolving demands of the labor market. Furthermore, these insights should inform the design of specialized interventions aimed at improving graduates' competitiveness and employability.

Ultimately, only through a comprehensive, evidence-based approach to graduate tracking and data utilization can universities ensure that their educational programs remain relevant, responsive, and aligned with national economic development goals. The implementation of robust alumni monitoring systems, coupled with strategic leadership commitment and technological investment, is essential to enhancing the quality of career services and strengthening the overall capacity of higher education institutions to support student transitions into the workforce.

3.1.4. Criterion 4: The state of measuring competency-based outcomes and satisfaction of the educational program.

An in-depth examination of institutional accreditation reports reveals significant and persistent variations among Azerbaijani universities in the methodologies and frameworks they employ to assess the competencies acquired by students during their academic programs, as well as the overall satisfaction of graduates with the quality of education they received. These disparities are observable not only in the frequency, design, and structure of data collection instruments, but also in the extent to which the resulting findings are systematically analyzed, interpreted, and utilized to inform substantive academic improvements.

Within the set of institutions evaluated, ADA University emerges as a particularly strong example of best practice in this domain. The university has developed and implemented a highly structured and comprehensive feedback system that involves the regular surveying of its graduates to determine post-graduation employment outcomes. These surveys assess not only whether alumni

are employed, but also whether their current positions correspond to their field of academic specialization or fall outside it. Importantly, ADA University does not treat this information as a mere administrative formality. Instead, the data collected through graduate surveys is actively integrated into a broader institutional strategy that facilitates continuous, evidence-based adjustments to academic programs. This practice enables the institution to maintain a high degree of responsiveness to the evolving demands of the labor market.

Furthermore, ADA University fosters sustained dialogue between academic departments and representatives from the employment sector. This open channel of communication allows for the routine exchange of information concerning labor market trends, employer expectations, and graduate performance. Such collaboration directly informs curriculum development and ensures that academic programs are frequently revised to maintain their relevance and alignment with industry standards. By embedding this feedback loop into institutional processes, ADA University demonstrates a forward-looking and adaptive approach to higher education quality assurance and curriculum reform.

The Azerbaijan State University of Economics (UNEC) has also undertaken commendable initiatives aimed at aligning educational outcomes with professional requirements, although the degree of systemic integration observed is somewhat less comprehensive than that of ADA University. At UNEC, courses such as "Career Planning," "Soft Skills," and "Hard Skills" are delivered in collaboration with labor market actors, thereby offering students exposure to real-world expectations and helping to bridge the gap between academic instruction and workplace readiness. The university additionally conducts online graduate satisfaction surveys, which serve as tools for evaluating alumni perspectives on their academic experiences and the applicability of their learning in professional contexts.

However, concerns have been raised regarding the overall robustness and methodological rigor of these surveys. In particular, the lack of standardized survey instruments and systematic analytical procedures undermines the reliability and objectivity of the data collected. While UNEC has established mechanisms for gathering feedback, the subsequent processing, interpretation, and application of this information to academic decision-making and curricular improvement are not yet implemented in a consistent or institution-wide manner. Consequently, the potential impact of these data collection efforts on meaningful academic reform remains limited.

At Khazar University, comparable efforts are also in evidence. The institution regularly conducts online surveys to solicit feedback from its graduates regarding the quality and relevance of their educational experience. A dedicated internal unit is responsible for administering these surveys and analyzing the results. Nevertheless, operational challenges persist, particularly with respect to the comprehensiveness and representativeness of the data. For instance, the university faces difficulties in obtaining feedback from graduates who are serving in the military or living abroad, which can result in incomplete datasets and may compromise the validity of subsequent analyses. Although the feedback collected is reviewed within the university, there is a notable lack of transparency regarding how this information influences concrete changes to teaching practices or curriculum content. As such, while the data collection infrastructure exists, its functional contribution to institutional reform remains somewhat ambiguous.

In contrast to the institutions mentioned above, several other universities demonstrate considerably less developed approaches to the evaluation of graduate satisfaction and the assessment of acquired competencies. These institutions include, but are not limited to, the Azerbaijan Tourism and Management University (ATMU), Western Caspian University, Baku Business University (BBU), and Azerbaijan Technical University (AzTU). Within these universities, the processes associated with graduate feedback and program evaluation tend to be superficial and largely symbolic. Where surveys are conducted, they are typically sporadic and not embedded within a systematic, ongoing framework of quality assurance.

Moreover, even when some data is collected, there is often a clear absence of follow-through in terms of rigorous data analysis, structured interpretation, or strategic application to academic development. For example, at ATMU, only two or three graduate satisfaction surveys have reportedly been conducted over a six-year period. The outcomes of these surveys have not been examined in detail, nor have they served as a basis for initiating curricular or pedagogical changes. Similarly, at AzTU and the Azerbaijan State Oil and Industry University (ADNSU), there is no documented evidence of a formalized graduate feedback mechanism. Furthermore, there appears to be no indication that any such data is systematically collected or employed to inform educational policy, course design, or institutional development planning.

Taken collectively, these findings point to the pressing need for a more unified, coordinated, and strategically oriented approach to the evaluation of graduate competencies and satisfaction across the Azerbaijani higher education sector. Institutions must transition from irregular or tokenistic data

collection efforts to the adoption of comprehensive and institutionalized frameworks that emphasize both the acquisition and effective utilization of graduate feedback. These frameworks should incorporate clear guidelines for survey design, data processing, interpretation, and integration into academic governance processes.

Moreover, universities should prioritize the development of internal mechanisms that ensure graduate feedback not only informs but actively shapes academic reform. Such efforts would substantially enhance the quality, relevance, and labor market alignment of higher education programs. They would also serve to strengthen institutional accountability, improve graduate outcomes, and contribute to national human capital development. Ultimately, a systematic and evidence-based approach to graduate competency assessment and satisfaction monitoring represents a critical step toward elevating the overall performance and credibility of Azerbaijani higher education institutions in an increasingly competitive global landscape.

3.1.5.Criterion 5: The Existence of Sustainable Alumni Engagement Systems

A comprehensive review of institutional practices across Azerbaijani higher education institutions reveals that the establishment, implementation, and maintenance of long-term engagement with alumni are undertaken at varying levels of sophistication, coherence, and consistency. The strategies adopted by universities to foster and sustain alumni relations exhibit significant variation. These range from structured, institutionally supported models equipped with dedicated administrative units and digital platforms to more informal, ad hoc approaches reliant primarily on personal networks or interactions facilitated through social media. This observed heterogeneity is reflective not only of the disparities in institutional capacity and resource availability but also of the extent to which alumni engagement is prioritized within each university's strategic framework. Moreover, it reflects differing levels of institutional awareness regarding the long-term value and potential of alumni networks for enhancing educational quality, graduate outcomes, and institutional reputation.

Among the institutions assessed, the Azerbaijan State University of Economics (UNEC) stands out as an example of a higher education institution that has, in recent years, placed significant emphasis on formalizing and systematizing alumni engagement. As part of its broader strategic development agenda, UNEC has established the UNEC Alumni Association, which serves as an umbrella

organization responsible for coordinating and overseeing a range of alumni-focused activities. The creation of the "Extern" center has further reinforced the institutionalization of alumni relations, providing a centralized and clearly defined structure through which alumni engagement is managed on a continuous basis. In support of these efforts, the university employs the EDUMAN digital platform, which functions as a comprehensive tool for the systematic collection, storage, and management of alumni data. This platform not only facilitates the accurate and up-to-date gathering of graduate information but also serves as a medium through which professional collaborations, mentoring relationships, and feedback loops are cultivated and maintained. In addition, UNEC operates the "Endless Fairs" virtual job fair platform, which remains active throughout the calendar year. This platform provides alumni with ongoing access to job opportunities, thereby maintaining a dynamic and mutually beneficial connection between the university and its graduates. This year-round engagement model represents a noteworthy innovation in the digitalization of alumni services and is instrumental in advancing both employment outcomes and institutional outreach objectives.

Similarly, ADA University demonstrates a strong institutional commitment to alumni engagement and approaches this area with a high degree of strategic planning and operational coherence. Alumni relations at ADA University are not treated as a peripheral concern but are instead regarded as a central and enduring component of the university's development strategy. These efforts are formally coordinated by the ADA Alumni Association, which operates as the principal organizational body tasked with maintaining alumni relations and orchestrating graduate engagement initiatives. The university has implemented a series of carefully designed and sustainable mechanisms intended to ensure that its relationship with alumni extends well beyond graduation. In addition to organizing traditional alumni reunions and networking events, ADA University places considerable emphasis on inclusive outreach through digital channels. Online forums, in particular, are utilized to engage graduates who are living or working abroad, thereby fostering a global alumni network. Regularly conducted alumni surveys, structured communication campaigns, and formal networking events serve to reinforce a sense of ongoing belonging among graduates and maintain their active involvement in university affairs. This comprehensive and inclusive approach ensures that alumni remain informed about institutional developments and are empowered to contribute to the continued advancement of the university through mentorship, feedback, and strategic collaboration.

Khazar University also recognizes the critical importance of maintaining strong and enduring alumni relations as an integral element of institutional development. The university employs a lifecycle approach to alumni engagement, initiating these efforts from the earliest stages of a student's academic journey. From the first year of enrollment, students are actively involved in the programs and initiatives of the Career Center, laying the foundation for sustained engagement throughout and beyond their academic careers. This proactive integration of student support and alumni services ensures that students form meaningful connections with the university's career infrastructure, which later evolves into alumni-focused engagement. Services such as résumé and CV development, mock interviews, career coaching, and internship facilitation are extended not only to enrolled students but also to graduates, thereby ensuring the continuity of support and reinforcing lifelong ties to the institution. In addition to formal institutional channels, Khazar University utilizes a range of social media platforms to maintain informal yet consistent communication with its alumni community. Graduates are regularly invited to participate in university events, deliver guest lectures, engage in mentoring programs, and contribute to academic and professional discussions. These efforts contribute to a holistic and community-centered model of alumni engagement; wherein former students continue to play an active role in the intellectual and professional life of the university.

By contrast, other institutions—such as the Azerbaijan State Oil and Industry University (ADNSU), Azerbaijan Technical University (AzTU), Lankaran State University (LDU), and Baku State University (BSU)—exhibit considerably less developed and more informal approaches to alumni relations. In these universities, graduate engagement is typically conducted through unofficial and fragmented channels, most commonly through platforms such as WhatsApp groups, social media pages, or informal personal networks maintained by individual staff members. While such methods may be effective for limited short-term communication, they are not supported by institutional policies, dedicated personnel, or technological infrastructure, and therefore lack the sustainability, strategic oversight, and data-driven capabilities required for long-term alumni engagement. In many cases, these institutions do not possess dedicated administrative units responsible for alumni affairs, or if such units exist, they operate with limited staff, inadequate resources, and unclear mandates. The absence or underutilization of modern information systems capable of maintaining comprehensive alumni databases, tracking career outcomes, or facilitating structured interactions with graduates further restricts these universities' ability to develop meaningful and productive alumni networks.

The implications of these disparities are both significant and far-reaching. Institutions that do not invest in the development of robust and strategic alumni relations risk forfeiting valuable opportunities for graduate feedback, career tracking, fundraising, and the cultivation of institutional reputation through the professional success of their alumni. In contrast, strong and well-maintained alumni networks serve as critical institutional assets. They enhance graduate employability, contribute to the continuous improvement of academic programs through feedback and collaboration, and play a pivotal role in strengthening ties with employers and industry stakeholders. Moreover, alumni can serve as ambassadors of the university's values and achievements, thereby contributing to international partnerships, student recruitment, and institutional visibility in global academic networks.

In conclusion, while a select number of Azerbaijani universities have succeeded in adopting technology-enabled, institutionally embedded, and strategically governed approaches to alumni engagement, a considerable number of institutions remain in the early developmental stages of building such systems. This inconsistency in the sophistication and implementation of alumni relations practices points to an urgent need for capacity-building initiatives, the formulation of national policy guidelines, and the promotion of inter-university collaboration and knowledge-sharing. By investing in the establishment of robust and sustainable alumni engagement frameworks, Azerbaijani universities can enhance their institutional effectiveness, better support the career trajectories of their graduates, and contribute meaningfully to national human capital development and labor market integration. Ensuring that alumni relations are treated as a core institutional priority will ultimately strengthen the role of universities as lifelong partners in the personal and professional journeys of their graduates.

3.2. Interview-Based Study

This section presents the second phase of the research study, which focuses on the qualitative analysis of interviews conducted with key institutional stakeholders. Building upon the document analysis undertaken in the first phase, this stage provides a more nuanced and contextually grounded understanding of career center operations within Azerbaijani higher education institutions. As detailed in the methodology chapter, the second phase adopts an in-depth qualitative approach, relying on semi-structured interviews to gather rich, first-hand insights from professionals directly involved in career service provision.

Interviews were conducted with the directors of Career Centers at three universities: Azerbaijan State University of Economics (UNEC), ADA University, and Khazar University. These institutions were purposefully selected based on the findings of the initial document analysis, which indicated that they represent distinctive and exemplary models in the development and implementation of career guidance, employability enhancement, and employer engagement strategies. Their career centers have demonstrated innovative and structured approaches that distinguish them from the broader landscape of career services in the country.

The analysis of the interview data is organized thematically, and it is structured around six key analytical dimensions that emerged both from the research framework and inductive coding of the interview transcripts. These dimensions are as follows:

1. Existence of Career Centers – assessing the institutionalization, staffing, and governance of career centers within the university structure.

2. Operational Mechanisms – examining how career services are planned, managed, and integrated into institutional workflows.

3. Accessibility of Services – exploring the extent to which career services are made available to all students and the ease with which they can be accessed.

4. Employer Collaboration and Career Events – analyzing how institutions build and sustain partnerships with labor market actors, including the organization of job fairs, internships, and employer-led sessions.

5. Graduate Monitoring and Tracking Tools – evaluating the methods and platforms used to monitor graduate outcomes and employment trajectories.

6. Successful Job Placement Strategies – identifying the specific initiatives or mechanisms that have led to successful employment outcomes for graduates.

The subsections that follow present the findings according to these six thematic categories, offering a structured and comparative analysis of the interview responses. Where appropriate, direct quotations from respondents are provided in italics and quotation marks to preserve the authenticity of their perspectives and to give voice to the practitioners at the heart of these institutional practices. These quotations are drawn verbatim from the interview transcripts and have

been included to illustrate key themes, provide illustrative examples, and reinforce the credibility of the analysis through respondent validation.

Through this qualitative phase, the study aims to deepen understanding of how leading Azerbaijani universities conceptualize, operationalize, and assess the effectiveness of their career services. The insights gathered offer practical implications for both institutional development and national policy, and they provide a benchmark for other universities seeking to improve graduate employability outcomes.

3.2.1. Existence of Career Centers

Each of the three universities examined in this study—ADA University, Azerbaijan State University of Economics (UNEC), and Khazar University—maintains a formally established Career Center that plays a central role in supporting student employability and facilitating the transition from higher education to the labor market. Although the timelines of establishment and development vary among these institutions, all three have demonstrated a sustained commitment to institutionalizing career services as an integral component of student support systems.

At Khazar University, in particular, the Career Center has a notably long history. According to a key respondent interviewed during the qualitative phase of this research, *"the center was originally established in the early 2000s."* This early adoption indicates that Khazar University recognized the strategic importance of career guidance well before it became a widespread focus in the Azerbaijani higher education landscape. Furthermore, the respondent noted that as of December 2023, the center underwent a significant restructuring process, which was aimed at modernizing its services and aligning its functions more closely with current labor market demands and student expectations. Despite changes in structure and scope over time, the center remains actively operational, reflecting both its historical legacy and its contemporary relevance within the university.

This pattern of maintaining dedicated career centers is not unique to Azerbaijan. Internationally, the establishment of career services within universities has become a standard feature of institutional infrastructure in most advanced higher education systems. Career centers are widely regarded as essential organizational units that not only support student development but also contribute to institutional performance and societal impact.

As Bridgstock (2009) argues, modern universities are increasingly expected to take an active role in enhancing graduate employability, and one of the most effective mechanisms for doing so is through centralized career management units. These centers provide structured opportunities for students to engage in career-related learning, acquire transferable skills, and receive personalized guidance on their professional pathways. By offering services such as career counseling, internship facilitation, employability workshops, and employer engagement activities, career centers help students develop competencies that are essential for successful labor market integration.

Furthermore, leading international organizations have also emphasized the strategic role of career centers in aligning educational outcomes with labor market demands. For example, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2004) and the UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES, 2010) have both identified university-based career services as critical institutional levers for promoting graduate success and improving the responsiveness of higher education systems to economic and employment trends.

In this context, the presence and continued evolution of career centers at ADA University, UNEC, and Khazar University not only reflect their institutional commitment to student employability but also position them in line with international best practices. Their efforts demonstrate how Azerbaijani universities are responding to the growing expectation that higher education institutions play an active and sustained role in preparing students for the workforce—not only through academic instruction but also through structured career development support embedded within the institutional ecosystem.

3.2.2. Operational Mechanisms

Interview data gathered from the directors of Career Centers at ADA University, Azerbaijan State University of Economics (UNEC), and Khazar University reveal that all three institutions provide a comprehensive portfolio of career services designed to support students' transitions from university to the labor market. The services offered typically include career counseling, facilitation of internship and job placement opportunities, organization of career fairs, training and capacity-building programs, and sustained employer engagement initiatives. These services are framed not

only as student support functions but also as critical institutional strategies for enhancing graduate employability and aligning academic programs with labor market expectations.

At ADA University, the Career Center operates through a dual-pronged strategic model that reflects both curricular integration and external stakeholder collaboration. The first strategic direction centers around the implementation of a semester-long career development course that is mandatory for undergraduate students. This course forms a core component of the university's formal curriculum and covers a range of relevant topics, including career planning, workplace ethics, emotional intelligence, CV and cover letter writing, networking skills, and interview preparation techniques. As articulated by the interview respondent: *"After completing this course, students in their third year participate in internship programs."* This model ensures that students receive structured, formalized career preparation early in their academic journey and are equipped with the foundational skills necessary for professional engagement prior to their participation in internships.

The second strategic direction at ADA University emphasizes the organization of career-oriented events and the strengthening of relationships with industry partners. This includes regular employer presentations, alumni talk, job fairs, and networking events aimed at fostering direct connections between students and potential employers. These activities not only facilitate employment opportunities but also contribute to a dynamic learning environment in which students are exposed to real-world career insights and expectations.

At UNEC, the Career Center's operations are similarly multifaceted, although with a slightly different emphasis. The center primarily focuses on offering advisory and consultative services, facilitating both internship placements and employment opportunities, and organizing institution-wide career fairs and professional training programs. The respondent interviewed described the center's mission succinctly: *"Providing career counseling, facilitating internships and job opportunities, organizing career fairs and training sessions, and engaging with employers are among the core functions of the center."* This highlights a strong operational focus on direct service delivery and partnership building, with the goal of enhancing both immediate employment outcomes and students' long-term career readiness.

At Khazar University, the Career Center operates with a distinctive emphasis on bridging student support with alumni relations. According to the center's director, the institutional strategy is to integrate career support with graduate outreach, thereby leveraging alumni expertise and

networks to benefit current students. As the respondent explained: *"We aim to combine these two areas—our alumni work in reputable positions, and with their support, we organize meetings, training sessions, and career fairs."* This approach not only enriches the student experience through exposure to real-world perspectives but also reinforces a culture of mentorship, institutional loyalty, and professional continuity. Alumni are viewed not just as beneficiaries of the university's past services but as active contributors to its current employability ecosystem.

The operational mechanisms described by all three institutions reflect alignment with internationally recognized best practices in the field of career services. For instance, Xiaoqing and Noordin (2024), in their study of career service models in Chinese universities, emphasize the growing importance of integrating digital infrastructure, virtual technologies, and artificial intelligence tools to personalize career support and broaden access. Their research shows that AI-driven platforms are increasingly being used to automate CV feedback, simulate interviews, and provide individualized job recommendations, thereby increasing both the efficiency and effectiveness of career centers.

Similarly, Bridgstock (2009) underscores the necessity of embedding career management learning into university curricula, noting that career education should not be treated as an ancillary service but rather as a fundamental part of the higher education mission. She argues that enhancing graduate employability requires deliberate institutional strategies that foster career self-management skills and facilitate sustained engagement with industry throughout the student lifecycle.

These approaches also align with the policy recommendations issued by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2004). The OECD advocates for a model of career services that emphasizes multi-channel service delivery, including both in-person and online platforms; active partnerships with employers and community stakeholders; and proactive, inclusive engagement of all students, including those from underrepresented or disadvantaged backgrounds. Such comprehensive strategies are increasingly viewed as essential to improving employment outcomes, fostering social mobility, and ensuring that higher education institutions remain responsive to evolving economic conditions.

In conclusion, the findings from the interview analysis confirm that ADA University, UNEC, and Khazar University are actively implementing structured, multi-dimensional career service models that correspond with global standards. Their practices exemplify the potential of

well-organized career centers to serve not only as student support units but also as strategic institutional mechanisms for workforce development, alumni engagement, and labor market alignment.

3.2.3. Accessibility of Services

All three universities examined in this study—ADA University, Azerbaijan State University of Economics (UNEC), and Khazar University—employ a diverse array of communication channels to facilitate student awareness and accessibility of career services. These multi-modal approaches demonstrate a deliberate institutional strategy aimed at ensuring that students across varying academic backgrounds and technological competencies are adequately informed and continuously engaged with available employability resources. The choice and integration of communication platforms reflect each university's broader commitment to service accessibility, inclusivity, and student engagement in the career development process.

At ADA University, communication efforts are heavily grounded in digital integration, reflecting a systematic and forward-thinking management model. The Career Center prioritizes digital platforms as the main medium for disseminating information about its services, upcoming events, internship opportunities, and job postings. As one respondent elaborated: *"First, communication is via email; second, via social media and the official ADA website; third, through the Career Link platform. Additionally, information is shared on bulletin boards using QR codes within the university. Third-year students are also regularly informed by career advisors, who maintain weekly contact. In short, all available means are utilized."* This comprehensive approach illustrates a well-orchestrated effort to embed communication within both digital ecosystems and the physical campus environment. The use of QR codes on bulletin boards, in particular, signifies a hybrid strategy that bridges offline and online spaces, making information both accessible and immediate. Weekly advisory meetings with third-year students further reinforce personalized outreach, highlighting ADA's proactive commitment to ensuring that no student remains unaware of the resources available to them.

At UNEC, a similarly multifaceted strategy is employed, although it draws more heavily on popular communication applications and institutional systems familiar to the local student demographic. The university utilizes social media platforms, Telegram, WhatsApp groups, the official university website, student portals, and institutional email systems to maintain communication with students. These channels serve multiple purposes: they disseminate announcements, promote career fairs and internship calls, deliver training schedules, and provide individual responses to student inquiries. The use of student portals and official email ensures alignment with academic communication practices, while platforms such as Telegram and WhatsApp offer real-time interaction and are particularly effective for quick updates and peer-to-peer engagement.

At Khazar University, the communication strategy blends both digital and traditional methods, reflecting an inclusive approach tailored to reach students and alumni through multiple points of contact. As stated by the Career Center director: *"We rely heavily on social media to disseminate internship and job postings. We also collect student emails and phone numbers through faculties and use various platforms such as WhatsApp and Microsoft Teams. Announcements are posted on internal bulletin boards. Additionally, we engage alumni through dedicated WhatsApp groups and invite them to all events to ensure their participation in university life."* This strategy illustrates an intentional effort to foster continuity of communication not only with current students but also with alumni. By leveraging familiar and widely used platforms such as WhatsApp and Microsoft Teams and combining them with more formal communication channels and physical bulletin boards, Khazar University ensures that its messages reach a broad and diverse audience.

The diversity of communication methods employed by these universities reflects a strategic commitment to inclusivity, recognizing that students differ in their digital habits, preferences, and levels of engagement. The combination of technology-enabled platforms with face-to-face advisory sessions, internal portals, and physical information points enhances the redundancy and resilience of communication efforts. However, as Mammadova and Valiyev (2020) caution in their study on Azerbaijani student engagement with university career services, many students remain unaware of the full range of services available to them, despite the presence of digital platforms. Their research concludes that the effectiveness of communication is not determined solely by the existence of platforms, but rather by the frequency, interactivity, and institutional consistency in using these tools. In other words, accessibility must be operationalized through continuous outreach, targeted messaging, and integration into students' daily academic routines.

International research supports these findings. In the Nigerian higher education context, Ogwo (2024) discovered that although many institutions offered well-developed career services, only 25% of students were aware of them. This underscores the point that digital presence alone is insufficient; institutions must invest in strategic dissemination and student engagement mechanisms that ensure visibility and relevance. According to UKCES (2010), universities that embed career communication into curricular pathways, including advisory sessions, mandatory internship preparation platforms, and integrated learning management systems, tend to experience higher levels of student participation in employability initiatives and improved outcomes in graduate tracking and employer satisfaction.

In this regard, the practices observed at ADA University, UNEC, and Khazar University reflect promising institutional models that move beyond static announcements and toward interactive, student-centered communication strategies. Their efforts to maintain open lines of communication, whether through weekly advisor contact, peer messaging platforms, or interactive digital portals—represent meaningful steps toward building an inclusive and accessible career service ecosystem. By combining digital innovation with personalized outreach and structured advisory engagement, these universities are not only increasing awareness of career resources but also fostering a stronger culture of career readiness and professional development.

3.2.4. Employer Collaboration and Events

One of the core functions of university-based Career Centers is to serve as a vital intermediary between students and the labor market by creating platforms for direct engagement with employers. Through carefully structured activities and sustained institutional strategies, Career Centers aim to facilitate students' exposure to employment opportunities, build their professional networks, and enhance their preparedness for the workplace. The three universities included in this study—ADA University, Azerbaijan State University of Economics (UNEC), and Khazar University—demonstrate varying models of employer engagement, each contributing uniquely to the employability ecosystem within their respective institutions.

At ADA University, the Career Center operates a highly organized and systematic calendar of employer engagement activities, which are planned with careful consideration of the university's

academic calendar, including midterm and final examination periods. The director of the Career Center emphasized that all events are intentionally scheduled to avoid academic disruptions and to maximize student participation. These activities are designed to provide practical exposure, interactive learning opportunities, and direct connections with potential employers. Notably, the center implements the following core activities:

Weekly visits by HR departments from well-established national and international companies, held during the fall semester. These sessions are structured to introduce students to available internship and employment opportunities, often featuring company presentations, Q&A discussions, and networking opportunities.

Monthly breakfast meetings with Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) and senior executives, designed to offer students informal access to leadership-level insights. These sessions promote candid discussions on career pathways, personal growth, and industry-specific challenges.

Intensive three-day certified training programs, held during both the fall and spring semesters, are delivered by industry experts and academic department heads. These programs are tailored to specific disciplines and provide students with in-depth, practical training in niche areas, often culminating in the award of participation certificates.

The "Career Ambassadors" program, which enlists selected students to serve as representatives of partnering companies within the university. These ambassadors facilitate on-campus engagement, organize promotional events, and build awareness of organizational cultures and opportunities among their peers.

Professional masterclasses conducted by experienced specialists from diverse industries. These sessions give students valuable exposure to real-world workplace expectations, technical insights, and soft skill requirements, contributing to their overall career readiness.

An annual "Career Month", held every April, which includes a dedicated 8-day Career Preparation Week. This intensive series of events features sessions on personal branding, interview skills, CV writing, and labor market trends, delivered by representatives from approximately 20 participating companies. A notable outcome of this initiative is the direct selection of high-performing students for internship or employment opportunities.

The capstone of ADA University's employer engagement calendar is the Annual Career Fair, organized every May. This large-scale event brings together over 130 local and international

employers, including prominent public sector organizations, offering students the opportunity to explore job prospects, submit applications, and participate in on-the-spot interviews.

In addition to these high-profile initiatives, ADA's Career Services Office regularly facilitates internship placements, organizes expert seminars, and implements skills development workshops, all of which contribute to a structured and strategic transition of students into the labor market. The comprehensive and layered approach taken by ADA University reflects a deep institutional commitment to preparing students for the demands of contemporary employment and reflects international benchmarks for high-impact career services.

At UNEC, a similarly structured but more event-focused model of employer engagement is employed. According to the Career Center representative, the university organizes a large-scale job fair at least once per academic year, which serves as the centerpiece of its employer relations strategy. These job fairs attract a wide range of employers from different sectors, enabling students to gain insight into available opportunities, submit applications, and interact directly with company representatives. In parallel with the job fairs, the university offers training programs throughout the year, which are tailored based on students' interests, academic disciplines, and emerging labor market trends. As the respondent described: *"Job fairs are held annually, while training programs are offered throughout the year based on students' needs and interests."* This dual model ensures that employer engagement is not confined to a single event but remains a year-round effort that adapts to student demand and industry developments.

At Khazar University, the Career Center adopts a particularly intensive and frequent engagement model. The director of the center reported that the university organizes approximately three employer-related events per week, which include a mix of seminars, training sessions, and recruitment events. These events are intentionally diversified to cover all academic disciplines, ensuring equitable access across the student body. The director further stated: *"We hold a career fair annually, but the number of seminars and meetings is countless. We aim to cover all academic disciplines and request companies to commit to hiring our students after such events."* This approach illustrates a results-oriented model of collaboration in which employer participation is tied not only to brand visibility but also to concrete recruitment commitments. The Career Center actively pursues mutually beneficial partnerships, encouraging companies to offer internships or job placements as a condition for participating in on-campus events. This strategy enhances accountability and maximizes the return on student engagement.

The employer engagement activities described across these institutions align closely with international best practices in career development services, which emphasize direct interaction with employers as a critical driver of graduate employability. As Cranmer (2006) explains, meaningful employer involvement—whether in the design of curricular content, the facilitation of training programs, or the supervision of internships—is instrumental in equipping students with the skills, insights, and professional attitudes needed to succeed in today's complex labor markets. Similarly, Wilton (2011) found that structured employer engagement through work placements, mentorship programs, and on-campus events significantly enhances students' career readiness, promotes industry alignment, and increases graduate employment outcomes.

In sum, the practices observed at ADA University, UNEC, and Khazar University exemplify a progressive institutional response to the growing emphasis on industry-academic collaboration. These universities have embedded employer engagement into the core functions of their Career Centers, utilizing a range of activities—from formal job fairs to interactive masterclasses—to support students in building their career competencies. By doing so, they contribute not only to individual student success but also to broader national efforts to align higher education outputs with labor market needs.

3.2.5. Graduate Monitoring and Tracking Tools

All respondents emphasized the critical importance of monitoring graduates' employment status as a core function of university Career Centers and as an essential measure of institutional effectiveness. The consistent theme across the interviews was that tracking alumni outcomes serves not only to inform institutional strategy but also to demonstrate accountability to stakeholders, strengthen employer partnerships, and enhance the responsiveness of educational programs to labor market dynamics. Each of the three universities studied—ADA University, Azerbaijan State University of Economics (UNEC), and Khazar University—has adopted mechanisms for graduate tracking, though with varying degrees of technological sophistication and operational scope.

Both ADA University and Khazar University have adopted similar foundational approaches, whereby graduate employment data is collected during key academic milestones—most notably at the point of diploma issuance—and subsequently stored in centralized databases.

This practice allows for the systematic gathering of employment-related data at a moment when students are transitioning from university to the workforce, thus maximizing the likelihood of accurate reporting. At both institutions, this process has been embedded into graduation workflows to ensure consistency and completeness of data.

At ADA University, this effort is significantly enhanced through the use of an advanced digital platform known as Career Link, which serves as a comprehensive alumni and career management system. According to the Career Center director, the platform provides a centralized repository for storing student and graduate CVs, job application histories, and employer feedback, while also enabling real-time reporting and analytics. As the respondent explained: *"We are the only university in Azerbaijan using this platform. It allows easy access to job opportunities and enables us to generate reports. Post-internship and post-fair feedback from companies is also collected."* This system exemplifies a data-driven model of employability services, in which feedback loops are actively utilized to improve both service delivery and employer satisfaction. The ability to collect structured feedback from partner organizations following events such as job fairs and internships enables ADA to adjust its programs based on market signals. According to the respondent, this approach has contributed to a graduate employment rate of 82%, positioning ADA among the leading institutions in the country in terms of post-graduate labor market integration.

UNEC, on the other hand, employs a more survey-based model, relying heavily on digital questionnaires and employer feedback mechanisms to assess the career trajectories of its alumni. These instruments are administered periodically and are designed to capture a wide range of data points, including job placement rates, industry sectors, graduate satisfaction, and employer evaluations. As the Career Center respondent noted: *"We collect data through surveys and questionnaires. Feedback from partner companies is analyzed alongside outcomes from career fairs and internship programs."* This dual-layered approach—combining graduate self-reporting with employer-sourced data—provides UNEC with a multifaceted understanding of graduate outcomes. It also enables the institution to measure the effectiveness of its career interventions, such as internship placements and skill development workshops, based on actual labor market results.

Khazar University employs a hybrid tracking strategy that combines informal digital communication channels with formal data collection efforts. The university utilizes platforms such as social media (e.g., WhatsApp groups and LinkedIn) to maintain ongoing communication with

its alumni, while also drawing on external data sources, such as information from the State Employment Agency. This combination of internally generated and externally sourced data enhances the comprehensiveness of graduate tracking efforts. The Career Center director highlighted that a dedicated staff member is tasked with overseeing this function: *"We have a staff member dedicated to data collection. Surveys are sent to alumni via shared links."* This approach enables the institution to maintain continuity in alumni relations while capturing key employment metrics. Although it lacks the centralized infrastructure of ADA's Career Link system, the strategy at Khazar still reflects an intentional commitment to long-term alumni engagement and labor market visibility.

Collectively, these institutional practices represent a blend of traditional, technology-assisted, and relationship-based monitoring mechanisms. While the tools and processes vary, all three universities demonstrate a shared recognition of the need for continuous graduate tracking to support institutional learning and performance assessment.

These practices are consistent with global models of graduate outcome tracking, which underscore the importance of structured data collection and feedback loops. In the United Kingdom, for instance, the "What Do Graduates Do?" survey, published by the Higher Education Careers Services Unit (HECSU), and the Key Information Set (KIS) developed by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), provide systematic, annually updated data on graduate employment outcomes, salaries, and further study. These tools are widely regarded as essential instruments for policy transparency, stakeholder accountability, and institutional benchmarking (HECSU, 2012; HEFCE, 2012). They also help ensure that prospective students, employers, and government bodies have access to reliable information about the efficacy of higher education institutions in preparing students for the workforce.

In line with these international benchmarks, the efforts undertaken by ADA, UNEC, and Khazar University reflect a growing trend in Azerbaijani higher education toward evidence-based decision-making in the area of graduate employability. Their approaches highlight the importance of combining quantitative data collection with qualitative employer insights, as well as the strategic use of technology and communication platforms to maintain up-to-date alumni records. As such, these institutions serve as valuable examples of how targeted tracking initiatives can contribute not only to improved career services but also to broader goals of educational quality assurance, labor market alignment, and stakeholder trust.

3.2.6. Successful Job Placement Strategies

Respondents in this study identified a range of strategic interventions and institutional practices that have proven effective in enhancing graduate employability. These strategies, which vary slightly across universities, collectively emphasize the importance of early exposure to the labor market, field-specific training, employer engagement, and comprehensive access to career-related information and services. The insights gathered from ADA University, UNEC, and Khazar University offer a nuanced view of how Azerbaijani higher education institutions are operationalizing their commitment to improving student career outcomes.

At ADA University, a particularly effective strategy revolves around the integration of a structured career development course into the formal undergraduate curriculum, specifically during the third year of study. This course is followed by a mandatory internship program, ensuring that students are provided with both theoretical career knowledge and practical, real-world experience prior to graduation. According to the Career Center respondent: *"Students start their internships in the third year, which ensures they accumulate practical experience before graduation."* This sequence allows students to apply the career planning and soft skills acquired during the course—such as resume writing, interview techniques, and emotional intelligence—within a professional context. The strategy underscores the importance of curriculum-based employability training, with internships serving as a bridge between academic learning and workplace practice. The structured timing of these internships also ensures that students are better positioned for competitive job markets immediately after graduation.

In the case of Azerbaijan State University of Economics (UNEC), the institutional strategy prioritizes the alignment of internship opportunities with students' academic disciplines, alongside the delivery of skills development training and early employer interaction. This targeted approach is designed to ensure that students are not only gaining general work experience but are also engaging with industry-specific environments that align with their long-term career goals. The Career Center respondent at UNEC emphasized: *"Field-appropriate internships and interview preparation training play a critical role in successful job placement."* This highlights the value of tailoring professional development opportunities to students' fields of study, as well as preparing them for the formal recruitment processes used by many employers. Additionally, UNEC's emphasis on early-stage employer engagement—through training sessions, seminars, and

recruitment fairs—enhances students' awareness of sectoral expectations and fosters proactive job-seeking behavior.

At Khazar University, a somewhat different but complementary strategy is adopted. Here, the emphasis is placed on accessibility to services, self-promotion, and information dissemination. According to the Career Center director: *"The most important aspects are ensuring accessibility, self-promotion, and the dissemination of relevant information."* This suggests a strategic focus on creating student-centered services that are visible, approachable, and widely communicated. The university works to ensure that students are continuously informed about available opportunities and resources via multiple communication channels, including digital platforms, in-person advising, and faculty networks. Moreover, alumni engagement is a key pillar of Khazar University's employability strategy. The institution organizes annual alumni meetings, collaborative networking events, and mentoring initiatives that allow current students to learn directly from graduates who have successfully entered the workforce. This intergenerational learning not only fosters a sense of community but also enhances students' understanding of career pathways and employer expectations.

These institutional practices are consistent with a robust body of international research that underscores the critical role of work-integrated learning, employer interaction, and personal development training in enhancing employability outcomes. For instance, Cranmer (2006) found that structured work placements, when integrated with the curriculum and supported by employer engagement in course design, significantly improved immediate labor market outcomes for graduates. Similarly, Gault, Redington, and Schlager (2000) demonstrated that undergraduate students who completed internships were more likely to experience long-term career success, including higher initial salary levels, faster job acquisition, and greater job satisfaction over time. These findings reinforce the idea that early and sustained exposure to professional environments during university studies provide students with a competitive edge in an increasingly demanding job market.

In the broader context of the United Kingdom and OECD countries, research further highlights the importance of embedding soft skills development—including communication, teamwork, adaptability, and problem-solving—within both curricular and co-curricular frameworks. According to CBI/EDI (2011) and Mason et al. (2009), universities that prioritize interactive employer engagement and create opportunities for students to develop transferable skills report

higher graduate employment rates and stronger employer satisfaction. These skills are increasingly viewed as essential for navigating complex work environments and adapting to evolving industry demands.

Furthermore, the work of Pegg et al. (2012) offers a comprehensive framework for enhancing employability through curriculum-embedded practices. Their findings suggest that institutions that integrate employability into course content, extracurricular programming, and personal development planning—including initiatives such as internships, alumni mentoring programs, and personal branding workshops—equip graduates with the tools necessary for sustained employment success. Such approaches are not only beneficial for immediate job placement but also foster lifelong career resilience, adaptability, and upward mobility.

In summary, the strategies identified by respondents at ADA University, UNEC, and Khazar University reflect a shared institutional awareness of the multifaceted nature of employability. While the mechanisms differ—ranging from curriculum-integrated internships and targeted training to enhanced accessibility and alumni engagement—each approach contributes to a broader culture of career readiness. By aligning their practices with international standards and research-backed principles, these universities exemplify how Azerbaijani higher education institutions are evolving to meet the dynamic needs of students and the labor market.

CONCLUSION

This thesis presents a comprehensive and contextually nuanced investigation into the role of university-based career centers in enhancing graduate employability within Azerbaijani higher education institutions. The research addresses a critical challenge facing the national education system—namely, the transition of graduates from academic environments into the labor market. In recent years, global educational priorities have shifted from the mere dissemination of theoretical knowledge toward the facilitation of students' professional development and integration into the workforce. Within this evolving paradigm, career centers are conceptualized as strategic intermediary structures that bridge the gap between higher education and labor market demands.

This issue is particularly salient within the Azerbaijani context. Each year, thousands of graduates enter the labor market, many of whom encounter difficulties in securing employment commensurate with their acquired skills and academic qualifications. Employing a qualitative methodology—comprising document analysis of accreditation reports from 15 universities and semi-structured interviews with the directors of three career centers—this research seeks to evaluate both the structural presence and the practical effectiveness of career services.

Findings reveal that although nearly all assessed Azerbaijani universities have established some form of career service or dedicated center—indicating a growing recognition of career support as an essential component of higher education—the operational quality and scope of these services vary markedly across institutions. Certain universities have adopted more structured and proactive models. These institutions integrate career preparation into their curricula through formal courses on career planning and soft skills, maintain active industry partnerships, regularly organize internships and job fairs, and implement feedback mechanisms to monitor graduate employment outcomes and satisfaction. Such institutions offer a wide range of services (including counseling, training, and employer networking events) and continuously refine these offerings based on outcome-based assessments.

In contrast, the majority of universities provide only basic or fragmented career services. Common deficiencies include inadequate staffing and funding for career centers, low student engagement (with many students unaware of the centers' existence), sporadic or superficial activities, and insufficient systems for tracking graduate outcomes. In several cases, career services

are embedded within unrelated administrative departments (e.g., public relations units), lacking both strategic direction and operational autonomy. The interviews conducted offer significant insights into effective practices, particularly in relation to industry collaboration (such as internships and employer engagement), alumni involvement (through mentorship and feedback mechanisms), and the curricular integration of career training. For instance, one university organizes large-scale career fairs in collaboration with various companies, while another has launched an online platform to facilitate connections between alumni and current students. Institutions with active follow-up mechanisms and sustained engagement exhibit the most favorable graduate employment outcomes.

A key contribution of this thesis lies in its critical examination of accreditation reports issued by the Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (TKTA). Although these documents offer a formal foundation for inter-institutional comparison, the lack of standardization in reporting on career services presents analytical challenges. Some reports provide detailed and evaluative insights, whereas others merely acknowledge the existence of a career center without substantive commentary on its functions or effectiveness. This inconsistency underscores the need for more structured, outcome-oriented evaluation criteria within the national quality assurance framework.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that while there are commendable examples of career center models aligned with international standards, such practices have not yet been widely adopted across Azerbaijani universities. Many institutions still require substantial reforms to effectively facilitate students' transitions into the workforce.

A principal strength of this research is its context-specific orientation. While numerous international studies have explored career services and student employability, few have undertaken such an in-depth analysis within the Azerbaijani higher education landscape. Another notable strength is the study's policy-relevant focus. The findings illuminate not only institutional-level shortcomings but also systemic gaps in the national educational policy infrastructure. The results suggest that both TKTA and the Ministry of Science and Education should establish clearer policy frameworks for the development of career centers, including enhanced financial support and rigorous monitoring mechanisms.

In conclusion, this master's thesis represents a model of applied academic research that successfully integrates theoretical frameworks with practical implications. From problem

identification through to actionable recommendations, the study is characterized by logical coherence and a well-structured analytical approach.

Limitations and Comparison Challenges

The interpretation of the results must be undertaken with due consideration of the limitations inherent in the data sources and analytical framework. The principal constraint lies in the lack of standardization across the institutional accreditation reports issued by the Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (TKTA) with regard to career services. While some reports provide detailed information concerning specific services, quantitative indicators (such as student participation rates and graduate employment statistics), and targeted initiatives, others are markedly more general. In the more comprehensive reports, evaluators explicitly identify the strengths and weaknesses of career centers, thereby facilitating a substantive assessment of their effectiveness.

Conversely, several reports offer only cursory descriptions, limited to acknowledging the existence of a career center and listing general categories of activities, without elaborating on their quality, scope, or outcomes. This inconsistency in the depth and clarity of reporting significantly impedes efforts to conduct systematic comparisons. For instance, when one institution's report is rich in data and evaluative detail, while another's is superficial and lacking empirical evidence, it becomes methodologically challenging to assess the respective career centers using equivalent standards of rigor.

Given that this research draws heavily on information reported in these accreditation documents, there is a risk that certain effective practices may not have been adequately captured or represented. Moreover, as the primary function of these reports is to verify institutional compliance, they often lack contextual nuance and analytical depth. Evaluators tend to prioritize the confirmation of formal criteria—such as the mere existence of a career center and the enumeration of activities—over a critical evaluation of service quality and impact.

Nevertheless, despite these limitations, the analysis yields meaningful insights grounded in official evaluations. The findings, while requiring cautious interpretation, contribute constructively to the understanding of career center practices within the Azerbaijani higher education context.

Practical Recommendations

Despite the identified limitations, this study offers several actionable recommendations for enhancing the effectiveness of university career centers. It is clear that institutions with underdeveloped career services can benefit significantly from emulating best practices observed in more successful models. Such practices may include the implementation of career development courses or seminars across all academic faculties, the reinforcement of partnerships with employers, the expansion of internship and cooperative education programs, and the establishment of robust alumni engagement systems, such as comprehensive alumni databases.

It is imperative that university leadership acknowledge the direct influence that career centers exert on graduate employability outcomes and, by extension, on the institution's overall reputation. Accordingly, sufficient human and financial resources must be allocated to career centers, and these units should be formally integrated into the core academic and strategic mission of the university.

From a practical standpoint, institutions may consider establishing annual participation targets for career center activities—such as the proportion of students receiving career counseling or engaging in internships—and should employ data-driven methods to monitor and evaluate outcomes. Furthermore, there is a pressing need for the development of more comprehensive systems to track graduates' career trajectories. The implementation of such measures would enable universities not only to fulfill accreditation requirements but also to make meaningful and sustained improvements in students' career readiness.

Policy Recommendations at the National Level

The findings of this study also yield significant implications for educational regulatory bodies in Azerbaijan—particularly the Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (TKTA) and the Ministry of Education. Foremost among these is the necessity of establishing a standardized framework for evaluating career services within the accreditation process. The adoption of more precise and uniform reporting requirements would allow universities to document critical dimensions of their career centers—such as resource allocation, service diversity, student engagement levels, and mechanisms for monitoring outcomes—in a more systematic and

comparable manner. This standardization would not only enhance the transparency and consistency of evaluations but also establish clearer institutional expectations.

For instance, TKTA could enhance its Criterion 3.10 by incorporating measurable indicators, such as the student-to-advisor ratio, the number of annual employer engagement events, and the existence of alumni feedback mechanisms. Simultaneously, monitoring and support mechanisms must be reinforced to ensure the effective implementation of accreditation recommendations. The Ministry of Education, in collaboration with TKTA, could introduce accountability measures to track institutional progress post-accreditation—such as periodic activity reporting and compliance reviews.

At a broader policy level, the development of a unified national platform for the collection and utilization of graduate employment data would represent a substantial advancement. Such a system would facilitate evidence-based policymaking and institutional benchmarking. Ultimately, these policy interventions should seek to elevate the quality of career services across all universities, promoting the establishment of professionalized career centers with dedicated personnel, adequate funding, and opportunities for inter-institutional knowledge sharing. Through such initiatives, career centers in Azerbaijani higher education institutions can assume a more prominent role in enhancing graduate employability and contributing to national labor market development objectives.

In addressing the core research question, the study concludes that the most effective career center strategies are those that are student-centered, data-informed, and rooted in external partnerships. Practices such as continuous individualized counseling, the integration of career modules into academic curricula, and experiential learning opportunities significantly enhance student engagement. Moreover, strategies based on collaboration with industry—such as joint internship programs and career fairs—prove particularly effective in aligning educational outcomes with labor market needs.

Within the Azerbaijani context, these findings suggest that although career centers are still in a formative stage, they possess considerable potential. With sustained policy-level support, universities can implement targeted initiatives that significantly improve graduate employability. The conclusions of this research offer a practical framework through which higher education institutions can contribute meaningfully to national economic development.

In conclusion, the enhancement of graduate employability must be understood as a collective responsibility involving government agencies, higher education institutions, the private sector, and students themselves. Career centers stand at the nexus of this collaboration. Through the effective implementation of the recommendations presented herein, and with a commitment to continuous improvement, Azerbaijani universities can better prepare graduates for success in the labor market—thus advancing both individual aspirations and broader national development goals.

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