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**EFFECTIVENESS INDICATORS OF UNIVERSITY CAREER CENTERS IN
AZERBAIJAN**

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**AZƏRBAYCANDA UNIVERSİTETLƏRİN KARYERA MƏRKƏZLƏRİNİN
SƏMƏRƏLİLİK GÖSTƏRİCİLƏRİ**

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**ПОКАЗАТЕЛИ ЭФФЕКТИВНОСТИ КАРЬЕРНЫХ ЦЕНТРОВ УНИВЕРСИТЕТОВ В
АЗЕРБАЙДЖАНЕ**

Abstract. This study evaluates the effectiveness of university career centers in Azerbaijan in enhancing student and graduate employability, based on a content analysis of 15 institutional accreditation reports. The analysis focuses on the national quality assurance criterion for “Career Services and Ongoing Contact with Alumni” (Criterion 3.10) to identify how well universities implement career support structures and activities. The findings reveal substantial variability across institutions: while a few universities demonstrate comprehensive career center strategies – including dedicated career counseling, integrated career-planning courses, robust internship programs, regular job fairs, and systematic alumni tracking – many others have only rudimentary or under-resourced services. Several institutions are in forging employer partnerships and using data on graduate outcomes to improve programs, but in most cases career services remain uneven and only partially aligned with best practices. This disparity in career center development correlates with inconsistent graduate employment outcomes nationally. The study’s conclusions underscore the need for standardized evaluation frameworks and stronger monitoring by education authorities

Keywords: *Career Services, Student Employability, University Accreditation, Azerbaijan Higher Education, Career Center Effectiveness, TKTA Reports, Student Career Development, Institutional Quality Assurance*

Xülasə. Bu tədqiqat Azərbaycanda universitetlərin karyera mərkəzlərinin tələbə və məzunların məşğulluq imkanlarını artırmaq qabiliyyətini qiymətləndirir. Təhlil 15 institusional akkreditasiya hesabatının məzmun analizinə əsaslanır. Araşdırma, universitetlərin “Karyera xidmətləri və məzunlarla davamlı əlaqə” (Kriteriya 3.10) üzrə milli keyfiyyət təminatı meyarını nə dərəcədə yerinə yetirdiyini müəyyənləşdirmək məqsədilə aparılıb. Nəticələr göstərir ki, ali təhsil müəssisələri arasında bu sahədə ciddi fərqlər mövcuddur: bəzi universitetlər peşəkar karyera məsləhət xidmətləri, integrasiya olunmuş karyera planlaşdırma dərsləri, güclü təcrübə proqramları, müntəzəm iş yarmarkaları və sistemli məzun izləmə mexanizmləri daxil olmaqla, hərtərəfli karyera dəstəyi strategiyalarına malikdirlər. Lakin digər bir çox universitetdə bu xidmətlər ya ilkin səviyyədədir, ya da lazımı resurslardan məhrumdur. Bir sıra ali məktəblər işəgötürənlərlə tərəfdaşlıq qurmaqda və məzun nəticələrinə dair məlumatlardan proqramların təkmilləşdirilməsi üçün istifadə etməkdə uğurlu olsa da, əksər hallarda karyera xidmətləri qeyri-bərabər şəkildə inkişaf edib və ən yaxşı təcrübələrlə tam uyğunluq təşkil etmir. Karyera mərkəzlərinin inkişaf səviyyəsindəki bu fərqlər ölkə üzrə məzunların məşğulluq nəticələrinin dəyişkənliyinə səbəb olur. Tədqiqatın nəticələri təhsil orqanları tərəfindən vahid qiymətləndirmə çərçivələrinin hazırlanması və monitorinqin gücləndirilməsinin vacibliyini vurğulayır.

Açar sözlər: *Karyera Xidmətləri, Tələbə Məşğulluğu, Universitet Akkreditasiyası, Azərbaycan Ali Təhsili, Karyera Mərkəzlərinin Effektivliyi, TKTA Hesabatları, Tələbə Karyera İnkişafı, İnstitusional Keyfiyyət Təminatı*

Аннотация. Данное исследование оценивает способность карьерных центров университетов Азербайджана повышать возможности трудоустройства студентов и выпускников. Анализ основан на содержательном изучении 15 институциональных отчетов об аккредитации. Цель исследования – определить, насколько вузы выполняют национальный критерий обеспечения качества «Карьерные услуги и постоянный контакт с выпускниками» (Критерий 3.10). Результаты показывают, что среди высших учебных заведений существуют значительные различия: некоторые университеты имеют комплексные стратегии поддержки карьеры, включая профессиональное карьерное консультирование, интегрированные курсы по планированию карьеры, развитые программы стажировок, регулярные ярмарки вакансий и систематическое отслеживание карьерного пути выпускников. Однако во многих других университетах данные услуги находятся на начальной стадии развития или недостаточно обеспечены ресурсами. Ряд вузов успешно устанавливают партнерские отношения с работодателями и используют данные о карьерных результатах выпускников для улучшения своих программ, однако в большинстве случаев карьерные услуги развиты неравномерно и лишь частично соответствуют лучшим практикам. Различия в уровне развития карьерных центров коррелируют с неоднородностью показателей трудоустройства выпускников по стране. Выводы исследования подчеркивают необходимость разработки единых рамок оценки и усиления мониторинга со стороны органов образования.

Ключевые слова: *Карьерные услуги, Трудоустройство студентов, Аккредитация университетов, Высшее образование Азербайджана, Эффективность карьерных центров, Отчеты ТКТА, Развитие карьеры студентов, Институциональное обеспечение качества*

Introduction

In recent years, graduate employment has become a critical issue in Azerbaijan due to the growing number of higher education graduates. This has placed pressure on universities and policymakers to strengthen employability outcomes. Globally, university career centers have become essential in bridging academic learning with labor market demands through career counseling, employer engagement, and skills training.

Research shows that students who utilize career center services are more likely to secure employment post-graduation (Van Derziel, 2022). In Azerbaijan, data from the State Employment Agency highlights employment dis-

parities across universities. Of graduates from 11 major universities (2018–2021), only 57% had official employment, while the rest were either unemployed (0.2%) or lacked formal job records, underlining the need for stronger career support.

This study evaluates the effectiveness of career centers at 15 Azerbaijani universities based on accreditation reports aligned with criteria set by the Ministry of Science and Education and TKTA. The research seeks to identify successful practices and gaps, focusing on how career initiatives impact graduate employability.

Significance

Practically, the findings offer Azerbaijani universities data-driven insights to improve

career services, optimize resource allocation, and better align education with labor market needs. Recommendations include strengthening university-employer partnerships, expanding internships, and enhancing career counseling.

Academically, this research fills a gap in the literature on employability services in developing countries. It contributes to national policy and provides international comparisons for career center models.

In conclusion, using accreditation criteria to assess career centers offers valuable insight into their effectiveness and guides strategies to boost graduate employment outcomes in Azerbaijan.

Literature review

In response to the growing need to identify and support students' career aspirations, universities globally have increasingly institutionalized career centers to facilitate student engagement with the labor market. These centers serve as vital intermediaries, enabling students to explore their career interests, acquire job-relevant skills, and learn how to navigate the professional world after graduation. In U.S. universities, career centers primarily focus on post-graduation employment and emphasize the practical aspects of students' educational experiences in alignment with their potential careers. In other countries—especially those that have undergone significant political and social transitions—career centers are still in their developmental stages, and as a result, the graduate services provided are less focused on concrete career development (K. Ziauddin Ahmed et al., 2017).

Career centers are institutions that provide job opportunities, internship programs, and skill development services to prepare students for professional life after graduation. Rather than having students search for jobs on their own, these centers are tasked with identifying appropriate job and internship opportunities for them (Popova-Hristova, 2018). With the increasing complexity of today's labor market, universities alone cannot guarantee employment through academic qualifications; skill development and career planning have become equally important. For example, the Careers Group at the University of London

observed a marked increase in career service utilization during the 1960s, reflecting the growing integration of employability into higher education (The Careers Group, University of London, n.d.).

Graduate employability is defined as the set of achievements, skills, understandings, and personal attributes that increase the likelihood of graduates securing employment and succeeding in their chosen careers (Yorke, 2006). Over the past decade, research in higher education has explored employability in 226 countries, particularly in the context of labor market changes and the massification of higher education. Tomlinson (2012), in examining the main dimensions of employability, states that it is now a central issue in policy discussions and that graduates' transitions into working life depend on a complex interplay of individual, institutional, and economic factors. From the perspective of labor market supply and demand, student employability can be categorized into four dimensions: understanding and awareness of the external environment, career development skills, general skills, and professional skills (Hongjie & Zhenjia, 2019).

Moreover, Advance HE (2019) emphasizes that employability should be embedded across all academic and institutional practices. Some universities now require internships or offer credit-bearing career development courses. For instance, ADA University mandates a "Career Development Skills and Strategies" course and internship experience for all undergraduate students, thereby integrating career services directly into the educational framework (ADA University. Academic Catalogue 2023–2024).

From a policy perspective, employability is increasingly regarded as an indicator of institutional quality. In the United Kingdom, the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) incorporates graduate employability into its evaluation criteria. Under the Bologna Process, universities are required to ensure that graduates possess market-relevant skills (Bologna Working Group, 2007). In Azerbaijan, this trend is echoed in national accreditation standards. TKTA includes career service functionality, regular career guidance, graduate tracking mechanisms, alumni feedback, and alumni

relations as core accreditation requirements, thus promoting both the presence and quality of career services.

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative document analysis approach to evaluate the effectiveness of career centers at Azerbaijani universities, drawing data from the accreditation reports of 15 universities. The primary focus is on determining the level of career services provided and identifying the key strategies in this area.

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design to systematically investigate how the criteria related to career centers are met in Azerbaijani higher education institutions. Document analysis is chosen as the primary method, as the accreditation reports of the Higher Education Quality Assurance Agency (TKTA) are available and carry an official character, serving as authoritative evaluations of the institutions' performance.

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 into consideration the institutional accreditation reports issued by the 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.

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. In addition to Criterion 3.10, **thematic coding** was applied to the remaining accreditation criteria. 228uta re228 method, information under each criterion was carefully read and coded based on recurring themes. This approach allowed for the classification and analysis of 228uta re228 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 228uta re228 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

Chapter 3 Findings & Discussion

This study investigates the impact of career centers on student employability based on the accreditation reports published by the Education Quality Assurance Agency (TKTA) of the Republic of Azerbaijan.

The main analytical framework of the study is Criterion 3.10 – “*Career Services and Ongoing Contact with Alumni*” from TKTA’s institutional accreditation standards. This criterion assesses the presence and effectiveness of career centers, the range of services offered, and the mechanisms for maintaining alumni relations across five sub-indicators. The findings related to the five criteria are as follows:

Criterion 1: Existence of Career Centers

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

Table 1. The presence of Career Centers in Azerbaijani Universities

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 functioning career centers are present at 12 out of the 15 universities examined (80 %), while in

the remaining 3 institutions (20 %), these services exist only partially.

The analysis reveals that in some universities, career centers are either poorly

structured or not established as independent entities at all. For example, at the Azerbaijan State Oil and Industry University (ASOIU) and Lankaran State University (LDU), career-related activities are not carried out within a clear structural framework but are instead managed under other departments, such as public relations, internship coordination, or academic affairs. This leads to fragmented operations and a lack of focused attention. In some cases, the number of staff at career centers is insufficient. At Western Caspian University (WCU) and Azerbaijan Medical University (ATU), having only one staff member significantly limits both the scale and continuity of the services provided. Furthermore, in some universities, students are unaware of the available services. For instance, a survey conducted at WCU found that 75% of students had never used the services of the career center. This raises concerns about the visibility and functionality of the center.

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

This study analyzed the organization and delivery of career counseling services across five key areas: accessibility of career centers, career-oriented courses, internship programs, job fairs, and professional development activities. Some universities, such as ADA, ATMU, and UNEC, have well-established career centers offering individualized counseling, internships, and seminars. Others lack dedicated structures or offer limited services.

Collaboration with employers is a common strategy. For instance, UNEC and Western Caspian University have signed numerous partnership agreements, and Baku Business University (BBU) and Sumgayit State University (SDU) maintain active ties with industry to support graduate employment.

Internship programs and job fairs are widely implemented. ADA makes internships mandatory, and UNEC organized 72 career events in one academic year. Institutions like ADA, BBU, BEU, ATMU, UNEC, and Khazar University regularly host or participate in job fairs, often attracting major employers.

Career-related training sessions and soft skills workshops are also held, with institutions like BBU, BEU, and Khazar University actively supporting student development. ADA stands out

by offering a mandatory “Career Development Skills and Strategies” course, integrating career preparation into the formal curriculum.

Differences in service quality are notable. Modern private institutions such as ADA, Khazar, and Western Caspian have more systematic and innovative approaches, while traditional universities like BSU are still developing in this area. The effectiveness of services often correlates with institutional capacity, staffing, and partnerships.

In conclusion, while some universities demonstrate strong, integrated career support systems, others still offer fragmented and underdeveloped services, highlighting the need for more consistent and structured approaches across the sector.

Criterion 3: The status of mechanisms for monitoring graduates’ participation in the labor market

This section examines how universities monitor graduates’ integration into the labor market, based on accreditation reports. Findings show significant variation: some universities have systematic mechanisms, while others rely on informal or underdeveloped methods.

ADA University conducts regular surveys 6 months to 3 years post-graduation, assessing both employment rates and job relevance. UNEC uses its “Virtual Labor Exchange” and data from the Ministry of Labor to track outcomes, including separate analysis for master’s students. Khazar University also conducts annual graduate surveys, though recommendations suggest expanding the analysis.

In contrast, institutions like ATMU, LDU, AzTU, and ADNSU mainly rely on informal channels (e.g., social media or WhatsApp) with limited data analysis or systematic tracking. The differences largely stem from disparities in technological infrastructure and institutional prioritization. Universities with advanced digital systems (e.g., ADA, UNEC) demonstrate more professional approaches, while others treat monitoring as a formal requirement rather than a strategic tool.

Importantly, the usefulness of collected data depends on how it’s analyzed and applied. When used effectively, graduate employment data can inform program improvements and enhance career services.

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

Analyses indicate that the approaches and methods used to measure graduates' competencies acquired through educational programs and their satisfaction with the quality of these programs vary significantly across universities. ADA University demonstrates relatively advanced practices in this area. The university assesses graduates' employment status—whether in their field of study or another sector—through surveys and uses the findings to inform and integrate changes into academic programs. Considering the rapidly evolving demands of the labor market, faculties maintain continuous dialogue with employers and implement flexible modifications to curriculum accordingly. At UNEC, certain initiatives have also been undertaken in this direction. Courses such as “Career Planning,” “Soft Skills,” and “Hard Skills” are taught with the participation of labor market representatives. Online surveys are conducted to measure graduates' satisfaction; however, these surveys are noted to lack the desired objectivity and effectiveness. While data collection channels exist, the analysis of survey results and their integration into academic programs are not yet conducted systematically. At Khazar University, although regular online surveys are carried out, difficulties arise in engaging graduates who are either serving in the military or living abroad. A dedicated unit functions to assess graduate satisfaction, and the results are analyzed. However, there is limited information regarding the direct impact of these findings on the teaching and learning process. On the other hand, in universities such as Azerbaijan Tourism and Management University (ATMU), Western Caspian University, Baku Business University (BBU), and Azerbaijan Technical University (AzTU), these activities tend to be more formal in nature. Surveys are either rarely conducted or not systematically implemented. In some cases where surveys are conducted, the mechanisms for analyzing results and implementing changes in academic programs based on these findings are weak. For instance, at ATMU, only two or three surveys have been conducted in the past six years, and the results

have not been adequately analyzed. Similarly, at AzTU and Azerbaijan State Oil and Industry University (ADNSU), there is no available information regarding feedback collection from graduates or evidence-based decision-making based on such data.

Criterion 5: The Existence of Sustainable Alumni Engagement Systems

Analysis shows that alumni engagement varies widely across universities. While some institutions have developed structured strategies, others rely mainly on informal methods like social media and personal networks.

UNEC has taken significant steps by establishing the Alumni Association and the “Extern” center, using the EDUMAN platform to manage alumni data and collaboration. Its “Endless Fairs” virtual job fair also supports graduate employment. ADA University maintains long-term alumni contact through a formal Alumni Association, online forums, and regular surveys and events, including outreach to international graduates.

Khazar University integrates alumni engagement early by involving students in Career Center activities from their first year. It provides ongoing support such as CV writing, interview prep, and internship opportunities, while maintaining active communication through events and social media.

Conversely, universities like ADNSU, ATU, LDU, and BSU primarily rely on informal communication channels, with limited structural or technological support. This lack of infrastructure limits the ability to sustain meaningful alumni relationships and track graduate outcomes systematically.

Conclusion and Recommendations

An analysis of accreditation reports from 15 Azerbaijani universities (by TKTA) shows that while career centers are recognized as essential, their implementation varies significantly. Some universities, like ADA and UNEC, operate well-structured, proactive centers with integrated career courses, industry partnerships, internship programs, and graduate tracking systems. These institutions use data to continually improve services. In contrast, others offer only basic, fragmented services with limited staffing, resources, and student engagement—sometimes lacking dedicated centers entirely.

Limitations and Cross-Case Compatibility: The analysis is limited by inconsistencies in the accreditation reports. Some provide rich, evaluative data, while others are vague or incomplete, making cross-institutional comparison difficult. In some cases, effective practices may be underreported. Moreover, as these reports are designed for accountability, they emphasize compliance over impact.

Implications and Recommendations for Practice: Underperforming universities can learn from better-performing peers by adopting structured strategies such as mandatory career development courses, stronger employer partnerships, and alumni tracking systems. Leadership must treat career centers as strategic assets and allocate proper resources. Universities should set measurable goals (e.g., internship placements) and use data to assess and improve outcomes. More robust tracking of graduate career paths is also essential.

Future Research: Future studies should move beyond document analysis to include case studies, interviews, and direct observation of career center operations. This would provide deeper insights into effective practices,

institutional strategies, and long-term outcomes. Longitudinal data on graduate employment would also help quantify impact.

Policy Implications for National Bodies: For national bodies like TKTA and the Ministry of Education, standardizing the format and criteria for evaluating career services in accreditation is crucial. Clearer guidelines and required indicators (e.g., counselor-student ratio, number of employer events) would improve report consistency and accountability. A centralized graduate tracking system should also be developed. Minimum standards—such as requiring every university to maintain a fully functioning career center—should be set, supported by training, funding, and knowledge-sharing across institutions. Benchmarking international practices can help align Azerbaijan's universities with global employability standards.

The relevance, scientific novelty, and practical significance of this article lie in its systematic analysis—based on national accreditation criteria—of the current state of career services in Azerbaijani higher education institutions, offering evidence-based recommendations to enhance graduate employability and inform education policy development.

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