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Informationszentrum (IZ) Bildung
E-Mail: pedocs@dipf.de
Internet: www.pedocs.de

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Knowledge Monopoly and Policy Change: EU-Backed VET Reforms in Azerbaijan

Majid Bayramli*

*ADA University, School of Education, Ahmadbey Aghaoghlu str. 61, Baku,
AZ1008, Azerbaijan*

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Abstract

Context: Azerbaijan's vocational education and training (VET) system has undergone a significant reform, culminating in the enactment of the Law on Vocational Education in 2018. Despite not being a member of the European Union (EU) and lacking formal political, economic, or cultural alignment with the union, Azerbaijani policymakers adopted EU-backed policy solutions in designing the country's new VET system. This raises important questions about the motivations behind this policy shift and the factors that shaped it, especially given the limited formal influence of the EU in non-member states.

Approach: This study applies a Cultural Political Economy (CPE) framework to examine the adoption of EU policy ideas in Azerbaijan's VET reforms. The research focuses on the policy transfer process, tracing how EU-driven concepts were introduced, negotiated, and institutionalized within Azerbaijan's education system. It explores the role of international organizations, domestic political actors, and political agenda in shaping policy decisions. The analysis draws on a qualitative case study approach, using document review and interviews with key national stakeholders to explore how decisions were shaped. It pays close attention to the interplay of ideational and material factors that influenced the design and content of the 2018 law.

Findings: The findings show that, even in differing political and economic contexts, education sectors can independently shape policy directions. In the case of Azerbaijan, policymakers turned to EU VET models not as a result of direct pressure, but as a response to pressing

*Corresponding author: mbayramli@gmail.com



domestic challenges. This engagement was not a simple replication of EU practices, but a selective and negotiated process shaped by the interaction between international frameworks and national institutional conditions. A key factor in this process was the EU's role as a provider of technical expertise and policy knowledge. Although the EU did not impose specific reforms, its control over policy-relevant knowledge and technical expertise structured the reform space, guiding Azerbaijani decision-makers toward particular options while limiting the visibility of alternatives.

Conclusion: This study contributes to the understanding of policy transfer in non-EU contexts, emphasizing the role of external knowledge provision in shaping national reforms beyond direct political or economic leverage. The findings underscore the subtle but powerful ways international organizations influence education policy, even in the absence of formal conditionality agreements.

Keywords: Vocational Education and Training, VET, Policy Transfer, Europeanisation, Knowledge Governance, VET Reform

1 Introduction

In recent decades, the importance of vocational education and training (VET) has surged due to globalisation, economic competition, and demand for skilled workforce. Consequently, numerous countries have embarked on reforms to restructure their VET systems, aiming to function as platforms for skill formation to meet the labour market's needs.

International organizations have played a pivotal role in shaping the paradigm and structural framework of VET systems within the contemporary political-economic landscape. Furthermore, they have increasingly influenced nations to adapt their education and VET systems in alignment with "international best practices" with the objective of confronting structural challenges such as unemployment, social inequality, poverty, and constrained social mobility (Melnyk, 2023). Within this realm "policy transfer" has become widespread, with countries adopting policy mechanisms and tools that have proven successful elsewhere and have been endorsed by international organizations to shape their VET systems (Gilardi & Wasserfallen, 2019).

Post-Soviet countries in the European Union (EU) neighbourhood and Central Asia face unique challenges in establishing VET systems that both align with their economic needs and accommodate distinct political and social contexts. Azerbaijan, a former Soviet state, serves as a compelling case for examining these dynamics. Supported by EU initiatives, Azerbaijan's VET reform culminated in the 2018 Law on Vocational Education, with the aim of transitioning from a centrally regulated system to a more adaptable, market-oriented model (European Training Foundation, 2020). This study examines Azerbaijan's VET reform

process, focusing on how EU policy ideas were transferred and adapted to fit the national context.

This study examines Azerbaijan's experience of policy transfer and adoption in VET reform, focusing on the influence of EU-supported VET models. To understand the extent of the EU's impact, the research poses the central question: *Why did Azerbaijani policy actors choose to adopt EU VET models in structuring their VET system?* Addressing this question sheds light on the motivations behind policy adoption and the adaptation process within Azerbaijan's unique socio-political landscape.

Existing research on policy transfer in VET, particularly in post-Soviet contexts, remains limited. Despite the EU's substantial influence on Azerbaijan's VET reforms, studies examining the transition from Soviet models to EU-influenced systems are scarce (Serban, 2011; Silova & Kazimzade, 2010; Tutlys et al., 2022). This gap hinders comprehensive understanding of EU policy influence in the region, raising questions about why policymakers choose EU models and how these are reinterpreted locally (Robertson & Dale, 2008; Verger et al., 2018). This study addresses this gap by exploring the intersection of VET reform, economic development, international influence, and the specific challenges faced by post-Soviet states in transforming VET systems.

1.1 Shaping and Transfer of VET Policies in the European Union

Before examining the VET reform, it is essential to understand the key elements of the EU's VET framework, which non-member neighbouring countries find attractive. The EU's approach to VET has been shaped by political, economic, and social imperatives, evolving significantly as globalisation intensified interdependence among economies, societies, and education systems (Brown et al., 2008). Recognising the need for a coordinated approach to VET, the Lisbon Strategy of 2000 established a framework for collaborative education and training policies across the EU, reducing barriers that confined VET within national borders (Beukel, 2001; Hingel, 2001).

EU VET policies aim to address evolving labour market needs by promoting harmonisation, lifelong learning, and inclusivity, aligning with the bloc's economic goals (Dale, 2005). This commitment to lifelong learning reflects the EU's goal to foster employability and social cohesion, envisioning VET as an adaptable, market-oriented approach to education (Field, 2006; Holford & Milana, 2023). One prominent feature of the EU's VET strategy is the emphasis on work-based learning and public-private partnerships, which the EU promotes as critical to reducing youth unemployment and fostering a skilled workforce responsive to global demands (Tchibozo, 2022).

The process of Europeanisation illustrates how domestic policies evolve through involvement in EU decision-making processes, as seen with frameworks like the European

Qualifications Framework (EQF) under the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) (Elken, 2015; Sorensen & Eeva, 2024). For post-Soviet and Eastern European countries, Europeanisation has introduced both convergence and selective adoption of EU norms, influenced by each country's unique socio-political and economic factors (Korosteleva et al., 2013). The OMC's use of soft law exemplifies this, allowing countries to reform without the obligations of formal EU membership.

The EU's preferred VET model, especially for Eastern European states, was a variant of the German dual system, which combines classroom education with industry-led, hands-on training (Martínez-Izquierdo & Torres Sánchez, 2022). This model is seen as particularly suitable for transitioning economies like Azerbaijan, given its potential to bridge skills gaps while fostering public-private collaboration (Edwards et al., 2021; Verger et al., 2018; West, 2013). The dual system's promise to meet employer and learner needs makes it an attractive option for post-Soviet states aiming to modernise their VET sectors and align with EU standards.

1.2 Analytical and Conceptual Framework

In analysing the reform process, this study utilises the concept of policy transfer, which involves the movement of knowledge, ideas, and practices from one context to another, often facilitated by international organisations. According to Dolowitz and Marsh (2000) policy transfer occurs through various mechanisms, including voluntary borrowing, coercion, learning, and diffusion. Dolowitz and Marsh further categorise policy transfer into direct forms, such as coercion and voluntary borrowing, and indirect forms, such as diffusion and emulation. As Simmons et al. (2007) highlight, diffusion and emulation often involve policymakers adopting policies that have gained international legitimacy.

In the context of EU VET policy, the concept of voluntary policy transfer has dominated discussions. This has led to an overemphasis on governance through soft law, while the potential for coercive transfer by supranational EU institutions (Bulmer & Padgett, 2005) is often overlooked. Tutlys et al. observe that European reform adoption by member states is often regarded as a voluntary policy transfer. However, this perspective overlooks that many policy transfers are built upon prior national or regional reforms, frequently shaped by Anglosphere models and motivated by financial incentives or the potential risk of public criticism and reputational pressures (Tutlys et al., 2022).

The motivations for policy transfer also align with Gilardi and Wasserfallen's (2019) discussion on how economic incentives, political pressures, and the perceived successes of external models influence decision-making. The transfer of VET policies is usually driven by a combination of factors, including the need to modernise its workforce and respond to local economic challenges, such as skills shortages and unemployment. However, as

Steiner-Khamsi (2014) notes, the reception and translation of international policies is mostly mediated by local contexts, wherein local actors incorporate global ideas but adapt them to fit the specific socio-economic and political realities of the country.

From this perspective, the existing literature on VET policymaking and policy transfer extends beyond conventional education-focused research and adopts a multidisciplinary perspective, enabling a detailed examination of complex social and institutional dynamics influenced by socioeconomic and cultural context (Verger & Fontdevila, 2023). On the one hand, neo-institutionalist scholars, drawing from the World Culture Theory, claim that policymakers at the national level are significantly influenced by international entities such as the World Bank or the EU when developing policy decisions (Ramirez et al., 2016). They argue that these policymakers adopt and implement policies advocated by these entities to bolster their legitimacy on the global stage. In essence, these researchers suggest that national policymaking is increasingly shaped by the imperative to adhere to global norms and standards. This is because aligning with these international benchmarks is perceived as enhancing a nation's standing and credibility on the global platform.

On the other hand, extensive research on the impact of globalisation on education policies indicates that economic issues, rather than culture, are the most critical considerations in policy transfer. The concept of the Globally Structured Agenda for Education (GSAE) implies that the international political economy, which drives globalisation, also influences social policy in nation-states (Dale, 2000). Supporters of this concept closely examine the changing intricacies of the global capitalist economy and evaluate its impact on educational systems, including at the level of national implementation (Dale, 2000; Verger et al., 2018).

Conversely, some scholars challenge these concepts by claiming that domestic factors and local issues primarily shape national policy choices. They assert that the influence of global institutions like the World Bank or the EU is either overstated or fluctuates based on the particular socio-political and economic circumstances of individual countries (Ademmer & Börzel, 2013; Börzel, 2015; Börzel & Pamuk, 2012; Börzel & Risse, 2012). Overall, the majority of transfer studies, whether through explicit theoretical assertions or implicit assumptions embedded within their empirical frameworks, indicate that policymakers adopt external policies either through a rational learning process or in reaction to economic incentives propelled by competition or coercion (Gilardi & Wasserfallen, 2019).

However, it is also recognized that policy learning is greatly influenced by politics, a concept explicitly addressed in policy transfer as delineated by Rose (Rose, 1991, 1993). Consequently, policymakers may harbour significant biases in favour of or against policies that align with or contradict their ideologies. Such biases can lead them to be resistant to learning from successful examples and more inclined to heed cues from fellow party members rather than governments led by opposing parties (Butler et al., 2017). Policymakers not only learn from the direct outcomes of policies but also from their political ramifications, particularly those

with electoral implications (Gilardi, 2010). The potential policy measure is filtered through ideological lenses that shape its interpretation. Consequently, and somewhat paradoxically, policies that prove ineffective may still be widely disseminated. This is often because policy-makers are as preoccupied with the political consequences of their decisions as they are with the practical efficacy of the policies themselves (Shipan & Volden, 2021).

Thus, when global policy concepts are transferred, they undergo continual reinterpretation and modification by various political actors operating at different levels, including national and local, per their respective symbolic frameworks and institutional arrangements (Verger, 2014). Moreover, any explanation of action, such as decision-making need to be objectively assessed and causally explained, while human interpretations must be subjectively understood and hermeneutically grasped (Archer & Tritter, 2000). In essence, studying policy transfer inherently involves a hermeneutic aspect, implying that agents attribute meaning to certain concepts, while institutional design in each country serves as an objective element within which these agents perform their roles.

2 Method

Since policy development and transfer necessitate unpacking of meaning-construction, social dynamics, and power structures this study adopts a qualitative research methodology (Sum & Jessop, 2013). Notably, scholars like Jessop (2010), Robertson and Dale (2015), and Verger (2016), working in policy transfer research predominantly employ qualitative data (Verger, 2016). Consistent with this emphasis, the study utilized qualitative data to interpret the intricacies of policy adoption, adaptation, and resistance during the policy change process (Beach & Pedersen, 2019; Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2013). The analysis encompasses both the historical context and the institutional decision-making processes that shape policy change. Additionally, it illuminates the political, economic, and cultural motivations behind the adoption of various VET pathways (Dobbins & Busemeyer, 2015). Thus to unpack the complex nature of policy adoption, this study employed the Cultural Political Economy (CPE) framework developed by Verger (2016) and Reflexive thematic analysis developed by Braun and Clarke (2021). This framework, bolstered by existing research (Zancajo, 2019), facilitated understanding of the policy change process. A core element of this approach is dissecting the policy change process through the lens of cultural, political, and economic factors during the analytical stages of variation, selection, and retention.

CPE method informed this study's identification of drivers and factors at each VET policy adoption stage and aims to answer to research question about explaining the motivations of decision makers to adopt EU VET models. Hence in this study, these factors are further categorised by their nature: External/internal, material/ideational (Verger et al., 2016). External influences included economic incentives, international mandates, or soft power. Internal

factors included government narratives, historical legacies, political dynamics, and economic needs that shaped decisions. Likewise, material drivers were economic benefits, infrastructure challenges, and geopolitical strategies and ideational drivers were cultural aspirations, historical narratives, and national identity.

The investigation commenced with the variation phase, where the focus resided on identifying the spectrum of influences and policy options available at the inception of the policy formulation process. This phase methodically catalogued the diverse sources of influence, encompassing EU policies, recommendations, and established practices, to understand the entire range of options considered by national policymakers. Subsequently, the selection and retention phases delved into the details of the mechanisms employed in a variety of specific policies. Here, the emphasis shifted towards clarifying the criteria, discussions, and negotiations that culminated in the prioritization of certain influences over others (Jessop, 2010; Verger, 2016). This phase attempted to illuminate the extent of the EU's influence by examining the processes through which particular EU-inspired VET policies were selected for adoption.

2.1 Research Strategy and Approach

This study investigated the policy change process surrounding the adoption of the Law on Vocational Education and Training. It focused on the policy adoption phase, which concluded with the law's enactment in 2018. Subsequent implementation stages were beyond the scope of this research but offer potential avenues for future exploration. To gain a nuanced understanding of this complex phenomenon as policy transfer, this research adopted a case study approach, prioritizing context over isolated variables (Yin, 2014). Unlike traditional comparative methods, this study employed a process-tracing approach. Here, the focus wasn't on establishing causal relationships, but rather on exploring the factors that drove policy change within the case study (Beach & Pedersen, 2016; Bennett & Checkel, 2015; Mahoney, 2000, 2004; Zaks, 2020).

While process tracing excels at dissecting causal processes and sequences of events, ultimately revealing the mechanisms behind observable outcomes (Beach, 2016; Beach & Pedersen, 2016; Beach & Pedersen, 2019), its application in qualitative research remains a topic of debate. The core of the debate lies in whether process tracing should establish clear causal chains or simply trace events to their roots, identifying influential factors (Zaks, 2020). This study adopts the latter perspective. Here, the focus was not on definitive causation, but on uncovering the "best explanation" for the case through weaving together theoretical insights with empirical observations (Day & Kincaid, 1994; Timmermans & Tavory, 2012).

2.2 Data Collection

The data collection for this study was conducted as part of a doctoral research project at the University of Glasgow. This research utilized a mix of primary and secondary data sources. To understand the evolution of VET policy, an examination of official documents was conducted. These documents served as historical archives, offering insights into past policy proposals, surrounding debates, and how the framing of VET reforms had changed over time (Stone, 2012).

The data collection for this study relied heavily on purposive sampling of policy documents to capture the key developments in Azerbaijan's VET reforms. The purposive sampling approach allowed the study to focus on documents that not only covered the official narrative but also revealed the deeper political, economic, and social dynamics that shaped policy decisions. These documents provided textual data that illuminated the ideational and material factors driving policy change, including the power relations, negotiations, and debates surrounding the VET reforms. Documents were selected based on their direct relevance to the policy process, ensuring that the sources used provided a comprehensive view of the reform trajectory. Following Flick's (2018) criteria of authenticity, credibility, representativeness, and meaning, the document selection process prioritised primary documents, including legislative acts, government reports, and official transcripts. This study used publicly accessible documents as the main data source, supplemented by a limited number of internal documents obtained through interviews with key participants involved in the VET reforms.

Notably, the Law on Vocational Education itself was a central focus of this analysis. This resulted in a diverse range of documents being examined, including government reports that shed light on the challenges the VET system faced and the rationale behind the reform (Pal, 2009). Parliamentary transcripts provided valuable insights into the public face of the debate, revealing how differing political viewpoints influenced the final shape of the policy (Howlett & Cashore, 2009). Official EU documents were critically examined to assess the institutional priorities of the EU towards both Azerbaijan and for VET sector, considering potential influences, alignments, or clashes with Azerbaijan's approach (Dolowitz & Marsh, 2000; Evans, 2009). Finally, press articles offered a window into how VET reforms were communicated to the public, potentially shaping their reception and future implementation (Stone, 2012). Initially, 32 documents, reports, and 10 press articles were collected based on these predetermined criteria which provided valuable details on key events, dates, outcomes, and the actors involved in the VET policy reform process. Following a comprehensive review, a subset of 17 documents was chosen for in-depth analysis. While some reports included quantitative data, the analysis primarily focused on understanding the context on certain decisions rather than conducting comprehensive quantitative analysis.

This method was complemented by triangulation through cross-referencing the document analysis with interview data, providing additional depth and ensuring the reliability of the findings. While document analysis is a valuable tool, the study acknowledged its limitations, such as the potential biases within official documents, and compensated by incorporating diverse sources and perspectives to create a more robust and nuanced understanding of the VET reform process. Therefore, in addition to document analysis, this study employed semi-structured interviews for their adaptability in uncovering deeper meaning and exploring participants' perspectives (Cohen et al., 2018). A purposive sampling strategy was utilized, selecting participants actively involved in shaping Azerbaijan's VET system reforms (Cohen et al., 2018). Data collection spanned six months (June-December 2022), targeting 30 interviewees but only 24 agreed to participate in the study.

Semi-structured interviews were chosen for their flexibility, allowing for the exploration of key themes while providing the adaptability to probe deeper into unexpected issues as they arose during the conversations (Cohen et al., 2018). This approach enabled the researcher to guide the interview with a predefined set of themes, ensuring alignment with the study's research objectives, while also allowing participants the freedom to elaborate on topics that were most relevant to their experience (Galletta & Cross, 2013).

The interviews were conducted with key stakeholders, including high-level officials from the Ministry of Education, members of the State Agency for Vocational Education, and international experts involved in Azerbaijan's VET reforms. These individuals were selected through a purposive sampling strategy, which targeted those directly involved in the decision-making, consultation, and implementation of VET policies, as well as those impacted by the reforms (Cohen et al., 2018). The goal was to ensure a diverse set of perspectives, ranging from policymakers and experts to those who opposed certain aspects of the reform.

Each interview was guided by a set of open-ended questions, organised into thematic blocks that were informed by the initial document analysis and the Cultural Political Economy framework. The interviews were designed to explore topics such as the drivers of the VET reforms, the roles of key actors, and the challenges encountered during the reform process. Ultimately, 24 interviews with high-ranking officials, experts, and key stakeholders yielded valuable insights. Face-to-face conversations, with occasional online Zoom sessions, ensured ethical data collection following the University of Glasgow's Social Sciences College Research Ethics Committee for Non-Clinical Research involving Human Participants.

2.3 Data Analysis

In this study, a hybrid deductive-inductive approach was applied to data analysis, allowing for flexibility in testing pre-existing frameworks and theories while also remaining open to new insights emerging from the data. Initially, an inductive approach was used to identify

patterns and themes directly from the data, especially in the early stages of document analysis. As these themes emerged, a deductive approach followed, using a pre-defined coding template based on the Cultural Political Economy framework to organise and test the data against established analytical concepts.

A two-stage approach was adopted for document analysis. The first stage involved an inductive thematic analysis to extract initial themes and identify any gaps in addressing the research question. This thematic analysis informed the development of interview questions, which subsequently guided the data collection phase. Before embarking on the data analysis, all interviews were transcribed that facilitated revisiting and considering non-verbal communication observed during the interviews. In total, the analysis encompassed 17 policy documents and 24 interview transcripts, providing a foundation for the study's findings.

In furtherance of the analysis, each document and interview transcript were subjected to independent coding using NVivo software. To ensure a systematic approach to identifying data pertinent to policy change, a pre-defined coding template was employed. This template comprised three core themes: Variation, selection, and retention. This structured analysis facilitated a focused examination of each interview and selected document, guaranteeing the precise identification and subsequent organization of text segments that demonstrably aligned with the pre-established thematic focus. By functioning as a methodological lens, this thematic investigation played a pivotal role in shaping the analytical approach by framing the very questions posed to the data itself (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

This study adopted Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) for examining document and interview data. The comprehensive six-step methodology developed by Braun and Clarke guided the analysis (2021; 2006). RTA's strength lies in its flexibility for open-ended engagement with the data. This allows themes to emerge organically, reflecting both the concrete evidence and the subjective experiences of participants (Hesse-Biber, 2017). The analysis employed an open-ended, iterative, and inductive-deductive framework to explore the meanings and influences shaping the reform process, ultimately revealing how these events and actions culminated in the final policy (Maxwell, 2013).

The research adopted a reflexive approach, acknowledging the author's background and its potential impact on the study. This involved critically examining how the researcher's experiences, pre-existing knowledge, and social position influenced the research process and the interpretation of qualitative data. This reflexivity was particularly important given the author's direct involvement in the policy change process between 2015 and 2020. Having been part of the reform team and participating in all three phases (variation, selection, and retention) provided the research with a unique insider's perspective on the reform journey. It is acknowledged that the researcher's involvement may have shaped data interpretation; therefore, Reflexive Thematic Analysis was applied to critically examine potential biases and strengthen transparency and credibility (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This process yielded 15

core themes, each illuminating a facet of the policy change phases that are elaborated in the findings section.

The examination of themes followed an approach of thick description, as advocated by (Braun, 2021) for use within RTA. Although initially developed within ethnography, the concept of thick description has become more widely utilised for analysis presented in a detailed, interpretive narrative style that is richly contextualised (Ponterotto, 2015). To complement RTA, this study incorporated Discourse Analysis (DA) following the methodology outlined by Rogers et al. (2016). This decision stemmed from work of Gareth Terry et al. (2017) who emphasize the synergy between thematic development and the in-depth examination of language and discourse. By integrating DA, the analysis delved deeper into patterns and meaning within the data (Terry et al., 2017). Since the study of policy transfer inherently includes a hermeneutic dimension, discourse analysis enables the deeper unpacking of meaning in both policy documents and interview transcripts. This allowed for a more nuanced exploration of how language is used to achieve specific goals within the data set. However, it is necessary to recognise that the discourse analysis used in this study was not as thorough as Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which extensively examines the language structures of the discourse. This study primarily used discourse analysis to uncover themes for data analysis, examine the rationales behind proposed policy measures, and comprehend the mechanisms of rejection and retention in the policy change process. Discourse analysis was applied to identify how political, socio-cultural, and economic factors were communicated and justified through discourse. While the thematic analysis helped identify key themes, DA provided an additional layer of analysis by examining how power dynamics and ideologies were embedded within the discourse. This approach revealed the ways in which policymakers, international organisations, and other actors framed and legitimised policy decisions, enabling a deeper understanding of the narratives that drove or hindered the reforms. So, the added value of DA lies in its capacity to uncover the broader meaning-making processes that shaped the policy outcomes, aligning with Jessop's (2010) work on cultural political economy.

Therefore, assuring a robust framework this study utilised research methodologies that are in line with Yin's (2009) suggestions for case studies to address construct validity, internal validity, external validity, and reliability. In this study, construct validity was established by employing many sources of evidence, such as interviews and documents, which facilitated the process of data triangulation. To maintain internal validity, pattern-matching and explanation-building approaches were employed to produce a coherent chain of evidence. The issue of external validity was resolved by clearly identifying the conceptual framework and guaranteeing that the findings may be applied to similar contexts. Reliability was ensured by creating a comprehensive case study process and building an analytical framework, which enabled the study to be replicated.

3 Findings

Based on the data analysis, fifteen crucial factors were identified as influencing policymakers' choices to adopt specific EU-supported approaches in reforming Azerbaijan's VET system. These factors, outlined in Table 1, stemmed from the primary themes uncovered during analysis. Each theme aligns with a global-local, ideational, or material dimension, impacting economic, political, or cultural contexts. This investigation was organised around the CPE framework stages—variation, selection, and retention—paralleling issue identification, solution selection, and policy integration.

Table 1: Factors Influencing Policy Change (own compilation)

<i>Influence Type</i>	<i>Variation</i>	<i>Selection</i>	<i>Retention</i>
<i>Ideational (Global)</i>	Problematization of Human Capital Issue	International best practice	Soviet past and Europeanisation
<i>Ideational (Local)</i>	Prevailing negative perceptions of the VET system	- Human capital paradigm	- Governance culture - Low expectations from society
<i>Material (Global)</i>	- World Bank reforms - Migrant workers	- Qualifications framework - Cost-sharing mechanism	
<i>Material (Local)</i>	- Skills shortage - Demographic change	Role of institutions	The impact of policy champion

3.1 Reform Triggers

The data analysis reveals that the VET reform in Azerbaijan was driven by a convergence of internal economic pressures and external recommendations. A severe economic downturn in 2015, following a significant drop in oil revenues, served as the primary catalyst for reform. According to the Strategic roadmap for VET document:

Starting from 2014, against the background of the sharp drop in oil prices and the economic crisis in trading partner countries, the slowdown of economic growth in the country, institutional and structural challenges, the balance of payments and non-oil budget deficit, the processes taking place in the financial and banking sector the need has arisen. (Government of Azerbaijan, 2016b, p. 4)

This economic crisis underscored Azerbaijan's vulnerability to fluctuations in oil revenue, prompting the government to commit to diversifying the economy and reducing oil dependency. The EU funded project document further highlighted this imperative:

In order to tackle this issue, the government of Azerbaijan is committed to diversification of the economy. Development of the non-oil sector has been marked as a priority for the Azerbaijan government. (European Union, 2019, p. 21)

To achieve this diversification, a skilled domestic workforce was essential. However, much of the skilled labour supply consisted of migrants, as the local VET system struggled to meet the demands of a growing economy. The country's reliance on foreign labour, particularly in sectors like construction, underscored the limitations of the VET system. Following the 2007 oil boom, Azerbaijan attracted significant numbers of migrant workers, especially for low-skilled and technical roles, leading to an increase in foreign labour quotas from 2010 to 2014, with 37% allocated to construction alone (Hosner, 2018). Yet, economic pressures forced quota reductions beginning in 2015, culminating in a 62% cut by 2017 (Siegel, 2017). Despite this reduction, demand for skilled foreign labour remained high across sectors, and the need for reform within the VET system became critical. As one interviewee observed: "Even in the early years of oil contracts, we brought welders from abroad" (Ministry of Labour representative, line 75), while another noted: "Specialists from China, India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan arrived, which alerted the government to potential issues" (A former VET Agency manager, line 21).

Recognising these challenges, the government sought assistance from donors and consultancy firms that emphasised the necessity of a robust VET system for economic diversification. Organisations like the World Bank and UNESCO had long underscored VET's role in strengthening human capital, with multiple reports advocating for VET reform to address Azerbaijan's significant skills gap (European Training Foundation, 2006; World Bank, 2016). Consultancy firms such as McKinsey & Company and MHC International Ltd. echoed this view, arguing that VET was essential to economic growth by equipping individuals with market-aligned practical skills (Hopkins & Webster, 2006). According to interviewee: "The reform was largely driven by donors who analysed the situation, showing the government that without vocational education reform, economic diversification and smooth development would be challenging" (EU technical assistance expert, line 58). This position aligned with the European Training Foundation's assessment that "the development of human capital is the main challenge facing Azerbaijan" (European Training Foundation, 2014, p. 17).

Despite international recommendations, the VET system faced persistent challenges rooted in its Soviet legacy, including a negative public image and chronic underinvestment. VET was widely regarded as an obsolete remnant of Soviet ideology, associated with low-quality, unskilled labour. As one interviewee explained:

When the Soviet system completely collapsed in the 90s, it affected areas deemed no longer essential, and vocational education was one of them. We thought vocational schools were obsolete, as they primarily prepared staff for factories and farms, training workers and tractor drivers for collective farms. (Ministry of Economy representative, line 8)

Similarly, another interviewee noted: "VET needs rebranding to elevate its reputation. People must move past the Soviet era, where vocational schools were considered for 'losers,' and this image must change" (EU representative, line 86).

Compounding these issues was a growing youth population and increasing youth unemployment, further straining the VET system. Torino Process report by the ETF noted that "contrary to the trend in the other Eastern Partner countries, Azerbaijan has a growing population, which puts pressure on the education system and the labour market, as young people need schooling and need to find jobs" (European Training Foundation, 2011, p. 18). In 2007, youth aged 19–34 represented 26% of the population, with 67% falling within the working-age bracket (Government of Azerbaijan, 2008a). Each year, approximately 100,000 students completed compulsory education, with only 30% continuing to general education and around 15% entering VET. This left nearly 60% either entering the labour market directly or remaining "not in education, employment or training" (NEET; Government of Azerbaijan, 2008b). As an interviewee remarked: "They were pointing in some direction, which, in these times, would create risks for certain subsequent years" (Ministry of Labour representative, line 93). This idea further supported by another interviewee who elaborated: "Allowing all 100,000 of them to take the exam in higher education institutions was a danger in itself (...). An alternative must be found" (Former VET manager in the Ministry of Education, line 223).

Another historical factor impacting VET underfunding was the economic policies promoted by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank during Azerbaijan's early development phase, which encouraged reductions in public spending. Facing an economic crisis, the World Bank and IMF advocated for reduced public expenditures, significantly impacting educational funding and weakening the VET system's capacity to meet emerging labour demands (World Bank, 1999). This approach sought to streamline government roles, reducing its involvement in non-essential sectors like vocational education, resulting in sustained underfunding (Government of Azerbaijan, 2003). Former high-ranking Ministry of Education official recalled that limited state investments consistently favoured general education over VET, with the VET sector receiving just 4-5% of the total education budget by 2019—insufficient for substantial reform (Government of Azerbaijan, 2022).

3.2 Selection of Solutions

Responsibility for VET reform fell to the Ministry of Education (MoE), but within both the ministry and the wider community, general and higher education took priority over vocational education, resulting in resource diversion that deepened VET's capacity shortfalls. Furthermore, public officials lacked expertise in skills development, limiting their understanding of effective, modern VET systems. Consequently, the reform plan, while promising on paper, faced practical obstacles. First, the MoE lacked the human resources and institutional

capacity necessary to transform VET into a robust skills development system. Second, there was an operational disconnect between education and industry; key agencies such as the Ministry of Economy and the Ministry of Labour (MoL) were not involved in system restructuring. This disconnect was noted by an interviewee: "Even today, entrepreneurs have little or no trust in the vocational school. They do not believe that vocational school will produce an educated and skilled person" (Employer representative, line 29). Another interviewee similarly commented:

The Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Labour are the most important institutions working on vocational education. However, at times, we observe that they have different perspectives. The MoL views the VET system from the perspective of employment, whereas the Ministry of Education focuses on the general protection of the education system. (Former VET Agency manager, line 70)

The appointment of a new Minister of Education in 2013, who had Western education and economic expertise, marked a pivotal shift towards viewing VET reform through a human capital and economic development lens. His vision was articulated in the State Strategy for the Development of Education, a foundational document that outlined the reform approach post-appointment. The strategy stated that its implementation would "enable the reconstruction of the content of education, staff training, educational management, and educational infrastructure in line with advanced international practice ensuring the establishment of a knowledge-based economy, an information society, and the country's sustainable development" (Government of Azerbaijan, 2013). For the first time, the document explicitly indicated that human capital development required alignment of educational standards with European benchmarks. Driven by the demands of globalisation, this alignment aimed to integrate Azerbaijan's education system with international standards (Government of Azerbaijan, 2013). The strategy highlighted decision-makers' intent, especially within the MoE, to build a reformed VET system consistent with EU standards.

The EU played an instrumental role in advancing European best practices in Azerbaijan's VET reform through targeted funding for technical assistance and grant projects. To support the MoE's efforts, the EU introduced the Education Support Programme in Azerbaijan, with objectives to modernise the country's education and training systems, improving quality, equity, relevance, and accessibility in line with European standards (European Union, 2014). The appeal of these EU practices, particularly those demonstrated in Baltic states' successful VET reforms, had a significant impact on Azerbaijani decision-making preferences. Reflecting on this influence, an interviewee stated: "In 2013, following Mikayil Jabbarov's appointment as Minister of Education, discussions commenced with various international organisations. Projects were either initiated or plans considered in collaboration with entities such as the European Union, the Korean Eximbank, and GIZ" (Former VET Agency manager, line

39). Such initiatives underscored the attractiveness of EU-aligned models for Azerbaijan, particularly for their technical and economic success in comparable contexts.

The EU's approach to Azerbaijan aligned with its strategy for other transitioning Eastern European nations, assigning the European Training Foundation a lead role while emphasising institutional and policy changes through "soft" mechanisms. A central goal for the EU was to harmonise qualification systems, enabling Azerbaijani citizens to compete in the European labour market with recognised qualifications. An interviewee explained: "The EU was particularly focused on integrating Azerbaijan into the EU's educational space, aiming for the recognition and harmonisation of qualifications to allow Azerbaijani graduates to work seamlessly across Europe, where recognised diplomas would be in demand" (Former VET Agency manager, line 93). However, as another interviewee clarified: "So, of course, there was policy borrowing, and of course, there was no policy lending. On the policy borrowing, for sure, policy borrowing because Azerbaijan wants to be a modern country" (Former ETF representative, line 291).

To support this alignment, the EU advocated the introduction of a National Qualifications Framework (NQF) compatible with the European Qualifications Framework, which became a crucial influence on policy change. Interview and document analysis show that ETF lobbied extensively for the NQF, highlighting its significance in synchronising Azerbaijan's qualifications with international standards. While the EU funded a technical assistance project to support NQF implementation, substantial resistance emerged within the MoE's leadership. An ETF representative described the process:

So, he (MoE employee) told me that you work from these NQFs. Is it something for us? I said, well, you have to decide for yourself (...) he said he spoke to the Minister, and he wants to have a presentation about NQF. So, I made this presentation, and then they said, can you stay because we want to work on it? Then they said, can you support this process? I said: Well, I could possibly do some of the work, but I cannot do everything (...). And he said, can you make some terms of reference for this work to happen?! So, I made something, I made the terms of reference (ToR). Then he said, can you help us find also experts?! I said, well, I can give you a few names. (Former ETF representative, line 87)

The primary aim of this initiative was to establish the Azerbaijan National Qualifications Framework (AzNQF) in line with the EQF, encompassing qualification structures, credit transfer, and recognition of prior learning. Through the EU project, these elements were integrated into the VET framework, providing a foundation for policy entrepreneurs to drive a market-oriented VET model. As an interviewee recalled:

While there were improvements in the infrastructure and material resources of some schools, the impact of the program was limited. This was mainly due to the absence of legislation for the NQF, which resulted in content-related issues. Therefore, the full impact of the state program was not realised. (VET Agency representative, line 54)

The EU, along with other donors and consulting firms, also advocated work-based learning and apprenticeship models within the VET system as part of the EU model. These approaches encouraged public-private partnerships and company collaboration with VET providers to create a responsive system for workforce development. The VET roadmap outlined this approach, emphasising "public, private and international funding sources... based on public-private partnership principles, provided by the private sector, supported by international donors and financial organizations, which is widely used in international practices" (Government of Azerbaijan, 2016b, p. 27). Intended to alleviate fiscal constraints, this funding model aimed to instil a business-driven orientation within VET system to tackle this shortfall.

The EU technical assistance project supported this model, stressing the importance of mechanisms that "ensure higher participation of the private sector and other social partners in VET" (European Union, 2019), particularly through public-private partnerships, apprenticeships, internships, and work-based learning. This initiative advocated for private sector involvement across all VET stages, from governance and curriculum development to training delivery, establishing a practical foundation for skills development. An EU representative explained that the financing model proposed "3-way financing (...) by the state, economic actors, and possibly partially self-financing" (European Union, 2019). Enterprise-driven models like apprenticeships and dual training appealed to decision-makers due to co-funding opportunities. However, cultural barriers persisted, as an interviewee observed:

Both the government and society believed that people should be trained in the VET Institution and then they should go and find a job for themselves. There was no such approach in the labour market that employers and entrepreneurs engaged in skills formation and paid and invested funds for this. (Manager in the Ministry of Education, line 65)

3.3 Recontextualization

In the retention phase of the VET reform, several key factors shaped the structure and institutionalisation of Azerbaijan's system, balancing both national priorities and external recommendations. A pivotal change was the establishment of the VET Agency, which was tasked with overseeing vocational education and serving as a policy champion. Initially proposed by EU experts as an independent entity that would integrate elements from the education, labour, and economic sectors, the agency was ultimately positioned under the Ministry of Education by government decision.

This structural choice created a notable challenge for the Minister of Education, who was simultaneously tasked with advancing VET reforms under a centralised governance model. Despite ambitions to "integrate employers into VET," adopt "European standards", and establish a system of "multilevel governance" with increased decentralisation, these objectives had to function within a framework firmly anchored within MoE control. The VET Agency

was delegated responsibilities for managing VET institutions, engaging with donor organisations, and appointing school management. According to government documents, this centralised arrangement positioned the VET Agency as the EU's primary contact for policy matters (Government of Azerbaijan, 2016a). However, centralised management of school appointments without input from local authorities or school staff constrained the potential for true decentralisation. An interviewee observed:

The notion behind this is that the individuals in the Ministry of Education were typically civil servants and thus lacked adequate industry experience. Unfortunately, a similar mistake was made when the agency was established, as it was, to a large extent, staffed by individuals who lacked the necessary experience in vocational education and industry. (the EU expert, line 184)

This staffing limitation led the agency to lean heavily on EU expertise for guidance. Reflecting on the agency's early struggles, an interviewee remarked: "Building the agency from scratch was a process in itself (...) the agency staff had to learn independently how to operate, how the system should function, and how policies should be implemented going forward" (Former VET Agency manager, line 212).

In order to reinforce the rationale for reform, the VET Agency strategically presented vocational education as an outdated remnant of the Soviet era that needed comprehensive modernisation. Anticipating resistance, the agency argued that other educational sectors, from secondary to higher education, had already modernised, leaving VET as the final sector requiring alignment with global standards. As an interviewee stated:

A new curriculum system has been introduced in secondary education, which is marked as a reform. Similarly, in higher education, the Bologna process has been adopted, which is also considered a reform. However, it is evident that vocational education, which existed in the Soviet system, continued at the same level until that time. (Senior official in the VET Agency, line 7)

The focus on modernisation, however, was deliberately separated from broader European cultural or political integration. Both Azerbaijani officials and EU representatives favoured European VET models for their practical alignment with labour market needs, rather than as instruments for broader Europeanisation. This distinction was reinforced by international actors, who approached the reforms as "policy learning" rather than "policy lending," to avoid perceptions of policy imposition. As one interviewee explained, "The idea of Europe is not to dictate to countries like Azerbaijan to adopt their approach, although it may play a role" (Former ETF representative, line 292). Azerbaijani officials supported this distinction, describing the aim as building a national VET model that could benefit from European expertise without direct alignment with EU membership goals.

This selective adoption of European VET models underscored a nationalist approach among government officials, who justified reforms on the grounds of modernisation while

consciously avoiding narratives tied to Europeanisation. During parliamentary hearings on the VET Law, one member of parliament expressed this sentiment: "Today, those who sit in Europe and slander our state, nation, and land have no sense of responsibility towards Azerbaijani values, neither in their upbringing nor their education" (Parliament of Azerbaijan, 2018, p. 17).

Thus, while Azerbaijan rejected the Soviet model for its limitations, European models were selectively adopted for their technical and economic benefits. Unlike Eastern European countries where integration was driven by EU membership aspirations, Azerbaijani elites viewed Western cultural and political frameworks as potentially disruptive, prioritising economic and technical adaptation over a shift in cultural identity.

A major factor supporting policy entrepreneurs' ability to maintain their selected reform path was the universally low expectations of the VET system among all levels of society. Decades of underinvestment and inefficiency had left the system in a degraded state, and on the eve of reform, the prevailing view was that conditions could hardly deteriorate further. Paradoxically, this bleak perception created a window for reformers to push forward with changes, as any improvement was anticipated to be a positive shift.

The dysfunctional state of VET also created opportunities for both the MoE, which managed the system, and the Ministry of Labour (MoL), which oversaw training for unemployed individuals, minority groups, and people with special needs. The MoL supported reform and advocated a European VET model that aligned with more liberal, decentralised governance principles. An interviewee observed:

The participation of stakeholders is essential in this process. We see that the previous centralised administrative method is not effective in managing the current challenges. This process should be made as open and wide as possible, allowing complete freedom in certain matters of the VET system. (Labour Ministry representative, line 172)

However, the general lack of confidence in VET's ability to meet workforce needs persisted across public institutions, industry, and employers, thereby reinforcing policy entrepreneurs' retention of their chosen approaches. Public institutions leveraged this opportunity for economic and political gain, while the private sector remained sceptical, viewing the initiative as yet another centrally-driven scheme unlikely to yield practical results. As highlighted by several interviewees, large companies ultimately circumvented the system, establishing their own informal training centres.

The Soviet-style, centralised governance system that persisted in Azerbaijan also had a considerable impact on the tools embedded in the VET Law. Azerbaijan's governance operates through a highly centralised, state-led system, unlike the collaborative, tripartite arrangements common in Western Europe, where trade unions, employer organisations, and government entities collectively influence policy. In Azerbaijan, government agencies remain

the largest employers, while the private sector lacks organised unions or confederations to influence labour policies in a systematic way (European Training Foundation, 2020). This governance structure has limited the capacity of private firms to participate meaningfully in strategic workforce planning, particularly among small and medium enterprises that lack resources for long-term planning. As an interviewee explained: "Our society still expects a lot from the system [government]. Therefore, the government's role is prominent here. We're not yet at a level where people shape things themselves" (Employer Confederation representative, line 138). Another interviewee also noted: "We haven't yet moved away from that [Soviet] system, and this issue goes beyond education governance; it reflects the broader governance culture." (Former VET Agency manager, line 225)

While the government retained control over the VET system to meet strategic objectives, employers remained reluctant to invest in skills development initiatives. As an interviewee described the societal expectation: "I agree that people want everything ready. That comes from our 70 years of history" (Employers' Confederation representative, line 77). Another interviewee expanded on this, stating:

The government must manage the system for 15 to 20 years [to address skills development] (...). After that, responsibility can gradually shift to the private sector. But expecting the private sector to assume this role today is unrealistic; a generational shift will require at least 30 years. (Private sector representative, line 158)

Thus, the Ministry of Education (MoE) continued to maintain a centralised model, arguing that neither employers nor VET institutions had the organisational capacity to manage a decentralised system. The fragmented demand for labour in the private sector further justified the government's central role, as systematic workforce alignment with market needs remained challenging under the current conditions.

4 Discussion

The findings reveal a multifaceted approach to Azerbaijan's VET reform, shaped by the influences of globalisation, Europeanisation, and the strategic selectivity that defines policy transfer in post-Soviet contexts. This reform process aligns with scholarship on policy transfer, which frequently highlights the interplay of voluntary adoption, adaptation, and external influences within national contexts. However, Azerbaijan's approach underscores a nuanced form of policy transfer, where European VET models were embraced for their technical utility in workforce development but cautiously adapted to avoid overhauling entrenched governance structures.

The study's findings underscore the significance of human capital investment in Azerbaijan's rationale for VET reform, aligning with a growing body of literature that links VET policies

to economic restructuring and global competitiveness. Scholars such as Dale (2000) and Verger et al. (2018) argue that economic incentives primarily drive educational reforms under globalisation, a perspective that resonates with Azerbaijan's motivation to address skill gaps and diversify its oil-dependent economy. The economic imperative led to selective policy borrowing, where government integrated elements of the EU model, such as public-private partnerships and work-based learning. This approach is consistent with the Globally Structured Agenda for Education (GSAE) framework, which posits that global economic factors often shape local education policies. However, Azerbaijan's selective adaptation of these models highlights the limitations of GSAE in fully explaining the reform, as economic motivations alone do not capture the broader sociopolitical factors at play.

Europeanisation, a central theme in the findings, played a pivotal role in guiding Azerbaijan's reform approach but was adopted primarily for practical purposes rather than deeper political or cultural alignment with the EU. Theoretical perspectives on Europeanisation often emphasise the influence of EU norms and standards on neighbouring countries, with policy transfer models frequently assuming a voluntary alignment with these frameworks. However, Azerbaijan's engagement with European VET standards reveals a selective form of Europeanisation, where the appeal lay in the technical aspects of EU models—particularly the NQF and cost-sharing for VET system fundings—rather than a commitment to full political or ideological integration with Europe. The findings support scholarship by Börzel and Risse (2012), who argue that Europeanisation in non-EU countries often occurs in a pragmatic, non-ideological manner, where countries adopt EU norms to enhance their economic functionality without necessarily embracing EU values or governance models. This selective Europeanisation highlights how Azerbaijan sought to modernise its VET system without altering its centralised governance model or compromising its distinct national identity.

Furthermore, this study reveals how Azerbaijan's reform process was mediated by the country's Soviet legacy, a significant factor in the retention of a centralised governance structure within the VET system. Neo-institutionalist scholars, particularly those informed by World Culture Theory, argue that global norms and standards often shape national policies, with international institutions playing a central role in legitimising these standards (Ramirez et al., 2016). However, Azerbaijan's experience illustrates that local governance structures and historical legacies can significantly mediate this process, resulting in selective policy adoption. The Ministry of Education's reluctance to decentralise reflects an embedded governance culture shaped by the Soviet era, where centralised control was essential for managing workforce development. This finding challenges assumptions within neo-institutionalism that global norms uniformly influence local governance, instead illustrating a more complex interplay where historical governance practices coexist with selectively adopted global models.

This selective adaptation process aligns with the policy transfer literature, which highlights various mechanisms—such as voluntary borrowing, diffusion, and emulation—that facilitate the integration of international models within national contexts (Dolowitz & Marsh, 2000; Evans, 2019). The study's findings indicate that Azerbaijan's policy transfer was largely voluntary, with policymakers selectively integrating EU VET models that aligned with national priorities and local governance constraints. Scholars like Simmons & Elkins (2004) suggest that policy transfer often involves "shallow learning," where local actors adopt foreign models without fully understanding their implications. In Azerbaijan's case, this shallow learning is evident in the retention of a centralised governance structure, despite the EU's recommendations for decentralisation. This selective transfer reflects a pragmatic approach, where policymakers incorporated foreign models as tools to achieve economic diversification but adapted them to align with local governance practices, rather than pursuing a comprehensive transformation.

An important dimension of the findings relates to the role of external knowledge sources, particularly the EU's provision of expertise and funding, in shaping Azerbaijan's VET reform. Although the EU did not exert direct pressure on Azerbaijan to adopt specific policies, its role as a knowledge provider influenced the reform process by narrowing the policy options available to Azerbaijani policymakers. This aligns with Bulmer and Padgett's (2005) observation that even without explicit coercion, dominant knowledge sources can shape policy agendas by providing frameworks that local actors are incentivised to adopt. The availability of EU-funded technical assistance and advisory services helped Azerbaijan's policymakers to align the VET system with EU standards, even as they adapted these standards to suit local governance constraints. The influence of EU knowledge provision on Azerbaijan's reform approach underscores the subtle, often indirect, mechanisms through which policy transfer occurs, even in the absence of formal conditionality agreements.

Despite these international influences, the findings suggest that local factors—including public perceptions of VET, labour market structure, and the political economy—played a crucial role in shaping the reform's final structure. The study's findings support Steiner-Khamisi's (2018) perspective that international policy ideas are reinterpreted within local contexts, as Azerbaijani stakeholders adapted EU models to fit a labour market that lacked a strong private sector willing to invest in skills development. The limited enthusiasm from employers to engage in skills development, combined with public scepticism towards VET, constrained the extent to which the European VET model could be fully implemented. These findings challenge the notion that economic pressures alone drive policy transfer, as the study illustrates how social expectations and local labour market dynamics can shape the form and function of transferred policies.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that Azerbaijan's VET reform reflects a complex interplay of global influences and local adaptations, where Europeanisation, policy transfer,

and neo-institutional factors intersected to shape the reform's structure. While economic diversification and human capital development were primary motivations, Azerbaijan's selective engagement with EU models highlights the limitations of economic globalisation and Europeanisation as singular explanations for policy transfer. The study reinforces the notion that policy transfer is not a linear process but rather one that involves reinterpretation, adaptation, and selective retention based on national governance priorities and historical legacies. Azerbaijan's approach underscores the importance of considering local political and economic contexts in understanding how global models are adapted in diverse national settings, contributing to the broader literature on policy transfer and education reform in transitional economies.

5 Conclusions

This study advances the academic discourse on VET policy transfer within the EU's neighbouring post-Soviet contexts, focusing on Azerbaijan's experience. The findings underscore that adapting internationally derived educational reforms is a complex process heavily mediated by local socio-political and historical factors. The study reinforces the view that policy transfer frameworks must consider these local nuances, as broader theories alone often overlook the intricate interplay of domestic and international influences (Carney et al., 2012; Phillips, 2021).

This study acknowledges limitations regarding the generalisability and transferability of its findings across diverse contexts. However, it aims to achieve analytic generalisability by providing an in-depth analysis of policy transfer processes, offering a framework for understanding how similar dynamics might unfold in comparable settings.

Practically, the findings suggest that centrally governed systems, such as Azerbaijan's, may benefit from a gradual, hybrid approach to integrating demand-led VET elements. A step-wise increase in local autonomy and employer engagement, within a state-dominant framework, could offer a balanced way to align VET more closely with labour market needs while respecting the existing governance structures.

Theoretically, the study contributes to policy transfer literature by underscoring the EU's role as a soft power that shapes regional policy, even absent formal conditionality. Azerbaijan's selective adoption of the EU's VET frameworks reflects a blend of voluntary policy borrowing and selective adaptation, a process shaped by socio-political traditions rather than mere economic alignment (Polglase, 2013; Silova et al., 2020).

While this research highlights the policy adoption phase, it excludes perspectives from teachers and students, limiting insights into the on-the-ground impact of VET reforms. Future studies could address this by examining the implementation phase, particularly how teachers, students, and employers experience and interpret the changes within VET.

Further research can benefit from comparative studies across post-Soviet states to better understand how different socio-political conditions affect EU-influenced VET reforms. Comparative insights into policy implementation, decentralisation challenges, employer involvement, and local adaptation strategies would enrich policy transfer scholarship, particularly within centralised governance structures. Additionally, systematic evaluations of EU-supported VET initiatives could inform policy adaptations that respect distinct regional governance needs, ultimately enhancing the effectiveness of VET reforms across varied national contexts.

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Ethics Statement

All participants involved in this research were informed about the purpose and scope of the study, and their participation was entirely voluntary. Informed consent was obtained prior to all interviews, in line with the ethical principles outlined in the IJRVET ethics statement. Anonymity and confidentiality were ensured throughout the research process.

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Biographical Note

Majid Bayramli, PhD, is a lecturer and research supervisor at the School of Education, ADA University in Baku, Azerbaijan. He earned his PhD in Education from the University of Glasgow. His academic interests centre on VET, higher education, skill development, and education policy analysis. In his academic work, he focuses on the dynamics of policy transfer, Europeanisation, and the influence of international organisations on education reform in post-Soviet contexts. He also supervises graduate research projects related to education governance and policy implementation.