



## Report

# Education in Azerbaijan during Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic

Baku – 2021

## Contents

General Information about the Report .....	3
Global problems caused by the pandemic in the educational process, steps taken at the international and local levels .....	4
Suspension of the educational-training process in Azerbaijan;.....	8
Temporary distance education in the country; .....	9
Problems caused by distance education in Baku and regions .....	10
Measures taken in accordance with the new educational year .....	13
How the loss and threats of the pandemic to the development of education are assessed ...	15
Conclusions .....	17
Recomendations .....	19

## **General Information About The Report**

This report was prepared by the experts: Seymur Kazimov, Dilara Efendiyeva, Yegana tarverdiyeva and Nazrin Hasanli involved in the project under the leadership of Mr. Avaz Hasanov, Chairman of the Humanitarian Research Public Union, within the framework of “the Restart: Civil Society Strengthening Initiative in Azerbaijan” Project.

The main goal of the project, implemented by the “Azerbaijan National Platform” of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum, is to help to overcome the stagnation in civil society, where NGOs exist, and to take the necessary steps to expand the scope of NGOs.

## **Global problems caused by the pandemic in the educational process, steps taken at the international and local levels**

In late 2019, at the local Huanan meat and seafood market in Wuhan, Hubei Province, China, the residents were diagnosed with pneumonia of unknown origin. The news was spread by world news agencies as an official announcement of COVID-19. The Chinese government informed the World Health Organization on December 31, 2019 about the onset of unknown pneumonia. Shortly after, on March 11, 2020, the Secretary-General of the World Health Organization, Tedros Adanom Gebreigus, at a briefing in Geneva announced that the Coronavirus (COVID-19) was considered as a pandemic. Prior to the official announcement of the pandemic, coronavirus infections had been reported in 114 countries<sup>1</sup>.

In Azerbaijan, the first coronavirus infection was registered on February 28, 2020. The government has developed a package of measures to reduce the negative impact of COVID-19 on the national economy, entrepreneurship and on the banking sector, and to strengthen the social protection of the population.

On February 27, the Operational Headquarters was established under the Cabinet of Ministers to prevent the threat posed by the pandemic and to implement preventive and urgent measures.

On March 14, the Operational Headquarters under the Cabinet of Ministers of Azerbaijan began to implement social isolation measures within the country. Following the closure of classes in early March, the government's social isolation measures included: a ban on weddings, mourning ceremonies and other public gatherings; closure of cultural facilities, theaters, museums, cinemas, entertainment centers, sports centers and other related facilities; prohibition of visits by relatives of patients in all medical institutions; and special rules for cafes, restaurants, shops, shopping malls, public transport, etc.

In order to prevent the spread of coronavirus infection, entry to Baku and Sumgayit cities, as well as the Absheron region has been restricted since March 17. International travels, including entry to Azerbaijan from all foreign countries, were restricted.

On March 31, a special quarantine regime was imposed in Azerbaijan. Citizens were required to stay in their homes permanently or temporarily until April 20.

The President of the Republic of Azerbaijan signed a decree on March 19 to reduce the impact of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic on the Azerbaijani economy, macroeconomic stability, employment and different structures functioning in the country. According to the decree, one billion manat was allocated from the state budget to the Cabinet of Ministers to finance the appropriate measures.

Some time later, on the initiative of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, the Coronavirus Support Fund<sup>2</sup> was established and the fundraising processes started.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://az.trend.az/azerbaijan/gundem/3205681.html>

<sup>2</sup> <http://covid19fund.gov.az/az/>

Since the declaration of the pandemic and the quarantine regime, the important measures such as strengthening the capacity of the public health system, commissioning of new modular clinics, involvement of private clinics in anti-epidemic measures, providing hospitals and patients with the necessary drugs, equipment and protective equipments have been taken. The lower cases of pandemic infections and the lower mortality rate compared to other countries reflect the effectiveness of anti-epidemic measures.

After the first case of infection was registered in our country, one of the areas where the restriction was applied was the education system. The closure of schools, which have been among the mandatory measures taken in all countries around the world, took place at different times. The Azerbaijani government has decided to close educational institutions and take disinfection measures, taking into account the scale of the threat posed by the pandemic in the region. However, it was difficult to predict how long these short-term precautionary measures would last.

The inclusion of China, Iran and other neighboring states in the list of first regions, where the pandemic was widespread, was a serious challenge for the regional states. The preventive steps, as closure of entry to the countries by the governments, the cancellation of flights further affecting seriously the economy, have increased worries and concerns among the people. Lack of knowledge about the pandemic, its rapid spread in densely populated areas have caused the fear among the population and the closure of public places, the transition of enterprises to remote operation have been the first preventive measures.

At the beginning of the spread of the coronavirus, countries such as Japan, South Korea, and Singapore closed schools and began to introduce a distance education system that students could learn more quickly.

The countries most affected by the pandemic, such as the United Kingdom, the United States, Italy, Spain and Germany, had to close schools too. Despite the late decision to declare a mass quarantine regime, it was decided to close educational institutions first.

The UK's Save the Children estimates that 1.6 billion students worldwide have limited access to education due to the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the organization, 9.7 million students worldwide are expected to leave the schools due to the economic downturn after the pandemic or the deteriorating social status of families. The situation is expected to worsen in 12 countries, especially in West and Central Africa, Yemen and Afghanistan<sup>3</sup>.

Although many countries have switched to online education to prevent the impact of the pandemic on education, however, especially developing countries are unable to use this form of education. In an interview to "Le Journal du Dimanche", Mr. Odre Azule, UNESCO's Director-General said that 53% of children and adolescents in the world do not have a computer at home and 47% do not have access to the Internet (in Africa this figure is more than 80%), so it is not possible for them to use online teaching form<sup>4</sup>. Odre Azule emphasized that the COVID-19 crisis is forcing a reconsideration of the parameters and objectives of UNESCO's qualitative education program. According to him, the suspension of classes in schools and universities during the pandemic will strengthen the existing backwardness in the implementation of the UN commitments to ensure common education

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.savethechildren.net/news/almost-10-million-children-may-never-return-school-following-covid-19-lockdown>

<sup>4</sup> <https://en.unesco.org/images/375163eng.pdf>

by 2030. Therefore, we will have to use this period to reconsider our ambitious goals in the field of education, to rethink its future.

The Republic of Azerbaijan has joined the “Sustainable Development Goals” approved for 2016-2030 at the “Sustainable Development Summit” held on September 25-27, 2015 by the member states of the United Nations. Taking into account that the implementation of the "Sustainable Development Goals" requires a comprehensive institutional and political approach, Azerbaijan has begun to form an effective national implementation mechanism to develop a more sustainable, inclusive and diversified economy and ensure balanced development of social spheres.

According to the document "Transformation of our world: Agenda for Sustainable Development until 2030", Azerbaijan's commitments and the creation of due structures are taken as a basis. The Decree of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan dated October 6, 2016 “On Establishment of the National Coordinating Council for Sustainable Development<sup>5</sup> of the Republic of Azerbaijan” aims to coordinate the implementation of responsibilities of state bodies to fulfill the obligations arising from the “Agenda-2030” at the national level.

Along with other national priorities that are important for Azerbaijan in terms of global goals and objectives until 2030, it is planned to coordinate and ensure state programs and strategies in the field of education through the "Sustainable Development Goals"<sup>6</sup>.

However, the unexpected problem faced in education due to the pandemic has seriously hampered the country's ability to meet its commitments. Although Chapter 4 of the document envisages the implementation of comprehensive measures on the state of education, the problem created by the pandemic has led to new concerns about the urgent transition to distance education. In addition to information on pandemic protection, educational institutions also faced difficulties in carrying out preventive measures in educational institutions.

Given the challenges the education is facing around the world, UNESCO has given its recommendations to countries to move to distance education, speed up and simplify virtual education among teachers and students, to carry online classes in order to help children and young people get education.

Withing a shorter period of time, the information on the symptoms of the COVID-19 pandemic, based on the international recommendations<sup>7</sup> and developed by UNICEF in cooperation with the World Health Organization, started to spread in educational institutions of the Republic of Azerbaijan and soon was presented at national television too. According to the recommendations, the clinical signs of the COVID-19 pandemic include: high fever; rash; red or pink eyes; swelling or redness of the lips, tongue, hands, feet; gastrointestinal problems; low blood pressure; poor blood flow to the organs and other signs of inflammation.

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<sup>5</sup> <http://sdg.azstat.org:8484/uploads/pages/full-material-636947851694915298.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> <https://president.az/articles/21314>

<sup>7</sup> [https://www.unicef.org/eca/sites/unicef.org.eca/files/2020-03/COVID%2019%20Prevention%20and%20Control%20in%20Schools\\_RUS.pdf](https://www.unicef.org/eca/sites/unicef.org.eca/files/2020-03/COVID%2019%20Prevention%20and%20Control%20in%20Schools_RUS.pdf)

Recommendations to schools and parents stated that medical care should be provided mainly<sup>8</sup> for children with the above symptoms, and appropriate measures should be taken for early diagnosis and treatment.

The preventive actions such as closure of the schools and social distance were taken to combat the infection at the initial stage of the pandemic in the country, prevented the interaction of children who were scared to interact.

When the coronavirus pandemic began, many Azerbaijanis, especially students studying abroad, faced a serious problem in returning back to the country due to the declaration of a quarantine regime in the country and the cancellation of flights and travel difficulties.

In the first phase of the quarantine regime, the local citizens who returned home from foreign countries in spring were kept in isolation in hospitals and hotels. They were tested against corona at least twice. By the subsequent cancellation of flights, the tickets previously purchased by the students studying abroad and having an urge to return home, were canceled or the flight time was changed to the time of opening flights.

Under such circumstance, a special portal "I'm going home"<sup>9</sup> was created for Azerbaijani citizens who stayed abroad and wanted to return home. The number of people who registered on this portal and hoped for the help of the state was enormous. However, these rules were applied to periodic charter flights for the citizens living in Russia. Students and other citizens wishing to return to Azerbaijan were often able to return to the country through expensive flights via Turkey and Russia.

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.unicef.org/azerbaijan/az/koronavirus-covid-19-valideynl%C9%99r-n%C9%99yi-bilm%C9%99lidir>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.evegedirem.info/az/info>

## **Suspension of the educational-training process in Azerbaijan**

Soon after the news of the registration of coronavirus patients in Azerbaijan in February 2020, parents decided the participation of pupils and students in secondary and higher education institutions on their own. Therefore, the Operational Headquarters under the Cabinet of Ministers decided to suspend education in all educational institutions in Azerbaijan from March 3-9 in order to prevent cases of coronavirus and increase the effectiveness of relevant preventive measures in this area<sup>10</sup>.

As March is a month of climate change and seasonal illnesses in Azerbaijan, the government's decision was a right step to protect students from infectious diseases such as measles, malaria and chickenpox, as well as to prevent coronavirus infection, if we take into account that at the beginning of the 2020-2021 academic year, it was forecasted that a total of 1,574,206 students will study in general education institutions of the country.<sup>11</sup>

According to the statistics of the Ministry of Education, 840,927 students are boys and 733,279 are girls. According to general statistics, there are 4440 schools in the country, including 3319 high schools, 783 general secondary schools, 317 primary schools, 16 special schools and 5 full-time (evening) high schools, including 60 high schools, including 50 lyceums, 15 gymnasiums and 14 boarding schools with integrated training.

The Ministry of Education reacted more quickly to the current situation and began to organize tele-lessons. However, one of the main challenges facing the Azerbaijani government during the pandemic was to bring classrooms up to new standards and to regulate the number of children in groups, so there was no choice but to close the schools.

According to the Model Charter of a General Education School in Azerbaijan, the number of students in secondary school classes was at least 20 and at most 30. According to the norm adopted during the pandemic, the number of students in the classrooms had to be reduced to 10, and that is why there was a need to increase the number of additional classrooms and involve additional teachers.

At the same time, this led to an increase in additional costs in schools: the reconstruction of classrooms and toilets, the regular disinfection of schools, and the frequent washing of the hands of children.

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/azeri/51702051>

<sup>11</sup> [https://apa.az/az/sosial\\_xeberler/Azrbaycanda-sagirdlrin-sayi-aciqlanib-604578](https://apa.az/az/sosial_xeberler/Azrbaycanda-sagirdlrin-sayi-aciqlanib-604578)

## Temporary distance education in the country

In order to prevent the threat of coronavirus infection in the territory of Azerbaijan, to take preventive measures and intensify medical-prophylactic, disinfectant and other preventive measures in all educational institutions in the country from March 3 to 9, 2020,<sup>1</sup> it was decided to suspend the teaching and learning processes in all educational institutions and to postpone all related events.

Although classes were expected to open on March 10, it was clear that the opening would be uncertain, given that this would be dangerous to the health of teachers and students. In order to keep students up to speed in education, the Ministry of Education launched tele-lessons on March 11 and started using the "Virtual School" platform on April 2.<sup>12</sup>

The Ministry of Education has launched the "Lesson Time" program, as well as the "Virtual School" project for students and teachers.

"Madaniyyat" TV channel has started broadcasting TV<sup>13</sup> programs all over the country. The best specialists in the field of education in the country were invited to take part in these tele-lessons, which were prepared in mini-studios specially created by the Ministry of Education. The lessons were broadcasted live or pre-recorded. Tele-lessons were presented by experienced teachers. Schedules of tele-lessons were announced in advance in television, and in some schools, WhatsApp groups have been set up by class teachers by including the phone numbers of the students or their parents. Information on lesson time-tables and tele-lessons was sent to these groups.

Given that students do not have the opportunity to watch the program "Lesson Time" in TV, they can watch it on the official YouTube<sup>14</sup> channel of the Ministry of Education. Classes for active social network users were broadcasted on the Facebook page of the Ministry of Education, as well as on the Facebook page<sup>15</sup> of Education TV. At the same time, they had the opportunity to watch these lessons on the video lessons portal of the Ministry of Education. Of course, preparatory works, the transition to the use of distance education without appropriate regulatory frameworks and specialists in this field showed that there are certain problems and setbacks in the field of education in the country.

Currently, the Ministry is implementing e-textbook projects on "Culture" and "ARB Gunesh" channels, "Lesson time", "Virtual school",<sup>16</sup> where all textbooks are available online. At the same time, the State Examination Center<sup>17</sup> has organized free trial exams on its website to prepare students for exams at home.

In addition to official channels, teachers also use programs such as "Voice Thread", "Zoom", and "Google Hangouts"<sup>18</sup> to teach students to the best of their ability.

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<sup>12</sup> [https://www.arti.edu.az/nodupload/editor/files/Final%20sayt%20%C3%BC%C3%A7%C3%BCn\\_.pdf](https://www.arti.edu.az/nodupload/editor/files/Final%20sayt%20%C3%BC%C3%A7%C3%BCn_.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.turan.az/ext/news/2020/5/free/Interview/az/123708.htm>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/playlist>

<sup>15</sup> <https://video.edu.az/>

<sup>16</sup> <http://virtual.edu.az>

<sup>17</sup> [www.otk.az](http://www.otk.az)

<sup>18</sup> <https://edu.gov.az/az/page/9/18449>

## **Problems in Baku and the regions due to the distance education**

The new law “On Education” approved in Azerbaijan on June 19, 2009, has defined the principles related to distance education in the country. However, the rules and conditions for distance education have not been applied in the country. Special attention was only given to the distance education in Azerbaijan during the emergence and spread of coronavirus pandemic.

The form of distance education is reflected in the Law on Education (Article 13) and the “Model Charter of a Higher Education Institution” approved by the Cabinet of Ministers on January 21, 2011 No. 9. However, research shows that the main reason for the lack of distance education in our country is the lack of distance learning mechanisms, only partial readiness of all higher educational institutions and the lack of information in this area. Delays in this process deprive tens of thousands of young people from the right to education, and limit the ability of our universities to attract students from abroad.

Admission to higher education institutions in Azerbaijan by correspondence has been suspended since 2015. In this regard, a program was adopted to amend the legislation and by that time correspondence education will be gradually replaced by distance learning.

At a time when the need for distance education in the country is growing, there is a problem with the recognition of diplomas of students studying abroad by the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Azerbaijan. Most students studying for a bachelor's degree or master's degree abroad after graduating from Azerbaijani universities face the problem of recognizing their diplomas in Azerbaijan.

The rules for recognition of documents of students studying abroad were determined according to the Article 27 of the Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan on Education<sup>19</sup> and the Rules for “Recognition and Equivalence (Nostrification) of Specialties in the Field of Higher Education of Foreign Countries”, approved by the Resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Azerbaijan No. 64 of 13.05.2003 and Resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Azerbaijan No. 8 of January 12, 2009 and No. 70 of April 24, 2009 on the approval of the list of specialties (programs) of the Bachelor's degree,

Our country has joined various international conventions on the recognition of diplomas of foreign universities. These conventions include the UN Paris Convention (on the recognition of diplomas of students studying in Europe), the Asia-Pacific-Bangkok Convention (on the recognition of diplomas of students studying in Asia), and the European region higher education developed by UNESCO in cooperation with the Council of Europe. There is the Lisbon Convention on the Mutual Recognition of Diplomas in the Field.

At the same time, our country joined the Hague Convention<sup>20</sup> of October 5, 1961, which abolished the requirement to legalize foreign official documents. The Apostille is issued for the mutual recognition of documents between States Parties to this Convention, which may be used in the territory of another country after the documents have legal force.

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<sup>19</sup> <https://bakimektebleri.edu.az/7/az/laws/download/42/>

<sup>20</sup> <https://meclis.gov.az/?/az/legislation/view/524>

Every student studying abroad must present a document of higher education in the territory of Azerbaijan and determine the equivalent of the specialty. The diploma of a person studying abroad must be officially recognized (nostrified) in the territory of Azerbaijan. The state body, formerly known as the Accreditation and Nostrification Department under the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Azerbaijan and now operating as the Agency for Quality Assurance in Education, carries out the procedure of recognition of diplomas.

Anyone who completes their education abroad must apostilize or legalize diploma in the foreign country where they studied. After that, the student must have the diploma, attachments to diploma and other documents translated into Azerbaijani language, notarize them and apply online to the Agency for Quality Assurance in Education for nostrification (recognition of the diploma). The application is sent online by entering and registering in the Electronic Application System<sup>21</sup>- “Recognition and determination of equivalence of foreign specialties in the field of higher education” by the Agency for Quality Assurance in Education.

The student's application is considered for a period of 6 months to 2 years as it passes through various procedures. The application sent to the state bodies undergoes a long-term inspection, and during this period the student is notified only by telephone.

As can be seen, distance education is easier and more cost-effective than the difficulties associated with studying abroad. At the same time, it allows universities to increase their student contingent, create opportunities for more students to get higher education at a very low cost, and attract a large number of students and teachers from abroad. Distance education creates conditions for the improvement of the financial situation of universities and a significantly increases teachers' salaries.

By the order of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev dated October 24, 2013, the State Strategy for the Development of Education in the Republic of Azerbaijan was approved. According to the decree of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan on the approval of the Action Plan<sup>22</sup> on implementation of the State Strategy for the Development of Education in the Republic of Azerbaijan, the action plant have been set up to maintain distance learning, education and development for gifted children, education and development of adults, establishment of regional universal centers providing consulting services on vocational and educational issues<sup>23</sup>.”.

Although during the pandemic period the measures related to the distance education in secondary schools have been taken, people are still struggling to keep up with this new method of education. “Last year we had a lot of problems with distance education. First of all, the quality of the Internet in the villages is poor. Second, most families and teachers still

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<sup>21</sup> <https://apply.enic.edu.az/default.aspx>

<sup>22</sup> [http://www.e-qanun.az/alpdata/framework/data/29/c\\_f\\_29145.htm](http://www.e-qanun.az/alpdata/framework/data/29/c_f_29145.htm)

<sup>23</sup> Interview with the teacher of Nakhchivan secondary school

do not have a computer or smartphone. Third, most families and even most teachers still do not know how to use it.

Undoubtedly, there are many problems with the organization of distance education. Achieving a solution to these problems is impossible without studying international experience and in-depth discussion of conceptual issues. Although it is not difficult to obtain information about the form of distance education, which has been used in foreign countries for many years and have been productive, it requires a professional approach to analyze and summarize the information, to some extent systematize them and adapt to the country's educational system.

By studying the experience of international educational institutions, which have a wide student audience in the world today, it is possible to strengthen the development of national education, which is entering to a new phase.

Due to the impact of the pandemic in Azerbaijan, the situation with mobile internet and fixed internet, as well as the availability of computers and smartphones for students and their parents caused serious concerns. According to Ookla, citing the Speedtest Global Index<sup>24</sup>, in the middle of 2020, the speed of Internet traffic received in the networks from mobile operators in Azerbaijan amounted to 31.23 Mbit /s. On the eve of the pandemic, the speed of the Internet has significantly decreased due to the increasing use of Internet services by mobile operators. It should be noted that the United Arab Emirates, South Korea and China are the fastest mobile internet providers in the world. The speed of the Internet in these top three countries of the world is 105.00 Mbit /s and even more.

By mid-2020, the speed of Internet traffic received in Azerbaijan on fixed broadband networks has been 21.27 Mbit/s, and the speed of sent Internet traffic has been 22.43 Mbit /s, which ranks Azerbaijan on 115th place in the world.

The world's leading countries with high-speed fixed Internet speeds were 213.18 Mbit/s in Singapore, 202.60 Mbit/s in Hong Kong and 171.45 Mbit/s in Thailand. The global average speed of received and sent fixed Internet traffic are 81.46 Mbit/s and 42.63 Mbit/s, which increased the use of Internet by 30-40% worldwide during the pandemic.

The statistics, about the "Virtual School" platform launched on April 2, 2020<sup>25</sup> and having more than 1 million users, has been published. According to the Ministry of Education, more than 4,000 secondary schools and 131,440 teachers were registered in the system during that period. According to statistics, 68.58% of users connected to the platform via Windows, 28.75% Android, 2.27% iOS, 0.40% Mac. Although there is no information on the exact number of students and teachers in the country who have personal computers and smartphones, this statistic gives some ideas.

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<sup>24</sup> <https://apa.az/az/infrastruktur/Azrbaycanda-mobil-internetin-surti-sentyabrda-35-Mbitsaniydn-cox-olub-611248>

<sup>25</sup> [https://www.arti.edu.az/nodupload/editor/files/Final%20sayt%20%C3%BC%C3%A7%C3%BCn\\_.pdf](https://www.arti.edu.az/nodupload/editor/files/Final%20sayt%20%C3%BC%C3%A7%C3%BCn_.pdf)

## Measures taken to start the new school year

Classes in Azerbaijan start on September 15 in accordance with the country's legislation. However, due to the suspension of educational institutions for the pandemic on March 3, 2020, the second and third semesters of the academic year were conducted entirely online.

Attempts were made to start classes in educational institutions twice. On August 27, during the briefing at the Cabinet of Ministers held with the participation of the Minister of Education Emin Amrullayev and dedicated to the beginning of the new school year, it was decided to start the teaching processes on September 15. Of course, kindergartens had to be opened gradually starting from September 15. In connection with the start up of pre-school education for 120,000 children in 2020, the opening of preschool and community-based schools was scheduled to the 1st of October. However, classes were scheduled to be held twice a week.

From September 15, classes in V-XI grades of secondary schools started online, and from the 1st of October, students of V-IX grades were expected to come to school. Students of the 10th and 11th grades had to start classes on the 15th of October.

The lessons in primary grades were planned to be provided 2-3 times a week from the 15th of September, however, for V-IX grades in online form starting from the 15th of September and from the 1st of October 2-3 times a week through participation at schools. X and XI graders were scheduled to start distance learning from September 15 and full-time from October 15, by having lessons 2-3 times a week. However, the government announced that a decision would be made on November 2, depending on the epidemiological situation.

However, the Patriotic War, which began on September 27, directed all attention on the war in Azerbaijan and the elimination of its consequences. As a result of the 44-day war, 54 educational institutions located near the front line were destroyed.

During the war, more than 1,200 schools in the frontline ceased operations. Teachers and students from those areas were temporarily relocated. According to the Ministry of Education, the number of students studying in schools affected by the war was 300,000. Residents of the villages where those schools located were temporarily housed in schools in Barda and Yevlakh districts to protect them from the war.

As a result of the 44-day war that began on September 27 and the shelling of towns and villages by Armenian forces, 10 pupils were killed and 16 were injured<sup>26</sup>. There are 16 teachers among the servicemen awarded the medal "For the Motherland" by the order of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev who died heroically for the liberation of our lands from occupation.

The next academic year in Azerbaijan began on February 1, 2021. In the new school year, 121,696 children in the country were involved in school-preparatory groups in general education institutions. In the next academic year, a total of 1,574,206 students are expected to study in general education institutions of the country.

Although in total 4,440 schools - 317 primary schools, 783 general secondary schools, 3,319 full secondary schools, 16 special type schools and 5 full-time (evening) secondary schools, as well as 60 school-lyceums, 50 lyceums, including 15 gymnasiums and 14 boarding schools were planned to operate in the Republic at the beginning of the 2020-2021 academic

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<sup>26</sup> <http://abc.az/az/news/63572>

year, it changed after the war. There are schools in need for restoration and reconstruction, especially near the front line. The government is working to relocate students to those schools.

With the beginning of the new school year, it was announced that the activities of general education institutions in Baku, Sumgayit and Absheron districts will be organized twice a week, and in other cities and regions 3 times a week in accordance with special curricula.

One of the main concerns of parents regarding the start of classes was overcrowding in schools and compliance with sanitary and hygienic rules. The number of pupils studying in 182 out of 4430 schools in Azerbaijan is 1,500 and more. According to the Ministry of Education, 47% of schools in the country (2104 schools) have more than 200 pupils. In 53 percent of schools (2,335 schools), the number of pupils is less than 200. The Ministry of Education has announced that it will regulate class density if classes open. However, there is no propaganda to confirm this information.

There is a lack of information on how to address the sanitary and hygienic situation that worries parents after the pandemic. The Ministry of Education stated that there are 120,000 teachers and technical staff in educational institutions who will ensure the implementation of necessary sanitary-epidemiological measures.

The pandemic situation has seriously affected the psychology of both adults and children. Fear of the pandemic spreading and infecting children make them be more careful at school. At the same time, according to the recommendations of parents, children will be more demanding to keep distance and follow the rules of hygiene. It is inevitable that the amount of funds allocated for education will increase to ensure that the sanitary and hygienic rules in schools meet these requirements.

## **How the loss and threats of the pandemic to the development of education are assessed**

It is clear from the interviews with experts that the withdrawal of students from the teaching regime in Azerbaijan has caused many complications, and there is a need to do serious work in the country to assess its results.

“Student attendance or attendance statistics are very low. In many cases, they simply confirm their participation by joining Microsoft Teams and Zoom. This situation, which is especially common among high school students, has also been observed among university students<sup>27</sup>.”

"Measures taken against pandemic, especially online classes, have naturally affected the quality of education," he said. The price of an online degree in the world's universities has always been lower than full-time education, precisely because of the quality of education provided. Of course, it is impossible to measure the damage in the current environment, because the objectivity and accuracy of the measurement criteria is questionable. Students are given discounts on exams, they are not too busy. The indicators of entrance scores in universities can be somewhat objective for us<sup>28</sup>.

The unexpected guest - "COVID-19" in Azerbaijan, as well as in other countries, has revealed the problems and shortcomings in many areas, including in the education system. It became clear that the education sector in particular is not at a level that would adequately respond to new challenges. "I think that the damage caused by the pandemic to education in Azerbaijan and further losses it will still cause will leave a certain and growing generation" disabled "in education, and I believe that this blow will have an impact on their future lives<sup>29</sup>."

"Even before the pandemic, it was impossible to say that education was at a high level. The problems became even more pronounced simply because it was not possible to hide a number of issues behind closed doors. The period of the pandemic proved that school education is not important, it is possible to enter to universities with high scores by having preparations at tutors. The period of the pandemic revealed the unprofessionalism of a number of teachers and the inadequate organization of a number of educational institutions and universities<sup>30</sup>.

"It is difficult to teach a comprehensive lesson in 30 minutes. We lose time until the student opens the microphone and answers, which is a waste of time. In general, the topics are covered by 50-60%<sup>31</sup>.

“Students have been out of school for a long time. Attendance is important for better quality education and training. Attendance was effective and easy in full-time education. For the

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<sup>27</sup> Citation from the interview with Deputy.

<sup>28</sup> From the interview with Professor, independent expert

<sup>29</sup> Interview with the teacher of Lyceum.

<sup>30</sup> From the interview with the teacher of Azerbaijan Languages University.

<sup>31</sup> Gazakh region, interview with the history teacher.

first time, the sudden introduction of the quarantine regime led to a sudden cessation of education. And now it is possible to partially eliminate it<sup>32</sup>. "

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<sup>32</sup> Interview with the technical vocational school in Gandja city.

## Conclusions and recommendations

In the first stage of the pandemic, the suspension of educational institutions in the country was intended for a short time. Because the government and the public had no idea of the scale of the pandemic, there was a perception that the gap in education would be short and that schools would soon resume operations. At the initial stage, it was predicted that students would return to school by organizing disinfection of schools. However, after seeing the spread of the pandemic, additional measures were taken to continue the educational process in the country.

The pandemic has revealed that there is a need to comply with hygienic rules in schools. This first of all showed that in most secondary schools, sanitary and hygienic nodes did not meet the restraining rules associated with the pandemic, in particular, there was a problem in the provision of sanitary nodes with proper hygiene and sanitation.

The transition of higher and secondary education institutions to distance education due to the pandemic from April 2020 has created certain problems for the country in this direction. There was a problem with the weak infrastructure capacity for distance learning in educational institutions and the need for large sums of money to increase that capacity. The Ministry of Education of the Republic of Azerbaijan organized “Virtual Lessons” and broadcasted them on television, which helped to fill certain gaps. There are many questions in the organization of work to attract students to participate in these video lessons. This is because, although video lessons are regularly broadcast on television, students' interest and attendance at those lessons have not been measured. Schools and universities have tried to organize Whatsapp groups for classes and groups to inform about TV lessons and planned events. However, it was not possible for them to reach every student and hold him accountable.

During the pandemic, higher and secondary school principals had the opportunity to determine the level of parental involvement in their children's education. So far, parents have put all the responsibility for their children's education on the school. Of course, after school, the parent provided additional post-school support to his child through additional training courses. During the pandemic, it became clear that the conditions in families for children to continue their homework outside of school were unsatisfactory. The lack of separate rooms for children to study independently, especially during online lessons, has been a serious obstacle to their learning.

During the quarantine period, all family members were at home, and it was unrealistic for students to listen to virtual lessons broadcast on television. Especially for families with one or two rooms and two students in the family, it has not been possible to solve this problem. Not all families have personal computers or smart phones for all family members, especially school-age children. Children had to connect to online classes with their parents' phones, which had technical difficulties.

In some families, the lack of internet over the telephone line and the use of the internet over mobile phones has reduced the ability of pupils and students to attend online classes. Although the access to the Internet of people living in the city is somewhat stable, the access to the Internet of people living in the districts and villages is at a very low level.

Parents have not been able to effectively support their children during online classes. Parents, in particular, had difficulty using technical equipment and interacting with online curricula. If there were several pupils and students in the family, during the pandemic they needed computers or smartphones to ensure their attendance at online classes. This has led to additional costs for families during the pandemic. In areas where telephone internet is

weak, parents have been forced to provide their children with mobile internet to connect to the internet at the same time, which has increased family costs.

There are problems in increasing the level of education using the internet or virtual space and in the field of access of information outside the traditional education of students to the internet. The lack of digital textbooks in higher and secondary education institutions has highlighted the need to create such resources in the future. In particular, there is a need to work to ensure that digital teaching aids are accessible to students, and to increase the knowledge and skills of digital staff, teachers and students.

Despite the fact that the pandemic has been going on for more than a year, no special propaganda materials have been prepared for children in Azerbaijan to explain the protection against the pandemic, and it has not been broadcast on television. There were no information materials on coronavirus in urban and rural areas. In cities and villages, information about the coronavirus has not been found in billboards on propaganda materials that will inform children specifically.

Children's knowledge, especially in rural areas, was unsatisfactory about their computer skills or the software used by educational institutions in online classes. Due to the lack of technical knowledge of the parents themselves, they had difficulty in providing technical assistance to their children. Although teachers supported students remotely in this area, it took time to download and tune programs to their phones or computers. Sometimes this delayed students from joining the learning process for months.

Since March 2020, there have been problems in the socialization of students who have moved away from the school environment due to the quarantine regime and lost contact with their peers, and schools must work to address this issue in accordance with the new rules.

As children became more accustomed to preparing their lessons according to the school schedule, it made it difficult for them to stay home and engage in unsupervised homework during the pandemic. Especially children who did not have a special room or technical facilities to prepare for these lessons had more difficulties. In particular, students living in the regions suffered from falling away from the teaching process.

It turned out that internal communication (communication between teachers and heads of educational institutions) was not good in educational institutions. During the pandemic, there was a need to establish new communication rules between the School-Student-Parent, and the involvement of parents in the WhatsApp groups created at that time led to additional discussions.

Some teachers had to work online for 10-15 hours a day. This also affected the quality of their work and the level of materials delivered.

Given the above, if the pandemic wave does not subside in the next academic year, it will cost a lot to adapt the educational institutions to new standards, introduce new rules, establish medical sanitary and hygienic norms. In this regard, the main issue facing the government, especially the Ministry of Education and the executive authorities in the coming months is the successful implementation of the existing rules for the new academic year.

## Recommendations

- Taking into account the current state of the coronavirus pandemic, in order to increase the immunity of Azerbaijani educational institutions in the fight against infectious viruses, internal infrastructure changes in schools, strict control of sanitary and hygienic rules, school entrance inspections and other safety rules should be restructured. At the same time, attention should be paid to the implementation of regular disinfection measures in schools and the provision of educational institutions with additional means to comply with sanitary and hygienic rules.
- In order to strengthen the transition to mixed education in the country, there is a need to accelerate the work on the basis of the state program and radically modify schools in this regard. In particular, the organization of classrooms for the organization of virtual lessons, the creation of material and technical base for the organization of video broadcasts from specially designed rooms in schools should begin.
- In order to accelerate the transition to a mixed form of education, attention should be paid to increasing the technical base of schools, increasing the knowledge of the pedagogical staff conducting distance education on computers and necessary programs;
- In order to expand distance learning opportunities in Azerbaijan, cooperation with educational platforms should be strengthened, and training should be provided to increase the knowledge of school teachers and technical staff about these platforms.
- It is necessary to create a digital library of higher education institutions in Azerbaijan, to provide free access to these libraries for students, masters and people engaged in scientific work. To increase the co-operation of digital library resources between universities, in the future, students should plan joint activities to facilitate the work of the use of these resources;
- To carry out mapping in order to eliminate personnel shortage in some subjects in remote rural schools, it is necessary to organize online classes taking into account the need in those areas. The teacher who is interested in online lesson should try to stimulate the staff and create their database.
- As it is impossible to predict how long the pandemic will last, it is necessary to implement a state program for the development of distance learning and digital textbooks in the country and to accelerate work in the field;
- The concept of building relationships between the school-parent and the student in order to improve distance learning and become more productive should be studied. In the future, through schools, parents should be informed about programs that will be necessary for distance education, to explain their behavior with these programs and rules in homes with students, or to organize courses;
- In order to increase the interest in distance education in the country and stimulate people interested in the application of this form of education, it is necessary to achieve exchange programs, conferences or seminars throughout the country.

## **Humanitarian Research Public Union**

Photo: From the web page of the Ministry of Education of Azerbaijan Republic.

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