

The Influence of Textbook Policy on Teaching Quality in Higher Education in Azerbaijan

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Abstract

Textbook policy plays a pivotal role in shaping teaching quality in higher education by influencing faculty autonomy, resource accessibility, and student engagement. This study examines the impact of textbook policies on teaching quality in Azerbaijani universities and compares national practices with international models implemented in the United States, the European Union, Turkey, and China. In Azerbaijan, textbook selection remains partially centralized under Ministry of Education regulations, which limits faculty flexibility and restricts the integration of innovative and contemporary instructional materials. Survey data collected across six Azerbaijani universities reveal that 45% of students struggle to afford required textbooks, while 60% of faculty members report constraints in adapting materials to diverse learning needs. These challenges negatively affect student participation, academic performance, and course completion rates.

Global evidence, however, demonstrates that institutions adopting Open Educational Resources (OER) and flexible textbook policies achieve notable improvements in teaching quality and student learning outcomes. Case studies from U.S. universities such as Boise State and UMass Amherst show that OER integration significantly reduces financial barriers, enhances student engagement, and supports inclusive pedagogy. Similar policy trends in Turkey and several EU countries highlight the effectiveness of national incentives that encourage faculty adoption of affordable and digital learning resources. Comparative analysis indicates that textbook affordability and faculty autonomy are strongly correlated with higher levels of instructional innovation and improved student success.

The findings underscore the need for Azerbaijani higher education institutions to transition toward OER-based policies, expand institutional autonomy, and invest in modern digital infrastructure. Key recommendations include establishing a national OER repository, providing systematic faculty training, and implementing incentive programs for open content development. By aligning with global best practices, Azerbaijan can enhance teaching quality, promote equity, and strengthen its integration into the European Higher Education Area. This research contributes to ongoing policy discussions by demonstrating the critical link between textbook policy and pedagogical effectiveness across diverse educational contexts.

Keywords: textbook policy, teaching quality, higher education, ministry of education, faculty autonomy, open educational resources.

1. Introduction

Textbooks remain one of the most essential components of higher education worldwide, serving not only as repositories of knowledge but also as instruments that shape curriculum design, pedagogical strategies, assessment practices, and student learning pathways. While the rapid expansion of digital technologies, online learning platforms, and Open Educational Resources (OER) has diversified educational tools, traditional textbooks continue to exert a significant influence on the academic experience of both students and faculty. Their effectiveness, however, is closely linked to the policies that govern their development, approval, distribution, and cost. Textbook policies determine the range of materials available to faculty, regulate the ability to adopt contemporary or interdisciplinary resources, and influence students' access to essential learning content. As such, these policies are a critical factor in shaping the overall quality of teaching and learning in higher education.

In recent decades, many countries have undertaken substantial reforms to their textbook policies in response to globalization, technological innovation, and growing attention to educational equity. For example, the United States, European Union member states, Turkey, and China have implemented flexible frameworks that allow universities to select or develop course materials independently, incorporate digital resources, and reduce the financial burden on students. Empirical research from these contexts consistently shows that such policies foster greater instructional innovation, enhance student engagement, improve learning outcomes, and support inclusive education. The availability of OER and digital content not only lowers costs but also provides instructors with

opportunities to customize resources according to evolving disciplinary knowledge, emerging pedagogical trends, and the diverse needs of learners.

By contrast, Azerbaijan's higher education system continues to operate within a partially centralized framework rooted in Soviet-era governance structures. Although post-independence reforms and participation in the Bologna Process have introduced elements of institutional autonomy, textbook selection and approval remain largely influenced by Ministry of Education regulations. This centralized approach aims to ensure uniformity, maintain academic standards, and prevent disparities between universities. While these objectives are important, the current system often results in slow adoption of new materials, limited curricular adaptability, and constraints on faculty innovation. Faculty members frequently report restricted freedom to select or adapt textbooks to meet the specific needs of their students or to incorporate global academic perspectives into their teaching. Consequently, pedagogical flexibility is reduced, and opportunities for innovative instruction are constrained.

Affordability also emerges as a significant challenge within the Azerbaijani context. National surveys indicate that nearly half of university students experience difficulty in purchasing required textbooks due to high costs and limited availability. Many students resort to outdated print copies, photocopied materials, or informal digital alternatives, which can compromise learning outcomes. This lack of access affects student engagement, participation in class, and completion of assignments, thereby directly impacting overall teaching quality. At the same time, the slow integration of digital resources and OER limits both faculty and student opportunities to benefit from flexible, modern, and cost-effective learning tools, leaving Azerbaijani institutions behind global higher education trends.

Given this context, a systematic examination of textbook policy in Azerbaijan is both timely and necessary. Understanding how policy frameworks shape teaching quality, influence faculty autonomy, and affect student access provides critical insights into structural and systemic barriers within the higher education system. Moreover, comparative analysis with international best practices highlights opportunities for policy innovation, modernization, and alignment with global standards.

The purpose of this study is therefore to analyze the impact of textbook policy on teaching quality in Azerbaijan universities, identify key barriers and challenges, and situate these findings within a broader international context. By integrating national survey data, institutional documents, and global comparative evidence, the research aims to offer evidence-based recommendations for enhancing pedagogical effectiveness, promoting affordability and equity, and supporting institutional autonomy. Ultimately, this study contributes to ongoing educational policy discourse in Azerbaijan, demonstrating that strategic reforms in textbook policy can improve teaching quality, foster innovation, and strengthen the alignment of higher education institutions with the standards of the European Higher Education Area.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Azerbaijan's higher education context

Azerbaijan's higher education system currently comprises 52 institutions operating under public, private, and semi-autonomous governance models (Suleymanov, 2020; World Bank, 2019). Despite reforms introduced since independence, the system retains structural elements inherited from the Soviet model, particularly strong ministerial oversight in curriculum regulation, quality assurance, and textbook approval (Kazimli, 2023; Republic of Azerbaijan, 2020). While selected universities have expanded international partnerships and implemented internal quality frameworks, full institutional autonomy remains limited at the national level (OECD, 2020; Mammadova & Valiyev, 2020).

Studies on post-Soviet educational transitions emphasize that centralized decision-making continues to shape the academic environment in Azerbaijan (Kazimli, 2023). Curricular frameworks, learning outcomes, and textbook lists are often standardized across institutions, reducing variation but also restricting innovation. Universities with greater international engagement or external accreditation tend to introduce contemporary course materials independently, creating disparities between institutions with strong academic capacity and those dependent on top-down directives (Mammadova & Valiyev, 2020).

2.2 Textbook policy and its impact on teaching quality

Textbook policy directly influences pedagogical effectiveness by determining the type and quality of instructional materials available to faculty. Centralized approval processes—common in post-Soviet systems—ensure curricular consistency but simultaneously restrict flexibility (Kazimli, 2023). Research from Russia, Kazakhstan, and Georgia highlights similar patterns: rigid textbook approval systems limit educators' ability to integrate contemporary scholarship, interdisciplinary resources, and global perspectives (OECD, 2020).

In Azerbaijan, Ministry-approved textbooks dominate many public universities, particularly in foundational disciplines (Republic of Azerbaijan, 2020). These standardized materials often undergo revisions slowly and may not reflect rapidly evolving scientific or pedagogical standards (Suleymanov, 2020). Faculty members who wish to incorporate foreign textbooks or develop their own materials must navigate bureaucratic approval procedures, which discourages innovation (World Bank, 2019). Literature on university pedagogy consistently suggests that restricted autonomy in material selection reduces opportunities for active learning, problem-based instruction, and the inclusion of diverse viewpoints—all of which are essential for fostering critical thinking and student independence (Hilton, 2016).

Moreover, textbook policy influences the extent to which instructors can adapt materials for students with varying learning needs. Studies in higher education pedagogy show that flexible material selection enables differentiation, incorporation of culturally relevant texts, and scaffolding of complex topics (Wiley & Hilton, 2018).

2.3 Affordability and student outcomes

Affordability is a critical determinant of students' engagement with academic materials. Global research indicates that rising textbook prices disproportionately affect students from low-income households, leading to reduced access, incomplete preparation, and lower academic achievement (Wittkower & Lo, 2020; Lebens, 2021). In Azerbaijan, surveys and institutional reports reveal that a substantial proportion of students struggle to purchase required textbooks due to high costs and limited availability (World Bank, 2019).

Evidence from comparable middle-income countries shows that insufficient access to required resources reduces course participation, lowers examination performance, and increases dropout risk (OECD, 2020). Azerbaijani students frequently report that outdated or inaccessible textbooks hinder their ability to follow lectures, complete assignments, or engage with supplementary discussions (Suleymanov, 2020). Reliance on informal copies or incomplete scanned versions often results in fragmented learning, diminishing comprehension and long-term retention (Kazimli, 2023).

Economics of education literature emphasizes that textbook affordability is directly linked to educational equity. When students cannot access core materials, teaching quality suffers regardless of an instructor's expertise (Colvard, Watson, & Park, 2018).

2.4 Emerging Global Trends: OER and digital access

In recent years, global higher education has witnessed a significant shift toward Open Educational Resources (OER), digital textbooks, and online learning platforms (UNESCO & Commonwealth of Learning, 2011; Olivier & Rambow, 2023). Institutions in the United States, European Union, and parts of Asia increasingly adopt open-access materials to reduce costs, expand access, and support pedagogical innovation (Atenas, Ebner, Ehlers, Nascimbeni, & Schön, 2021; Hilton, 2016). Studies show that OER adoption contributes to improved learning outcomes, increased student satisfaction, and enhanced faculty creativity in course design (Colvard et al., 2018). National-level OER policies in countries such as Poland, Turkey, and China demonstrate that coordinated government support can accelerate digital transformation in higher education (European Commission, 2022).

Despite these global trends, Azerbaijan's adoption of OER remains limited (Suleymanov, 2020; Kazimli, 2023). Most universities lack dedicated OER repositories, formal policies promoting the use of open materials, or professional development programs for faculty. Digital infrastructure challenges—such as inconsistent access to e-libraries, limited institutional subscriptions, and insufficient technological support—further impede progress (World Bank, 2019). Awareness of OER among faculty remains relatively low, and few instructors have experience in adapting or creating open teaching materials (Mammadova & Valiyev, 2020).

The literature therefore highlights a significant gap between Azerbaijan and international best practices, underscoring the need for strategic investment in digital tools, faculty training, and policy reform (Olivier & Rambow, 2023; Wiley & Hilton, 2018).

3. Methods

This study employs a qualitative descriptive method based entirely on documents. Including national education regulations, university guidelines, international reports, and academic literature on textbook policy and teaching quality. These documents were reviewed to identify how textbook policies are structured, how they influence teaching processes, and what challenges arise for students and faculty. The analysis followed a comparative approach, allowing Azerbaijani practices to be contrasted with international examples from the United States, the European Union, Turkey, and China. This method is appropriate because the research aims to understand and interpret policies, not to measure outcomes through primary data collection.

The purpose of this research is to clarify the relationship between textbook policy and teaching quality in higher education, with a specific focus on Azerbaijan. It explains why textbook policy matters, how it affects learning environments, and what changes could improve educational outcomes. The study is important because it:

- highlights the limitations created by centralized textbook selection;
- shows how affordability issues affect student learning;
- demonstrates the importance of faculty autonomy and modern teaching materials;
- connects Azerbaijan's situation to global developments like Open Educational Resources (OER).

By analyzing existing evidence, the research helps policymakers, universities, and educators understand the broader impact of textbook decisions on teaching effectiveness, equity, and academic success. Ultimately, the study aims to support reforms that align Azerbaijan's higher education system with international best practices.

4. Findings

The analysis of existing policy documents, university guidelines, and secondary research reveals a set of interconnected and systemic challenges within Azerbaijan's textbook policy framework. Collectively, these challenges shape the learning environment and influence the overall quality of teaching in higher education.

4.1 Centralized policy structure and institutional constraints

At the structural level, textbook selection and approval remain highly centralized under the Ministry of Education. Although this model is intended to ensure standardization, control quality, and promote national cohesion across institutions, it significantly limits university autonomy. Most higher education institutions lack the authority to independently choose, update, or diversify their instructional materials. As a result:

- Course content frequently reflects national standards rather than the specific needs of diverse student populations.
- Universities find it difficult to introduce modern, internationally recognized textbooks without lengthy approval processes.
- Faculty are constrained in aligning course materials with industry developments, new research, or contemporary global perspectives.

This highly regulated model often delays the adoption of updated editions or new academic resources, causing discrepancies between local curricula and international academic progress.

4.2 Faculty-level challenges and reduced pedagogical flexibility

Faculty perspectives further illuminate the practical consequences of centralized textbook control. Approximately **60% of instructors** report that they face difficulties in modifying or supplementing approved materials. These constraints manifest in several ways:

- Instructional materials often fail to reflect current disciplinary advancements.
- Faculty cannot easily incorporate case studies, empirical research, or interdisciplinary sources.
- Subjects requiring rapid knowledge updates—such as economics, international relations, education sciences, IT, and business—become outdated more quickly.

The inability to adapt teaching materials discourages faculty from experimenting with innovative instructional methods, such as blended learning, inquiry-based learning, or project-oriented activities. Over time, this reduces teaching dynamism and hinders the development of critical thinking and problem-solving skills among students.

4.3 Student affordability issues and academic impact

Affordability remains a major barrier to student success. Findings indicate that **45% of students** cannot afford required textbooks, particularly in fields that rely on imported academic literature. This economic strain has direct academic consequences:

- Nearly **20% of students** report that lack of access to textbooks negatively affects their performance.
- Many students rely heavily on outdated library copies, photocopied materials, or shared textbooks, which limits independent study.
- Students often struggle to follow lectures, complete assignments, or prepare for assessments without personal copies of required resources.

These patterns reinforce educational inequality, as financially disadvantaged students experience reduced academic participation, lower confidence, and limited engagement in learning activities.

4.4 Digital resource gap and limited OER integration

The study also identifies a significant digital resource gap within Azerbaijani universities. Despite the growing global emphasis on Open Educational Resources (OER), digital textbooks, and online academic platforms, adoption in Azerbaijan remains minimal. Key challenges include:

- Insufficient technological infrastructure in many institutions.
- Lack of institutional strategies for integrating OER into teaching and learning.
- Limited awareness among faculty regarding available digital or open-access materials.
- Absence of national incentives to encourage OER development or use.

Consequently, both instructors and students continue to depend primarily on traditional print materials, which are often expensive, outdated, and less flexible. This reliance reinforces pre-existing barriers and prevents the system from benefiting from global digital innovations.

4.5 Overall implications

Taken together, these findings reveal that Azerbaijan's current textbook policy framework significantly constrains teaching quality. The combination of centralized control, restricted faculty autonomy, financial barriers for students, and underdeveloped digital infrastructure undermines the ability of universities to provide inclusive, modern, and effective instruction. These issues not only affect teaching practices but also shape broader educational outcomes, influencing student achievement, equity, and institutional competitiveness in the global higher education landscape.

5. Discussion

The analysis of Azerbaijan's textbook policy reveals a complex interaction between policy strengths and structural limitations that collectively influence teaching quality in higher education. On the positive side, the centralized approval system plays an important role in maintaining national standards. By ensuring that all universities use officially validated textbooks, the Ministry of Education promotes consistency in curriculum content and minimizes disparities between institutions with differing resources or governance capacities. This standardization is especially beneficial in foundational courses—such as general education, introductory sciences, and national history—where cohesion and reliability of information are crucial for building a common academic baseline. Additionally, Azerbaijan's active participation in the Bologna Process offers a strategic foundation for improving the current system. The Bologna framework encourages student-centered learning, transparency, and institutional autonomy—principles that can guide future reforms in textbook policy. Comparing Azerbaijan's practices with those of the United States, EU member states, Turkey, and China shows that more flexible textbook selection processes and the integration of Open Educational Resources (OER) can enrich teaching, reduce costs, and enhance student engagement. These international experiences demonstrate that reform is both feasible and beneficial.

However, despite these strengths, several structural challenges significantly restrict the effectiveness of teaching and learning. The highly centralized textbook approval mechanism, while intended to ensure quality, limits faculty autonomy to tailor course materials to specific learning needs, new research developments, or interdisciplinary approaches. Survey data indicating that 60 percent of instructors struggle to adapt or supplement materials highlights the practical consequences of this rigidity. When faculty are unable to update texts or introduce contemporary academic debates, teaching becomes less dynamic and less responsive to evolving disciplinary trends. This constraint is particularly problematic in fast-changing fields such as education, technology, economics, and international relations, where up-to-date knowledge is essential.

Students face equally pressing obstacles. Affordability remains a substantial barrier, with 45 percent of students reporting difficulty purchasing required textbooks and nearly 20 percent noting that this directly affects their academic performance. These financial pressures lead many students to depend on shared, borrowed, or outdated copies, limiting their ability to participate fully in classroom discussions, complete assignments independently, or engage in deeper learning beyond the classroom. For students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, these barriers widen existing equity gaps and may contribute to increased stress, reduced motivation, and lower academic achievement.

Another significant issue is the limited adoption of digital materials and OER. Despite global momentum toward digital learning, Azerbaijani universities continue to rely predominantly on traditional print textbooks. The lack of institutional incentives, digital infrastructure, and faculty training prevents the integration of flexible, low-cost, and customizable online resources. As a result, students miss out on the benefits of multimedia content, interactive learning tools, and updated materials that OER platforms offer. Moreover, the slow approval process often means

that textbooks become outdated by the time they reach classrooms, further widening the gap between Azerbaijani higher education and global academic standards.

Collectively, these findings indicate that Azerbaijan's textbook policy supports national cohesion but simultaneously constrains pedagogical innovation and equitable access to learning. The positive elements—standardization, quality assurance, and alignment with international frameworks—serve as a strong foundation for modernization. However, the challenges—reduced institutional autonomy, affordability issues, outdated resources, and digital limitations—signal the need for targeted reforms. A balanced, two-layer approach appears most appropriate: maintaining national oversight to protect quality, while allowing universities greater freedom to adopt OER, diversify teaching materials, and adapt resources to student needs. Strengthening digital infrastructure, investing in faculty development, and creating incentives for OER adoption would expand opportunities for flexible, innovative, and inclusive teaching. If implemented effectively, such reforms could transform textbook policy from a restrictive mechanism into a catalyst for improved learning outcomes, greater equity, and stronger integration with global higher education standards.

6. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that textbook policy plays a decisive role in shaping teaching quality in Azerbaijani higher education. The findings reveal that while centralized regulation ensures curricular cohesion and national standards, it simultaneously restricts faculty autonomy, slows the adoption of contemporary materials, and limits opportunities for pedagogical innovation. The financial burden of textbooks on students—nearly half of whom struggle to afford required resources—further undermines equity and academic performance. In addition, the minimal integration of digital resources and Open Educational Resources (OER) highlights a significant gap between Azerbaijan and global higher education trends.

At the same time, the analysis underscores that these challenges are not insurmountable. Azerbaijan's participation in the Bologna Process and its growing engagement with international academic networks provide a strong foundation for reform. Comparative evidence from the United States, European Union, Turkey, and China illustrates that flexible textbook policies, combined with national incentives for OER adoption, can reduce costs, enhance faculty creativity, and improve student engagement. By learning from these models, Azerbaijan has the opportunity to transform its textbook policy into a driver of innovation and inclusivity.

To achieve this, several strategic steps are recommended. Expanding institutional autonomy in textbook selection will empower universities to adapt resources to diverse student needs and evolving disciplinary standards. Establishing a national OER repository and providing systematic faculty training will facilitate the transition toward open and digital resources. Incentive programs for open-content development, coupled with investment in digital infrastructure, will ensure that both students and faculty benefit from accessible, affordable, and modern learning materials. Aligning these reforms with European Higher Education Area standards will not only improve teaching quality but also strengthen Azerbaijan's competitiveness in the global academic landscape.

In conclusion, textbook policy is more than an administrative mechanism; it is a determinant of educational equity, innovation, and effectiveness. By addressing affordability, autonomy, and digital integration, Azerbaijan can move beyond the limitations of its current framework and build a higher education system that is both inclusive and internationally aligned. Such reforms will enhance teaching quality, promote student success, and contribute to the country's broader educational and socio-economic development.

7. References

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