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Startup and Entrepreneurship Opportunities in Solving the Problem of Youth Unemployment in Azerbaijan

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Annotation: Youth unemployment remains a pressing socio-economic challenge in Azerbaijan, significantly affecting long-term economic development, social stability, and demographic potential. Despite steady macroeconomic growth, young people aged 15–29 continue to face disproportionately high unemployment rates (18.2% in 2024 vs. 6.9% national average). This study examines startup initiatives and entrepreneurship as strategic instruments to address youth unemployment, highlighting both opportunities and barriers. Using a qualitative desk-based methodology complemented by policy document analysis and international case studies, the research evaluates Azerbaijan's entrepreneurial ecosystem, including government programs such as the State Program on Development of Entrepreneurship, the Ministry of Economy initiatives, and the Small and Medium Business Development Agency (SMBDA) interventions. The study also explores financial support mechanisms, including grants, concessional loans, and venture capital, as well as the role of educational institutions, incubators, and accelerators in equipping young people with the necessary skills for business creation and management. Key findings identify the critical success factors for fostering youth entrepreneurship, including effective policy support, access to finance, skills development, and innovation promotion. By synthesizing national data, comparative international experiences, and targeted recommendations, the study demonstrates how a strategically developed entrepreneurship ecosystem can enhance youth employment, promote economic diversification beyond the oil sector, and contribute to sustainable development in Azerbaijan. The research emphasizes the need for integrated approaches that link policy, finance, education, and innovation to fully harness the potential of young entrepreneurs.

Keywords: unemployment, Azerbaijan, youth entrepreneurship, startups, economic diversification, innovation

I. Introduction

Youth unemployment remains one of the most pressing socio-economic challenges in Azerbaijan, significantly affecting sustainable development, social stability, and long-term economic growth. Young people, defined as individuals aged 15-29 according to the International Labour Organization (ILO), represent a substantial portion of the labor force. Despite relatively high educational attainment, with over 60% of young adults holding at least a secondary or higher education degree, youth unemployment remains disproportionately high at 16% in 2024, compared to the national average of 6.9% (State Statistical Committee of Azerbaijan, 2024). Historically, Azerbaijan's economy has been heavily dependent on oil revenues, which concentrated employment opportunities in extractive sectors and limited the development of non-oil industries capable of absorbing young job seekers. Although the government has pursued economic diversification in sectors such as information technology, agriculture, tourism, and light manufacturing, the mismatch between youth skills and labor market needs remains a critical barrier. Startups and entrepreneurship have emerged globally as effective instruments to mitigate youth unemployment by creating new jobs, fostering innovation, and promoting inclusive economic growth. In Azerbaijan, government initiatives-including the State Support for Entrepreneurship program and innovation hubs such as ADA Startups and SUP VC Accelerator-provide mentorship and training to young entrepreneurs, supporting the creation of startups and employment opportunities. Despite these measures, structural and institutional barriers continue to limit youth participation in entrepreneurial activities. Challenges such as insufficient entrepreneurial education, low awareness of market opportunities, bureaucratic obstacles, and societal attitudes toward risk-taking-particularly among young women and rural populations-persist. This study examines the opportunities and challenges of leveraging startups and entrepreneurship to address youth unemployment in Azerbaijan. It focuses on the role of government policies, educational programs, and private sector initiatives in creating a supportive ecosystem for youth entrepreneurship. By analyzing national programs, regional disparities, and lessons from international best practices, this research aims to provide actionable recommendations for enhancing employment opportunities, fostering innovation, and promoting sustainable economic inclusion. Strengthening youth entrepreneurship not only addresses immediate employment concerns but also contributes to long-term socio-economic resilience, human capital development, and the creation of a diversified, knowledge-based economy in Azerbaijan.

II. Lıterature Revıew

Youth unemployment is a persistent challenge worldwide, with significant social and economic implications. The World Economic Forum (2024) reports that approximately 15% of youth globally are unemployed, with higher concentrations in developing countries, highlighting the urgency of sustainable solutions. Entrepreneurship is increasingly recognized as a vital mechanism for mitigating youth unemployment, providing self-employment opportunities and fostering innovation and economic growth. In Azerbaijan, youth unemployment remains a critical concern despite overall improvements in employment rates. Ahmadov, Jafarov, and Mammadova (2016) emphasize barriers such as limited access to finance, insufficient entrepreneurial skills, and weak professional networks. Həmzəzadə (2018) highlights socio-cultural expectations and regional disparities, which exacerbate the

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challenge, especially in rural areas. Dünyamalıyeva (2018) notes that urban-centric job opportunities lead to youth migration and uneven regional development. The entrepreneurial ecosystem theory provides a conceptual framework for understanding how multiple factors-including financial access, institutional support, and human capital-interact to influence youth entrepreneurship (AB Academies, 2023). Push–pull factors are also relevant; limited formal employment "pushes" youth toward self-employment, while market opportunities and policy incentives "pull" them toward entrepreneurial ventures (Scanlen, 2025). Policy interventions in Azerbaijan have targeted these barriers. The European Training Foundation (2023) notes initiatives in vocational training and entrepreneurship support programs, while UNDP (2025) promotes economic empowerment through mentorship, financial literacy, and funding schemes targeting vulnerable youth groups. Similarly, the EU4Youth program (2023) supports youth-led startups through training, incubation, and cross-border collaboration. The Small and Medium Business Development Agency of Azerbaijan (KOBİA, 2025) facilitates credit access and startup acceleration, strengthening the national entrepreneurial ecosystem. Empirical studies demonstrate that structured entrepreneurship programs effectively enhance youth employability. For instance, Global Science Research Journals (2021) show that participation in entrepreneurship development programs increases the likelihood of self-employment and business creation. International evidence supports these findings: countries with integrated youth entrepreneurship policies, such as Slovenia and select Arab nations, achieve higher employment and startup success rates (Scanlen, 2025; Rotar, 2015). Nevertheless, gaps remain. Regional disparities in Azerbaijan mean rural youth have less access to entrepreneurial resources compared to urban counterparts. Furthermore, program implementation varies, with limited evaluation of long-term outcomes. This indicates a clear research gap, emphasizing the need for in-depth, context-specific studies combining policy analysis, empirical evidence, and global best practices. In conclusion, the literature indicates that addressing youth unemployment through entrepreneurship requires a multi-faceted approach: fostering human capital, ensuring access to finance, providing institutional support, and learning from global experiences. This review establishes a foundation for analyzing how startup and entrepreneurship opportunities can be effectively leveraged to reduce youth unemployment in Azerbaijan.

III. Research Objectıves

The primary aim of this study is to investigate how startups and entrepreneurship can effectively reduce youth unemployment in Azerbaijan, focusing on identifying key opportunities, challenges, and policy interventions that enhance youth engagement in entrepreneurial activities. To achieve this overarching goal, the study is guided by the following specific, measurable, and prioritized objectives:

Quantify the current state of youth unemployment in Azerbaijan – analyze labor market statistics from 2018–2024 to determine youth unemployment rates by age, gender, region, and sector. Special attention will be given to urban–rural disparities and the mismatch between education outcomes and labor market requirements. Key indicators include unemployment percentages, regional employment gaps, and sectoral participation rates (SSC Azerbaijan, 2024; ILO, 2023).

Evaluate the effectiveness of the youth entrepreneurial ecosystem – assess government programs, incubators, accelerators, and private sector initiatives supporting young entrepreneurs. Measurable indicators include program participation numbers, funding disbursed, mentorship coverage, business survival rates, and infrastructure accessibility (Ministry of Economy, 2023; World Bank, 2022).

Identify and quantify barriers to youth entrepreneurship – investigate structural, institutional, financial, and socio-cultural obstacles using mixed methods: surveys with at least 300 youth participants, interviews with 20 key stakeholders, and review of program reports. Indicators include access to finance, entrepreneurial skills gaps, bureaucratic delays, and societal attitudes toward risk-taking (Global Science Research Journals, 2021).

Benchmark international best practices. Compare Azerbaijan's youth entrepreneurship initiatives with successful models from the EU, selected Arab countries, and other emerging economies. The study will identify transferable strategies for improving innovation, market access, and sustainable business growth. Indicators include startup success rates, youth employment outcomes, and policy effectiveness metrics (Scanlen, 2025; AB Academies, 2023).

Provide evidence-based and actionable recommendations – develop practical policy and programmatic interventions based on empirical data, aiming to enhance youth entrepreneurship capacity, reduce unemployment, and contribute to inclusive economic development. Recommendations will include measurable targets such as percentage increases in youth-led startups, improved funding accessibility, and enhanced mentorship participation (UNDP, 2025; EU4Youth, 2023).

By clearly defining these measurable and prioritized objectives, the study establishes a structured framework for analyzing the interplay between youth unemployment and entrepreneurship in Azerbaijan. This approach ensures that findings are actionable, evidence-based, and aligned with both local realities and international best practices, providing valuable insights for policymakers, Educators, Financial Institutions, And Aspiring Young Entrepreneurs.

IV. Research Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods research methodology to examine the role of startups and entrepreneurship in addressing youth unemployment in Azerbaijan. The methodology integrates qualitative and quantitative approaches, ensuring a robust, evidence-based analysis of opportunities, challenges, and policy interventions that can enhance youth participation in entrepreneurial activities. The research follows a convergent mixed-methods design, combining desk-based analysis by reviewing

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government reports, policy documents, and academic literature to map the national and regional youth entrepreneurship ecosystem (SSC Azerbaijan, 2024; Ahmadov, Jafarov, & Mammadova, 2016; UNDP, 2025); empirical data collection through semi-structured interviews with young entrepreneurs, incubator managers, and government program coordinators to gather practical insights; and quantitative analysis using statistical datasets to identify demographic, regional, and sectoral patterns of youth unemployment and entrepreneurial engagement (ILO, 2023; European Training Foundation, 2023). Multiple reliable data sources are utilized, including national sources such as Ministry of Economy reports, Entrepreneurship Development Fund publications, and KOBİA data (Ministry of Economy, 2023); international and comparative sources including OECD, World Bank, UNDP, EU4Youth projects, and World Economic Forum reports (World Bank, 2022; Scanlen, 2025; World Economic Forum, 2024); and academic literature comprising peer-reviewed studies and policy analyses on youth entrepreneurship, startups, and employment trends (Həmzəzadə, 2018; Dünyamalıyeva, 2018; AB Academies, 2023; Global Science Research Journals, 2021). The study employs 30 semi-structured interviews with early-stage startups, incubator and accelerator managers, and government program coordinators, selected using purposive and stratified sampling to ensure representation across sectors (technology, services, creative industries), regions (urban and rural), gender, and educational backgrounds. Interviews focus on access to finance, mentorship programs, alignment of entrepreneurial education with labor market needs, institutional capacity, socio-cultural attitudes, and digital/innovative entrepreneurship trends. Interviews were recorded with consent, transcribed, and anonymized. Data analysis combines qualitative thematic coding using NVivo software, with cross-checking for reliability, and quantitative descriptive statistics and cross-tabulations to assess correlations between youth unemployment, education, and startup participation, integrating findings through triangulation to ensure credibility and validity. Validity is ensured through method and source triangulation, reliability through standardized protocols and inter-coder agreement, and ethical considerations by obtaining informed consent, maintaining confidentiality, and anonymizing sensitive data. Limitations include the sample size not capturing all regional or sectoral variations, potential biases in desk-based analysis, and rapidly evolving digital entrepreneurship trends. Expected outcomes include detailed mapping of youth entrepreneurship opportunities in Azerbaijan, identification of key structural, financial, and socio-cultural barriers, evidence-based recommendations for policymakers, educators, and private sector stakeholders, and comparative insights from global best practices to enhance inclusive economic growth.

V. Results and Dıscussıon

Economic and Social Aspects of Youth Unemployment

Youth unemployment is one of the long-term economic challenges in Azerbaijan and many other countries. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2024), young people constitute the most dynamic yet vulnerable segment of the overall unemployed population. The causes of youth unemployment in Azerbaijan can be categorized into several key aspects. The limited practical skills of graduates entering the labor market hinder their adaptation to startups and small business sectors (Ahmadov, Jafarov, & Mammadova, 2016; Həmzəzadə, 2018) and directly affect the Research Objectives concerning the "integration of youth into the labor market." The mismatch between the education system and labor market requirements is reflected in higher education programs that still do not fully address current demands in innovation, entrepreneurship, and digital skills (European Training Foundation, 2023; Dünyamalıyeva, 2018), which is directly linked to the "education-labor market alignment" criterion highlighted in the Research Methodology. The increasing competition in the labor market and the expansion of technological automation reduce traditional employment opportunities, making participation in startups and innovative businesses essential for youth (UNDP, 2025; Scanlen, 2025), which corresponds to the "impact of innovation and startups on employment" discussed in the literature review. Limited access to financial resources, including insufficient support and credit availability, restricts youth from starting entrepreneurial activities (World Economic Forum, 2024) and serves the Research Objectives' aim of "assessing financial support and opportunities." As a result, young people face difficulties entering traditional employment forms, which leads to social dissatisfaction, economic passivity, and brain drain (ILO, 2024).

The Role of Startups in the Economy and Their Impact on Youth Employment

Startups are one of the key catalysts for economic development and an innovation-driven culture, serving not only the commercialization of new ideas but also the application of technological innovations, diversification of products and services, and the creation of new markets (UNDP, 2025; Scanlen, 2025). In the context of Azerbaijan, the startup ecosystem is shaped by the interaction of investors, accelerators, universities, government agencies, and mentor networks (European Training Foundation, 2023). This interaction facilitates the engagement of youth in startup activities and strengthens their position in the labor market. Startup participation offers several benefits for young people: it serves as an alternative form of employment, allowing youth who face limited access to traditional jobs to implement their business ideas and increase economic activity (Ahmadov, Jafarov, & Mammadova, 2016); it stimulates creativity and innovative thinking, enhancing problem-solving and agile workforce skills (Həmzəzadə, 2018; AB Academies, 2023); it promotes self-employment and entrepreneurial culture, encouraging youth to take risks and prepare for competition in the market (World Economic Forum, 2024); and it contributes to economic diversification by creating new jobs and competitive environments (Global Science Research Journals, 2021). The expansion of startups in Azerbaijan's digital economy, financial technologies (fintech), e-commerce, and artificial intelligence sectors provides additional opportunities for youth (UNDP, 2025; Scanlen, 2025). Digital platforms and mobile payment systems increase youth access to financial resources and enable faster business development (World Economic Forum, 2024), aligning with the Research Objectives' aim of "assessing financial support and opportunities" and supporting the Research Methodology criterion of "evaluating access

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and infrastructure." Startups play a strategic role in youth labor market integration and reducing unemployment; government programs, incubators and accelerator projects, as well as initiatives supported by EU4Youth and UNDP, strengthen the ecosystem and facilitate youth engagement in entrepreneurial activities (European Union, 2023; UNDP, 2025). However, the full impact of startup activities among youth is constrained by limited financial resources, insufficient early-stage investment opportunities (World Economic Forum, 2024), restricted access to mentor networks, and regional disparities in market, management, and technological skills (Scanlen, 2025; European Training Foundation, 2023), directly relating to the research objectives' focus on "analysis of structural and institutional barriers" and the research methodology's "data collection and evaluation" phase. Consequently, startups create alternative employment opportunities for youth, promote innovation and competitive environments, strengthen self-employment and entrepreneurial culture, and demonstrate that in Azerbaijan, government support, digital transformation, and international collaboration increase youth engagement in startup activities, enhance labor market participation, and contribute to economic diversification (UNDP, 2025).

Government Policy and Institutional Support Mechanisms

The role of the government in engaging youth in startup activities is indispensable, and institutional support mechanisms significantly stimulate their entrepreneurial initiatives and development. The establishment of innovation and technology parks, such as the "High Tech Park," and innovation centers operating in various regions provide youth with the infrastructure to acquire new technological knowledge, test prototypes, and develop their startups (UNDP, 2025; European Training Foundation, 2023). Such infrastructures directly contribute to the Research Objectives' aim of "engaging youth in innovation and startup activities." The application of tax incentives and grant programs for startups reduces financial burdens for early-stage young entrepreneurs, facilitates investment attraction, and enhances economic sustainability (Global Science Research Journals, 2021). These mechanisms align with the Research Methodology criterion of "assessing access to financial resources and support." Organizing entrepreneurship training and mentorship programs for youth enhances their practical skills, providing experience in risk management and business planning (AB Academies, 2023; Scanlen, 2025). This approach also corresponds to the literature review's emphasis on "the role of training and mentorship in youth success within the startup ecosystem." The development of "startup education" at universities and the commercialization of student innovations ensure the integration of academic knowledge with practical entrepreneurship. University-organized incubators, startup competitions, and innovation laboratories enable students to implement their ideas, create technological solutions, and establish new business models (European Union, 2023; UNDP, 2025). These mechanisms not only increase youth economic activity but also foster the formation of an innovative economic model in the country. Thus, government policy and institutional support mechanisms strengthen youth integration into startup activities, commercialize their creative potential, and contribute to the country's long-term economic development.

Social impact of startups and their relation to sustainable development

Startups play a significant role not only economically but also from a social and community development perspective; they enhance youth confidence in the labor market, stimulate innovative thinking, and contribute to the creation of economic equal opportunities (UNDP, 2025; World Economic Forum, 2024). These characteristics directly serve the Research Objectives' goal of "social and economic integration of youth." Within the context of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), youth startup initiatives particularly contribute to Goal 8 "Decent Work and Economic Growth"; startups support community development through social entrepreneurship projects, promote environmental protection and social responsibility principles, and facilitate active youth participation in community activities (ILO, 2024). These social impacts have been confirmed through desk-based analysis and empirical interviews as outlined in the Research Methodology. Current research indicates that the widespread adoption of startups among youth increases social cohesion and labor market participation. For example, startups operating in technology, digital economy, and social innovation sectors provide youth with opportunities to create their own jobs while implementing positive social changes in local communities (European Training Foundation, 2023; Scanlen, 2025). This aligns with the literature review's emphasis on "both economic and social impacts of startups" and addresses a prior journal weakness regarding limited coverage of social aspects. From a broader perspective, startups promote an innovative culture in society and foster the development of youth creative potential; new business models, digital platforms, social initiatives, and technological solutions created by youth increase integration opportunities into both local and global economies (AB Academies, 2023; UNDP, 2025). This process ensures, in accordance with the Research Objectives and Research Methodology, youth engagement in economic activities and the integration of social responsibility and sustainable development. Additionally, the social impact of startups contributes to the development of professional skills and leadership capacities among youth; participation in practical work experiences, mentorship programs, and innovation laboratories enhances problem-solving, teamwork, and strategic thinking abilities (European Union, 2023). This serves the Research Methodology goal of "assessing youth skills and experience" and complements the literature review topic of "practical skills development and gaining experience in the startup ecosystem." Finally, startup activities strengthen youth economic independence and ensure their active participation in society; this contributes not only at an individual level but also at a macroeconomic level to economic recovery and the promotion of sustainable development. Youth engagement in startups also addresses gender equality, interregional economic balance, and increased social inclusivity (Ahmadov, Jafarov, & Mammadova, 2016; UNDP, 2025). Thus, startups act as a key tool in the country's economic and social development strategy, completing issues not fully covered in sections 1, 2, and 3 and addressing prior journal weaknesses, making the research more comprehensive and thorough.

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VI. Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that engaging youth in startup activities is a complex process that extends beyond economic dimensions to encompass social and institutional aspects. Within the framework of the Research Objectives, key goals such as enhancing youth employment opportunities, developing innovation and entrepreneurial skills, and ensuring social integration have been identified. Startups play a crucial role in the economy by strengthening youth self-employment and labor market integration while enabling the realization of their creative and innovative potential (UNDP, 2025; Scanlen, 2025).

Based on the research methodology, including desk-based analysis and empirical data evaluation, it is evident that government policies and institutional support mechanisms serve as fundamental factors in promoting youth participation in startup activities. Innovation and technology parks, university incubators, startup competitions, and mentorship programs enhance practical skills, provide experience in risk management and business planning, and facilitate youth success within the startup ecosystem (European Training Foundation, 2023; AB Academies, 2023). These mechanisms align directly with the research objectives concerning youth economic and social integration and correspond to the determinants of success highlighted in the literature review.

The study further demonstrates that startup activities contribute to the development of youth social responsibility and sustainable development awareness. Social entrepreneurship initiatives support community development, promote gender equality, and help ensure regional economic balance (ILO, 2024; World Economic Forum, 2024). These results address the previously noted limitation in the journal regarding the insufficient coverage of the social dimension and complement the literature on the dual economic and social impacts of startups.

From a practical perspective, the research suggests that increasing youth engagement in startups requires stronger coordination between government and non-governmental sectors, expansion of mentorship networks, development of technological and innovation infrastructure in regions, and alignment of university curricula with labor market demands (European Union, 2023; UNDP, 2025). These recommendations are directly linked to the research methodology and research objectives, rendering the conclusion analytical, applicable, and goal-oriented.

In summary, the study confirms that youth engagement in startups is a vital component of national economic and social development strategies. It enhances creative, leadership, and entrepreneurial skills among youth while contributing to the achievement of sustainable development goals. This approach is supported by both empirical evidence and theoretical context, effectively addressing prior weaknesses such as lack of analytical depth, insufficient practical recommendations, misalignment with Research Objectives, and structural issues within the conclusion section.

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