Crafting Futures

Azerbaijan Craft Research Report

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Executive summary

Introduce: Begin with a brief introduction that states the purpose and major points of the report.

The purpose of the study is to learn more about the craft sector in Azerbaijan, outside of Baku, to inform further research and development initiatives and to create an impression of the sector for future reference, for development agencies, governmental agencies and education providers. It emphasises informal intergenerational learning. It presents the craftspeople's own perceptions, views and experiences. It is useful to craft and creative arts teachers, craft professionals, retailers, and those working within cultural management, heritage and tourism.

47 craftspeople were questioned on the areas listed below, enabling us to assess interest in and extent of informal craft learning by young people. The impact of the current pandemic situation on craft practice is also recorded, as well as building a general picture of what craft is being made, how it is being made and how it can be described.

It was undertaken in the context of the covid-19 pandemic which has had a significant impact on income.

It covers:

- Craft and business practices
  - Proud traditional craft heritage but with very little adaptation to the challenges posed by the pandemic and reliance on tourism.
- Teaching and Learning (informal, intergenerational)
  - teaching and learning experiences of respondents reveal a source of learning that has great potential, though it is often misunderstood.
- Economic Situation (income, workspaces, internet use)
  - growth in income interrupted by pandemic.
  - Craftspeople understand what they need to improve their businesses but are not necessarily able to do those things.
- Attitudes to craft and environmental sustainability
  - Craftspeople are interested in environmental sustainability
  - Understanding of sustainability and good practice focused on production. Impact of material extraction, transportation and carbon footprint not foremost in respondents' minds.
- Crafts people's perception of their sector
  - Associations of prestige and value and much higher than financial reward.

Recommendations

- Link *interested* young people with masters, supporting both parties to understand how informal intergenerational learning is different from the formal learning environment. This could be mentorship or training, and would need to be considered as a long term approach. Shorter tasters and masterclasses would help to identify interested young people.

- Funding for craftspeople to enable them to take on a student with minimal risk. This will also have the effect of helping with the severe impact of the covid-19 pandemic on income.
- Support craftspeople with access to banking services and the internet, emphasising phones and phone apps rather than computer software. Treat this as an opportunity for intergenerational learning and relationship building between young people and their older relatives.
- Focus marketing, advertising and educational campaigns about craft on local Azerbaijani tourists and where appropriate, locals, to move them from being souvenir purchasers to commissioners and collectors of craft.
- Strengthen community bonds within the craft community through groups, forums, associates or events to help further strengthen the established and collegiate community of craftspeople.
- Offer the Creative Learning Module developed as part of this programme to community centres and community hubs/spaces to develop creative competencies within the community that promote imagination and problem solving. This will help to build confidence and resilience.

Introduction

The British Council's Crafting Futures is a global programme which aims for a sustainable future through making and collaboration – supporting a future for craft by understanding its value in our history, culture and world today.

The programme brings together craft practitioners, designers and organisations from around the world to explore possibilities for this future together. In Azerbaijan, Arts University Plymouth is working with a range of partners. For the research project this includes the Tourism Agency and Asmart Creative Hub.

Crafting Futures is tailored to the needs of the local communities, and the British Council's inclusive approach means it is open to craft practitioners of any background in any location. In Azerbaijan the overarching focus is on craft education. While much of the work of the programme is focused on formal creative education for young people in the Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector, there is a strong tradition of informal education in craft so we felt it was important to draw attention to this within this research. Both formal and informal education are important for the health of the sector and the market. This report provides an overview of the sector to support educational and development initiatives.

Research Team

- Dr Kim Bagley
  - Craft specialist and Making Futures Fellow at Arts University Plymouth. UK Academic lead for the project.
  - Questionnaire adaptation, data and response analysis, report writing, research assistant training.
- Dr Asmer Abdullayeva
  - Art Historian, consultant and community arts facilitator. Lead Azerbaijani partner for the project.
  - Logistical and professional support for research assistants, consultancy, respondent shortlisting.
- Adalat Haliyev
  - Research Assistant
  - Fieldwork research and response collection, questionnaire review, photography.
- Vafa Adalat
  - Research Assistant
  - Fieldwork research and response collection, questionnaire review, photography.

The precedent and purpose for this study

This study is to an extent based on the Study of the Traditional Crafts Sector in Georgia conducted by the Georgian Arts and Culture Centre in 2012. The new study is smaller in scale and applied in Azerbaijan, The focus is on the growth of Azerbaijani crafts, as well as the sustainability of the sector. An important aspect of sustainability is the transfer and learning of skills. This gives a new focus to the study and explores, in particular, informal and home-based learning alongside current global concerns in craft practices.

The purpose of the study is to learn more about the sector to inform further research and development initiatives and to create an impression of the sector for future reference, for development agencies, governmental agencies and education providers. Questions focused on the following areas:

- The craft work itself
- Learning (informal, and intergenerational)
- Teaching (informal, and intergenerational)
- Income and growth
- The impact of the covid-19 pandemic
- The craft making space and habits of craftspeople
- Internet use
- Environmental sustainability
- Perceptions of the sector by the craftspeople themselves.

Questions on these areas enabled us to assess interest in and extent of informal craft learning by young people. The impact of the current pandemic situation on craft practice is also recorded, as well as building a general picture of what craft is being made, how it is being made and how it can be described.

Methods and Collection Process

The study collected primary data through a detailed questionnaire with a sample of 47 people who are professional master craftspeople. They engage in informal learning and/or teaching. The list of respondents was initially generated using prior knowledge and the existing network of Dr Asmer Abdullayeva who has worked extensively in this field, with further intel acquired during the fieldwork process to find and involve other suitable interviewees. Inclusion criteria were flexible, but participants were all professional crafts people primarily taught or teaching on an informal basis, or are self-taught. A range of practices, ages and both male and female respondents were included to give breadth. The sample is a representative cross-section of crafts people working in four major hubs for craft and tourism, with the proportion of respondents in each location being representative of the number of active crafts people and the size of the centre. The responses are an effective snap-shot of craft in Azerbaijan.

The questions were asked verbally and questionnaires were completed by the research assistants who were able to provide clarity and conversation leading to full responses. Visual photo and video documentation was recorded by the research assistants which provides further detail on work and sales spaces, craft practice and materials. All respondents consented to the use of their information and images. Demographic data and personal information was collected, but this data is anonymised for reporting purposes.

Both research assistants were trained online in good fieldwork practice by Dr Kim Bagley of Arts University Plymouth in advance of the fieldwork process and ethical clearance was sought at the University. Both research assistants had prior knowledge and experience of craft practice as well as suitable communication skills in English and Azerbaijani. Dr Asmer Abdullayeva supported the research assistants in Azerbaijan with her knowledge of craft in Azerbaijan, her prior research experience, and with her networks. The entire research team reviewed the research questionnaire to ensure local applicability and appropriateness of the questions asked before fieldwork commenced.

Fieldwork was undertaken in Spring 2021 observing government protocols in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic.

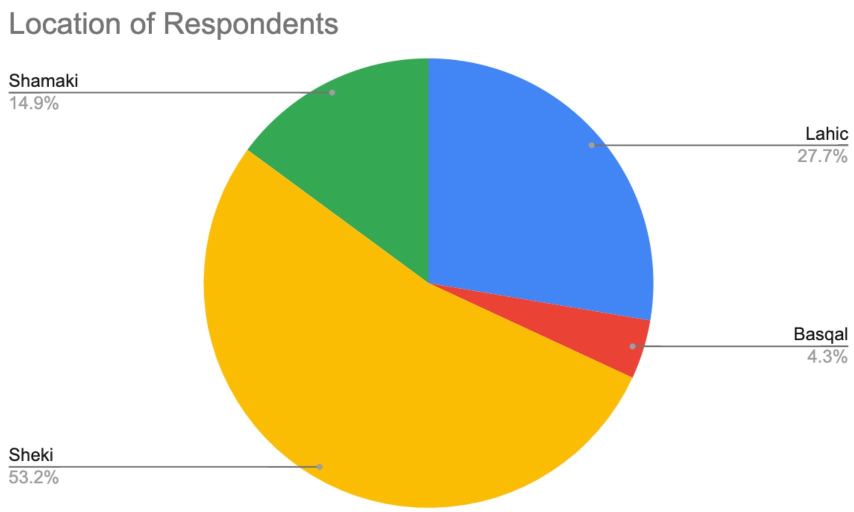
Limitations

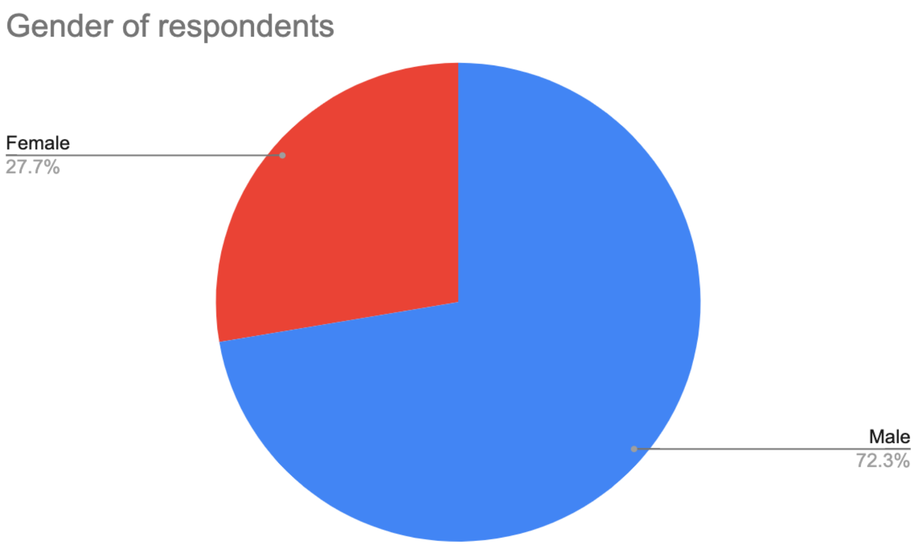
Though a substantial number of respondents were included, the study is limited by the sample size. Though it is significant and likely representative of the sector, it does not cover all professionals and is limited to the 4 listed areas. Despite the size of the industry, carpet makers were not particularly prominent in the study because of the significant research already undertaken on this highly successful practice within the craft sector. The study was an opportunity to examine other practices, especially coppersmithing, Kalaghai making, takalduz embroidery, ceramics and stained glass. Preference in this study was for individual crafts people and those making as part of small enterprises. Four carpet makers, who are individual master craftspeople were included. The study is limited to regionally-based crafts people, with Baku excluded, so this study is not a national picture. While the questionnaire was lengthy, and range of topics covered was extensive, the overall scale and funding of the study meant that it did not cover any single issue in detail. Working in an interdisciplinary, international team brought a range of perspectives, but it is acknowledged that the author of this report is an english-speaking academic without insider cultural knowledge and limited first hand cultural experience.

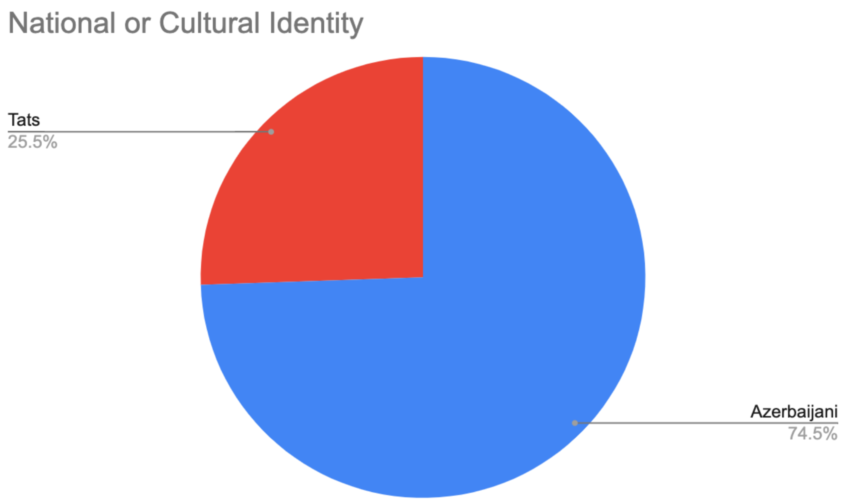
Each respondent is an individual with their own hopes, fears, and emotions in relation to their practice and the world around them. Their response to the study comes from this perspective and will naturally include individual biases, and some apparent contradictions in the data. These do not invalidate the study, but rather give it a sense of humanity - an important element of craft practices. The study primarily gathers the craftspeople’s own perspectives.

Demographics of respondents

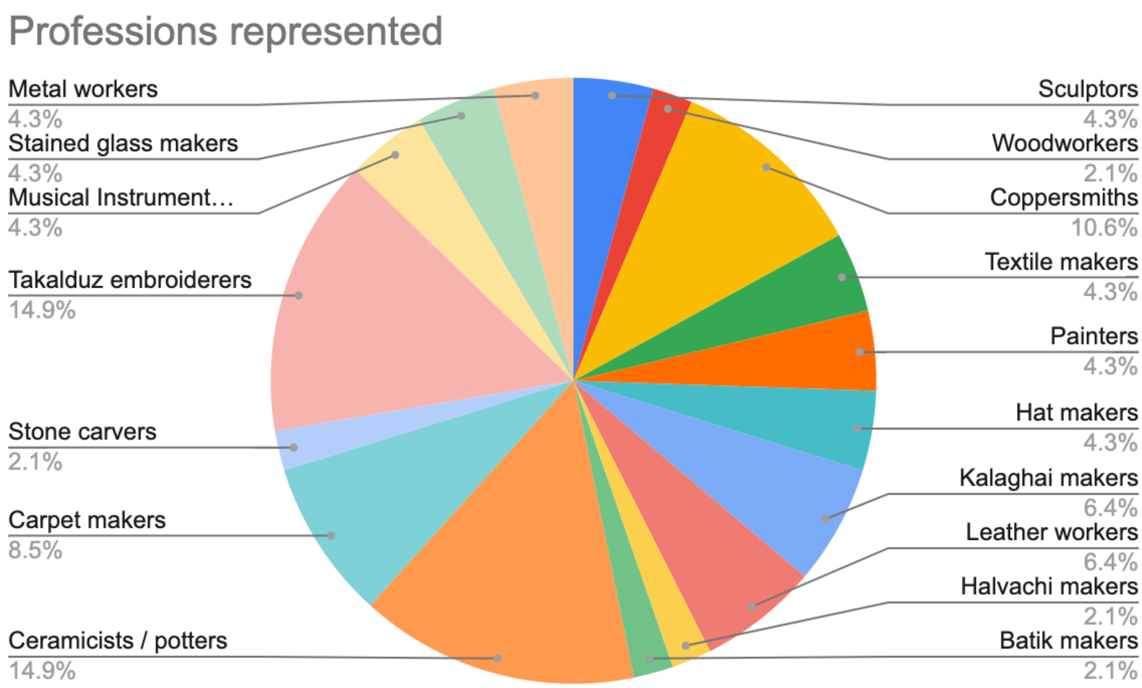
47 Crafts persons in four locations in Azerbaijan were interviewed by two research assistants. Locations included Shamaki (7 respondents), Basqal (2 respondents), Lahic (13 respondents) and Sheki (25 respondents), important centres associated with craft practice and tourism. Notable biographic observations were the strong presence of Tats-identifying craftspeople in the Lahic area, with 10 out of 13 respondents identifying themselves as Tats, and 2 respondents in Shamaki. The majority of respondents identified themselves as Azerbaijani, including all respondents in Basqal and Sheki. Just less than three quarters of respondents are male. This can in part be attributed to the focus on certain craft practices that are traditionally, though not strictly associated with men or women. Women are over represented in textile crafts and men in metalwork, ceramics and woodwork.





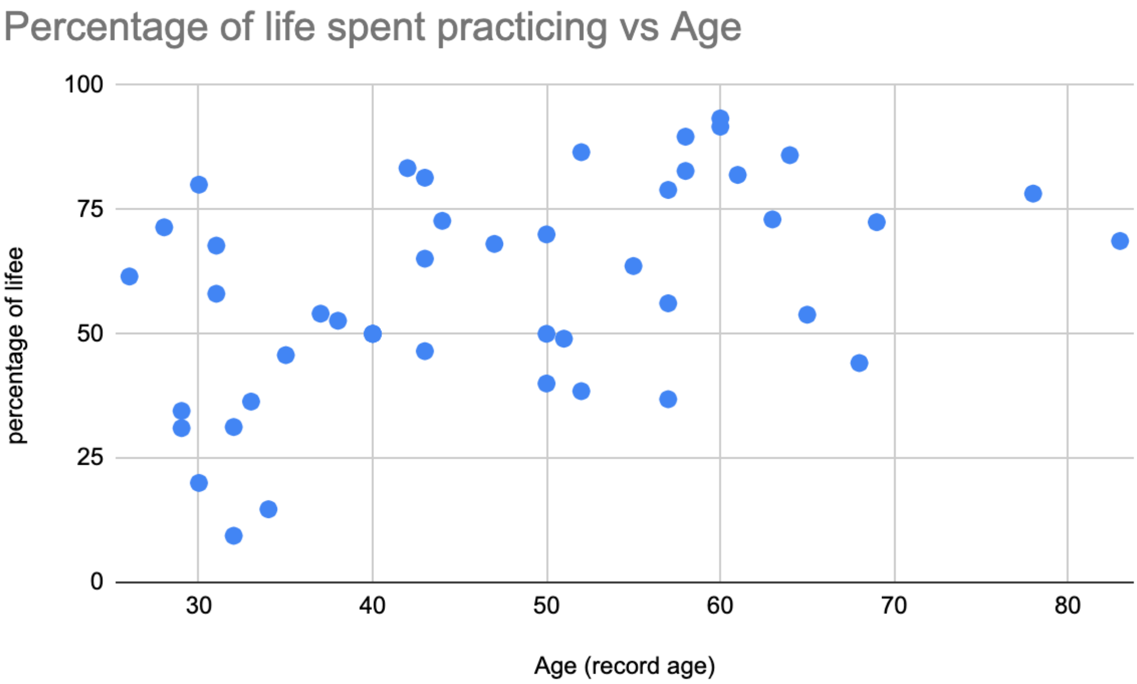


The range of professions or specialities represented is wide, with Takalduz embroidery (7), ceramics/pottery (7) and coppersmithing (5) most significantly represented, owing to the strong community of Coppersmiths in Lahic and the strong tradition of both Takalduz and ceramics in Sheki, including ceramicists working at the ABAD centre. Between 1 and 4 individuals represented hatmaking, halvachi making, stone carving, stained glass, carpetmaking, musical instrument making, painting and sculpture[1], representing a wide range of practices and materials. For the purpose of the study Kalaghai, batik, carpet and Takalduz are separated from other mixed textile practices, and coppersmithing is separated from other metalworking owing to their particular skill set and traditional forms.



[1] Painting and sculpture here are considered craft practices that emphasise technique and material over concept, and are described by their makers as traditional.

The length of respondents' careers in crafts was recorded. Many respondents, particularly older respondents, began their craft practice in childhood, with some very long careers of over 60 years recorded. There is a weak correlation between the time someone has been practising their craft and the percentage of their life they have been practising. This suggests that the oldest craftspeople are more likely to take up their craft in childhood than craftspeople who are currently in their 30s. The oldest craftsperson was 83 and the youngest was 29, with an average age of 47 and a median age of 45.5 years. This does suggest an ageing workforce, but because the inclusion criteria expected a high level of professional mastery, this may not be the case across the sector; mastery takes time. Therefore this study mostly looks at the perspectives of mature and established professionals. This is because they are the keepers of craft skill and knowledge. See the Teaching and Learning section for more details and young people’s engagement with our respondents.



The Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic

This research was undertaken during the covid-19 pandemic. It was impossible to ignore the impact on our respondents, and an opportunity to capture its effects. While the pandemic came up in many answers to our questions, we asked one specific question about the impact of the pandemic on our respondents' craft practices. 46 respondents all said that the pandemic led to a “loss of income from reduced craft sales”. The remaining respondent said that he made the decision to take the time to improve his skills rather than selling his work. As a younger, less experienced crafts person, this optimistic attitude does make sense. In addition he indicated that the pandemic presented him with ‘More time to develop [his] craft business. 4 other respondents chose this option (5 in total). In addition, 11 other respondents chose to close their business (at least temporarily), while only one changed their product line. This suggests either no other options, or a lack of resource, skills or motivation to change the way they were working in order to make up for reduced income.

While reduction in income is to be expected considering the unprecedented nature of the pandemic, with its truly global impact and strict governmental restrictions, it is nevertheless surprising and worrying that there was very little change or adaptation evident from respondents one year into the pandemic.

Craft and business practices of respondents

This section establishes the characteristics of craft production undertaken by the respondents, including what they are making, how they are making it and what its visual and materials characteristics are. It also captures changes in the recent past including the effect of the pandemic. Day to day aspects of running a craft business are also explored, including stock management, quality control and sales locations.

Materials, Techniques and Products

Kalaghai - traditional silk scarf
Respondents included two kalaghai makers from Basqal and one from Sheki. All 3 use silk fabric, wooden stamps and natural plant dyes and employ the hot stamping resist technique.

Carpet making - pile carpets and flat woven carpets
Respondents include two makers from Shamaki, 2 from Lahic and 1 from Sheki. Makers use silk and wool threads or just wool threads. They use hand tools and employ the flat woven and pile weaving techniques. One of our carpet makers also makes wool socks and gloves and one paints with oils in addition to making carpets.

Takalduz - traditional embroidered panels
Respondents included 7 takalduz embroiderers from Sheki
All use silk threads, some use wool and silk threads and some use raw wool in addition to threads. They employ stitching and embroidery techniques with some doing felting in addition. Two makers are making national costumes in addition to takalduz.

Ceramics - Red and white clay ceramics for functional and/or decorative use
Respondents included 7 makers from Sheki. Two makers use red clay, and the remaining makers use both red and white clay. In addition most use glaze and underglaze. They use moulding, carving, painting, glazing, underglaze painting and wheel throwing techniques. One maker carves riverstones in addition to their ceramic practice.

Shebeke - traditional geometric stained-glass and wood window making. Respondents included 2 makers from Sheki. Both use glass and wood. They cut glass, and cut and fix wood junctions using glue-less joining techniques.

Sculpture - ceramic, wood and mixed media sculpture

Two respondents from Shamaki and Sheki describe their work as sculpture. One uses materials including ceramics, wood (walnut, pine, pear), feathers, using carving, moulding and painting techniques, and in addition engages in photography, videography and painting. The second respondent uses a range of contemporary and manmade materials including oil and acrylic paints, fabrics, sponges, gypsum, silicone, foam and plaster and employs sculpting and painting techniques to make forms that imitate traditional Azerbaijani foods.

Wood Craft - Sculpture, souvenir and musical instrument making
3 respondents from Sheki and 1 respondent from Shamaki use wood (walnut, pine, pear, mulberry), bone (camel, buffalo) and mother of pearl to make wooden objects and musical instruments. They employ cutting, piercing, carving, inlay and burning techniques, with one respondent also engaged in carving, burning and painting with oils on pine.

Coppersmithing - coppersmithing and fine metalwork
1 respondent from Shamaki, 4 from Lahic use iron, copper, bronze, lead, steel and other metals, employing melting, casting, cutting, chasing and carving techniques. The Shamaki respondent also uses bone (Buffalo), cutting, burning and making prayer beads.

Black smithing and other metalwork
2 respondents from Lahic use steel, melting, casting and carving.

Stone or Bone carving
This is employed as part of other crafts including coppersmithing, blacksmithing, woodworking, musical instrument making and sometimes alongside other crafts such as ceramics. One respondent was a stone carver from Lahic who also made copper coins.

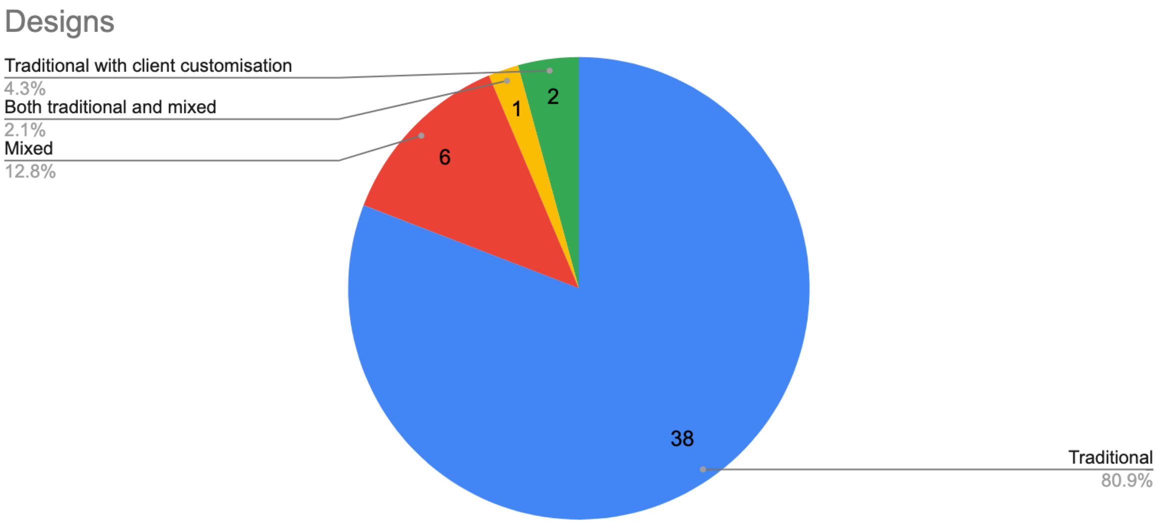
Leatherwork
5 respondents from Shamaki (1) and Lahic (3) use different animal leathers. Some make using prepared leather (cutting, stitching and casting) and others prepare the leather directly from fresh skins going through many different processes including cleaning and tanning. They make hats, horse trailer accessories and clothing. One in Lahic uses both leather and fabric and makes national costumes in addition to leather work.

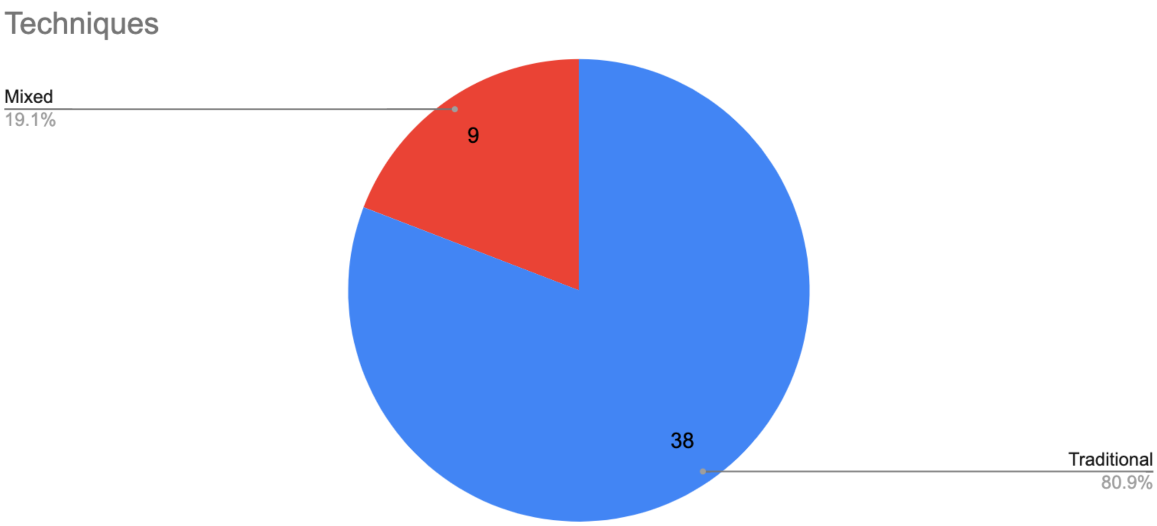
Halvachi - national sweets.
1 respondent from Sheki uses sugar, flour and other ingredients to make sweets, using techniques such as melting, cooking and various confectionary techniques.

Other textiles - Batik, tailoring and pile stitching
One tailor from Shamaki uses fabric, beads and other materials and uses tailoring techniques. 1 batik maker from Sheki uses silk fabric, wax and dye, using hot and cold batik techniques, dyeing and stitching to make various products including toys.
One textile maker from Sheki uses linen canvas, cotton and linen fabric, wool acrylic and silk threads to make panels using pile stitching techniques.

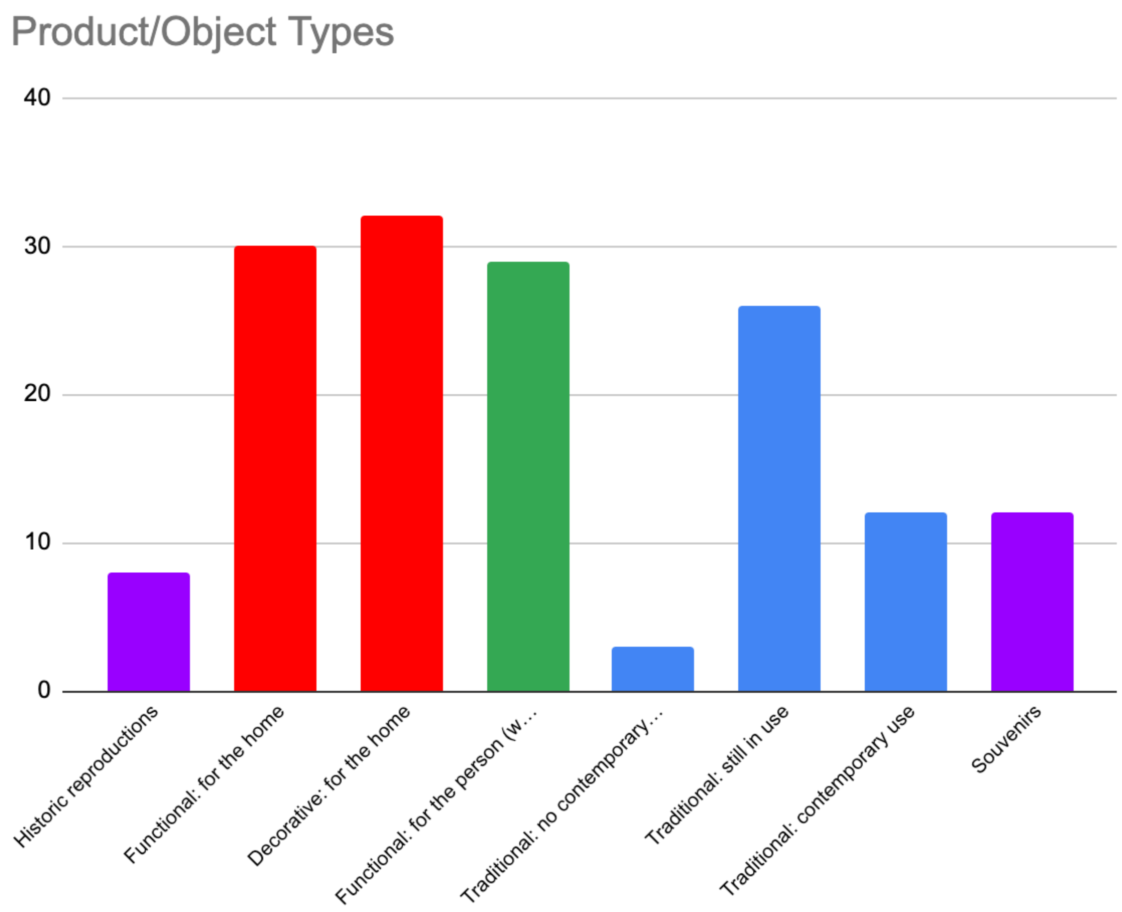
Categorising craft work

Respondents described their designs and their techniques as Traditional, Contemporary or Mixed (both traditional and contemporary). There is strong emphasis on traditional, with no respondents describing their designs or techniques as contemporary:





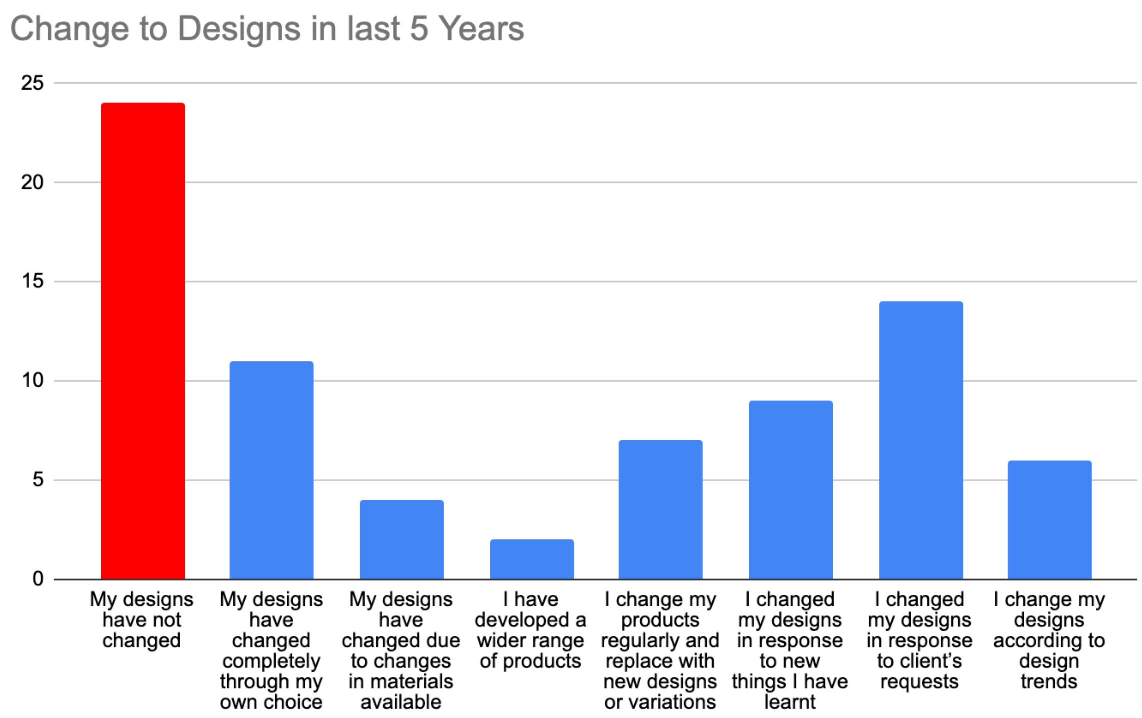
They also categorised their products, selecting all relevant categories. Categories included both historic reproductions and souvenirs to capture these specific types of craft object associated with heritage craft and with tourism. Other categories included functional and decorative products for the home, wearable/carryable objects such as clothing or jewellery, and traditional objects, which could be described as 'in use' in the same way they may have been in the past, having a 'new use' (such as s traditional form used for storage or drinking, which is now used as a vase), or traditional objects that are no longer normally in use, and are likely to now be used for decoration, or which serve a nostalgic purpose. These answers give us insight into how craft practices could be marketed or presented, for example within the interior design or fashion contexts.



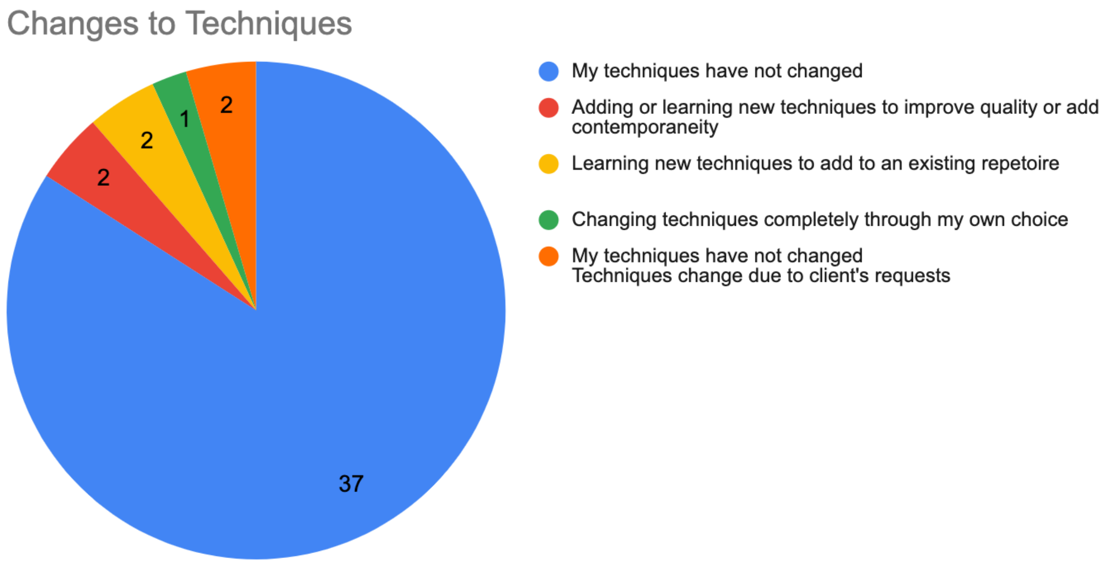
The large number of producers making functional and decorative products bodes well for domestic tourists who may be looking for higher value and more complex or sophisticated products rather than souvenirs. As one respondent in Sheki said, it is because their objects are functional that their income is growing. The small number of respondents who continue to make traditional objects that no longer have function suggests on the one hand that craftspeople respond to the market, and that people want to use the objects they purchase, but it also runs the risk that certain techniques or forms may be lost or in danger of being lost. This is an area for future and more targeted research.

Change and innovation

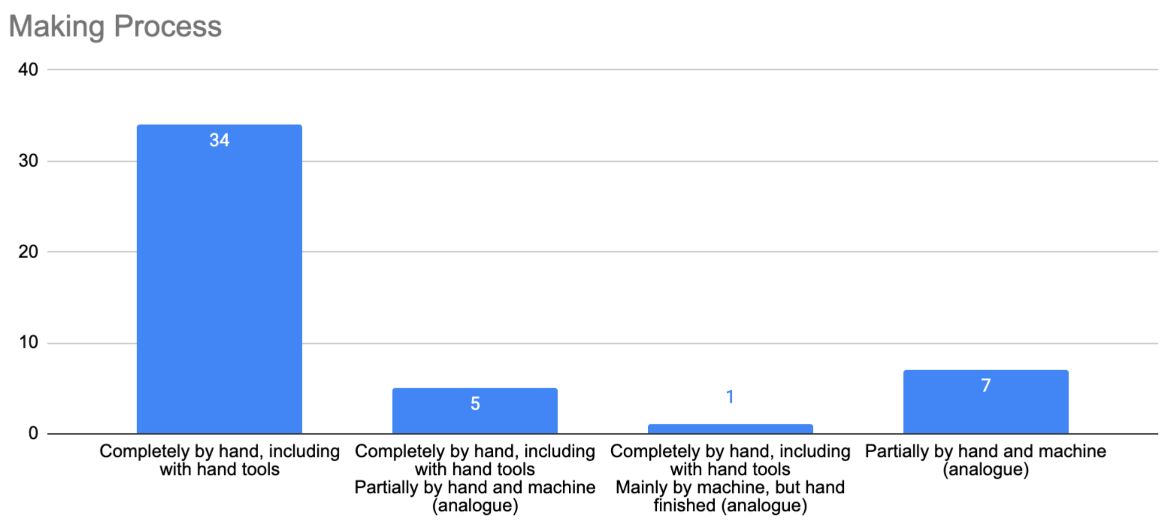
Looking at the last 5 years, 24 respondents said that their designs had not changed, indicating that half our respondents are not innovating. This is not necessarily negative, as they may simply be continuing to make successful archetypal designs that clients expect such as carpets with traditional ornaments where ‘change’ might not be an appropriate term. There are some examples of forces beyond the respondent’s control, such as material sourcing issues that lead to change. 4 respondents mentioned difficulty getting the exact materials or colours they would like and therefore needing to make adjustments on that basis. This seems to be a particular issue in Shamaki, but not the main driver for change. Instead, design change is driven by the craftspeople themselves and their response to the market or client. The most common reason to change design is in response to client’s requests. Customisation and personalisation are natural benefits of small-scale, craft production which add to its cultural and economic value. Several respondents mentioned changing their work as they themselves learn and develop their skills. A few have developed a wider product range, for example making souvenirs in addition to larger and more complex pieces, in direct response to the tourist market. Others mentioned responding to trends, and improving and changing their own work as they learn new things.



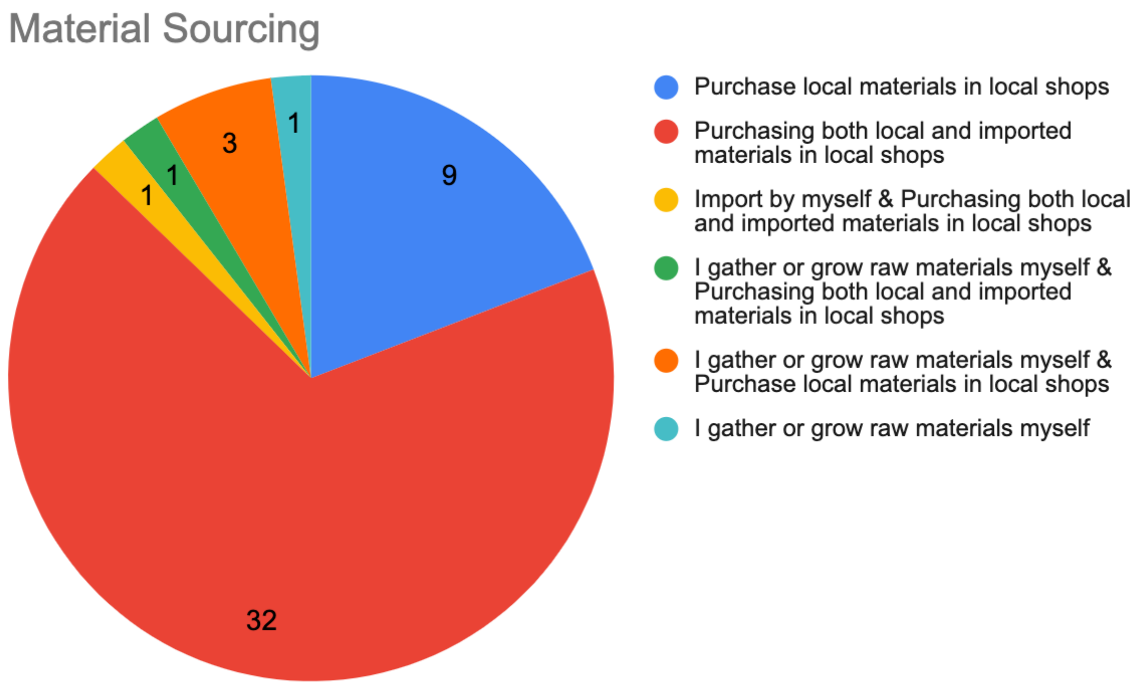
Regarding technique, the picture is similar, but more extreme, with 39 respondents saying their techniques have not changed in the last 5 years. Two leather workers recorded that they use 36 different processes. One described changing from making wool carpets to making silk carpets out of their own choice and two more suggested that they change techniques to improve the overall quality of their work or to add contemporary elements. Two, who work together, mentioned accommodating requests from clients and two more mentioned adding more techniques to their repertoire. Overall, there is a sense that once all the relevant techniques are established and mastered, there isn't much reason to change.



The majority of respondents make their work by hand (including with hand tools), with just less than one third using analogue machinery such as pottery wheels and sewing machines. None of the respondents said they use any digital or computer-controlled machinery, but kiln controllers are often digital, including in Azerbaijan, so it is possible that respondents were not thinking about the whole process in every case. However, it is clear that hand-making dominates and perhaps even defines craft production in Azerbaijan.

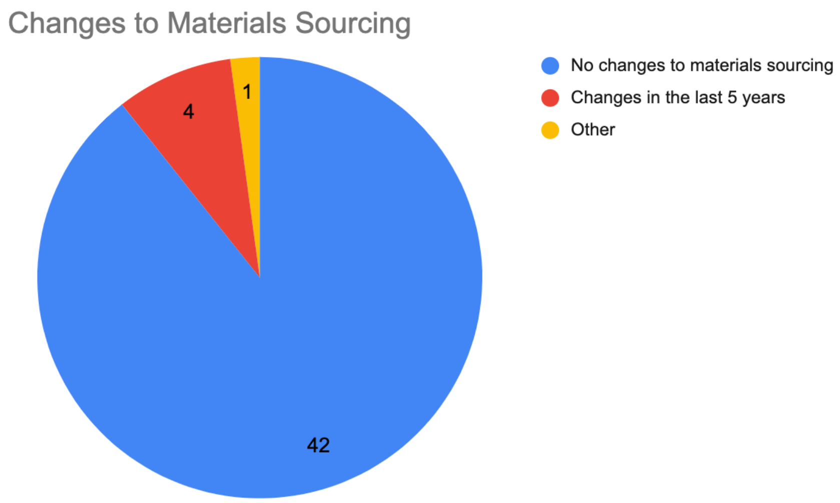


CAD (computer-aided design) and CAM (computer-aided manufacturing) is used alongside analogue and hand-making processes in some craft practices globally. While 14 respondents are aware of CAD/CAM technologies, only 1 is making use of this in their work. This is a Shebeke master who began using Autocad to build geometric designs 8 years ago.

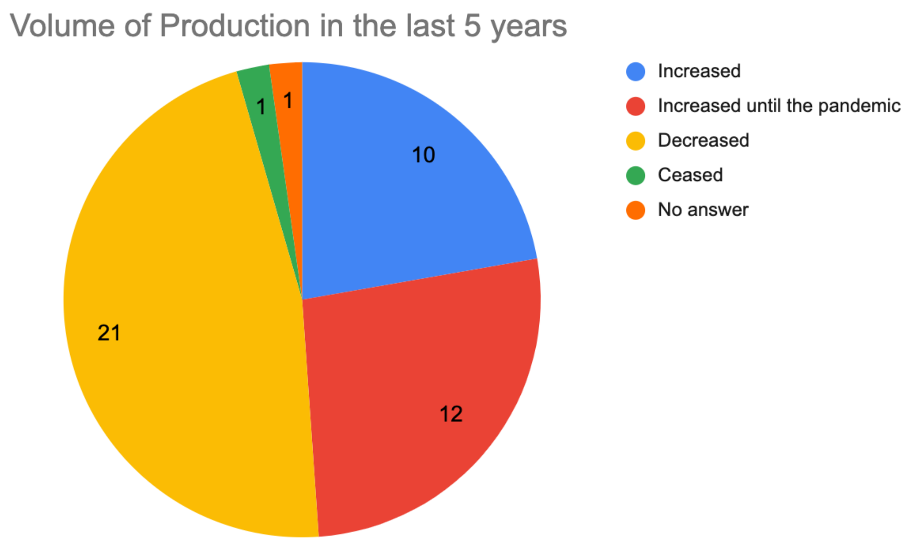


Material sourcing is dependent primarily on local shops, with most respondents buying local or both local and imported materials . A much smaller proportion gather their own materials, such as river stones or plants for natural dyes. There has been very little change to materials sourcing with no respondents indicating any changes specifically because of the pandemic. Reasons for changes in the last five years include markets closing or less variety of materials available. This could be attributed to less actual production taking place, or a lack of flexibility or motivation or possibility to source materials in different ways.

Respondents are not buying materials online at all, pointing to the importance of local shops and markets and their ability to maintain supplies, being key to the sustainability of the craft sector. Including such suppliers in future conversations about the sector is therefore recommended. Increasing internet literacy and improving online supply infrastructure might help to empower craftspeople to create more resilient businesses. Improving the range and quality of local materials available will make crafts people less dependent on imports, and able to tell a more localised provenance story.



Though it is difficult to understand whether this is just because of the pandemic, respondents have generally reported that their production has decreased in the last 5 years.



Sales venues are varied with a mix of online and physical outlets being used by respondents. Physical retailers do dominate, which has likely contributed to the drop in income during the pandemic. A large majority sell direct from their workshop, a site where they are fully in control of their narrative and also participate in selling their own work. International fairs and exhibitions are also popular. Online selling is less prominent, but it is still significant, with 13 respondents working with an online retailer and 8 using social media for direct selling. There is potential for more growth in the online sector but that will require improved access to banking and internet literacy which are highlighted later in this report.

Sales and customers

Our respondents sell to a range of customers, with each respondent generally selling to 2 - 3 of the following groups: local Azerbaijanis in their area, Azerbaijanis from other regions, international tourists, international buyers online, retailers, corporate buyers, and in one case, to interior designers. Respondents were asked to estimate the percentage of sales for the groups they selected.

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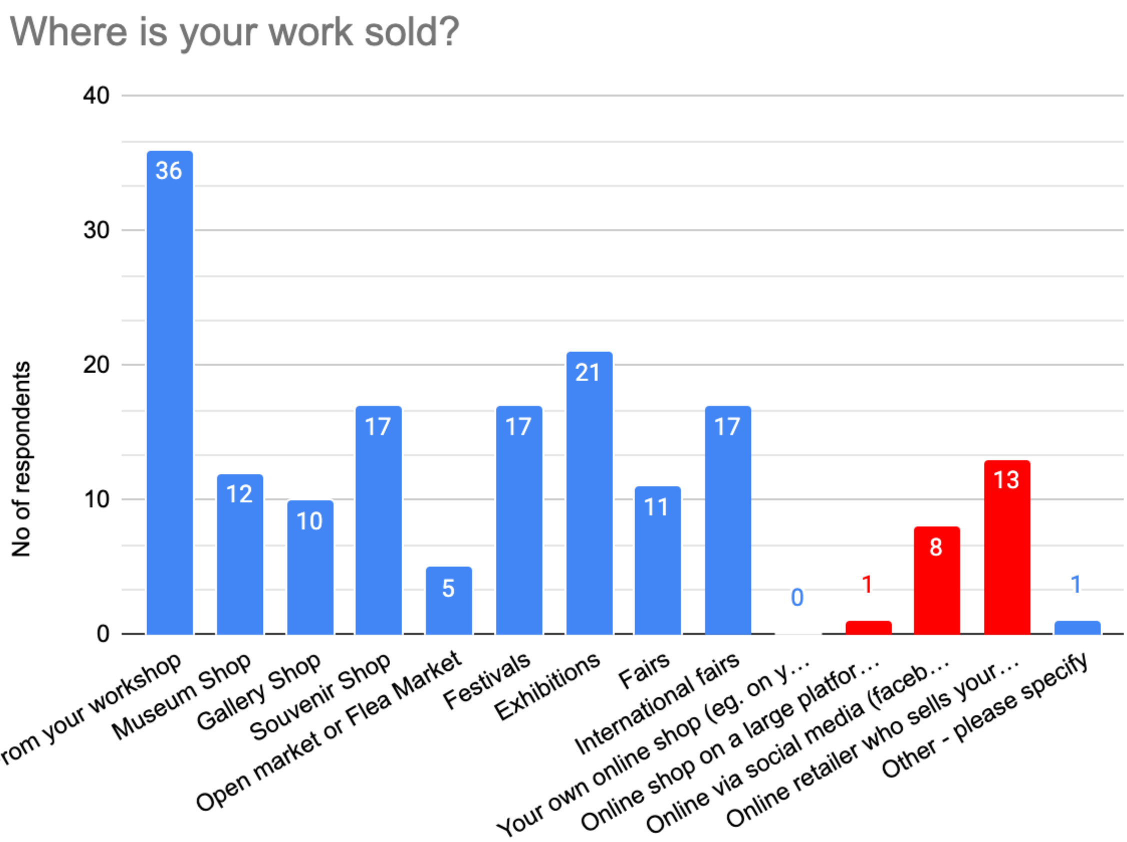
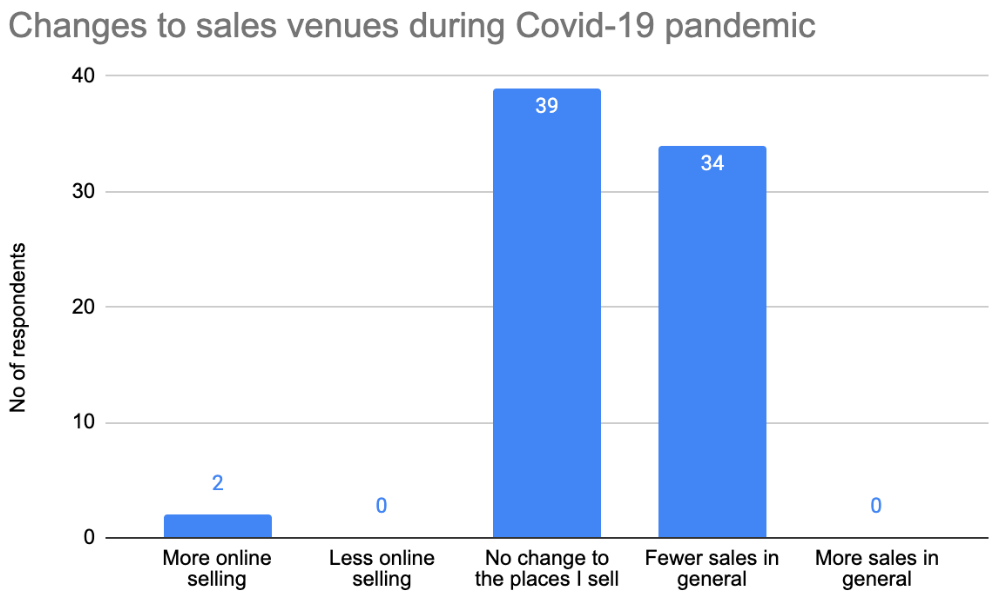
	No of respondents who sell to this group	Average percentage of total sales	Range of percentage of total sales
Local Azerbaijanis	16	23%	5-50%
Azerbaijanis from other regions	45	42%	10-100%
International Tourists	42	52%	5-90%
International buyers online	2	12%	10-25%
Local buyers online	0	0	0
Retailers	2	20%	20-20%
Corporate Buyers	6	29%	10-50%
Interior designers	1	20%	20-20%

Visitors from abroad and from other regions in Azerbaijan represent the most significant customer groups, underpinning the importance of travel and tourism to the craft economy. Online sales are not yet significant for most respondents, with only international online sales noted for this question by 2 respondents, but this is certainly a potential area for future growth if paired with appropriate infrastructure including internet literacy, support with banking, and making exporting more accessible. Existing online platforms did not form part of these conversations suggesting that they are not a significant part of these craftspeople's current earnings. While the narrative of the maker and the experience of buying the work physically is often an integral part of the experience, this narrative can be developed online too, and could help crafts people to encourage both physical and online sales.

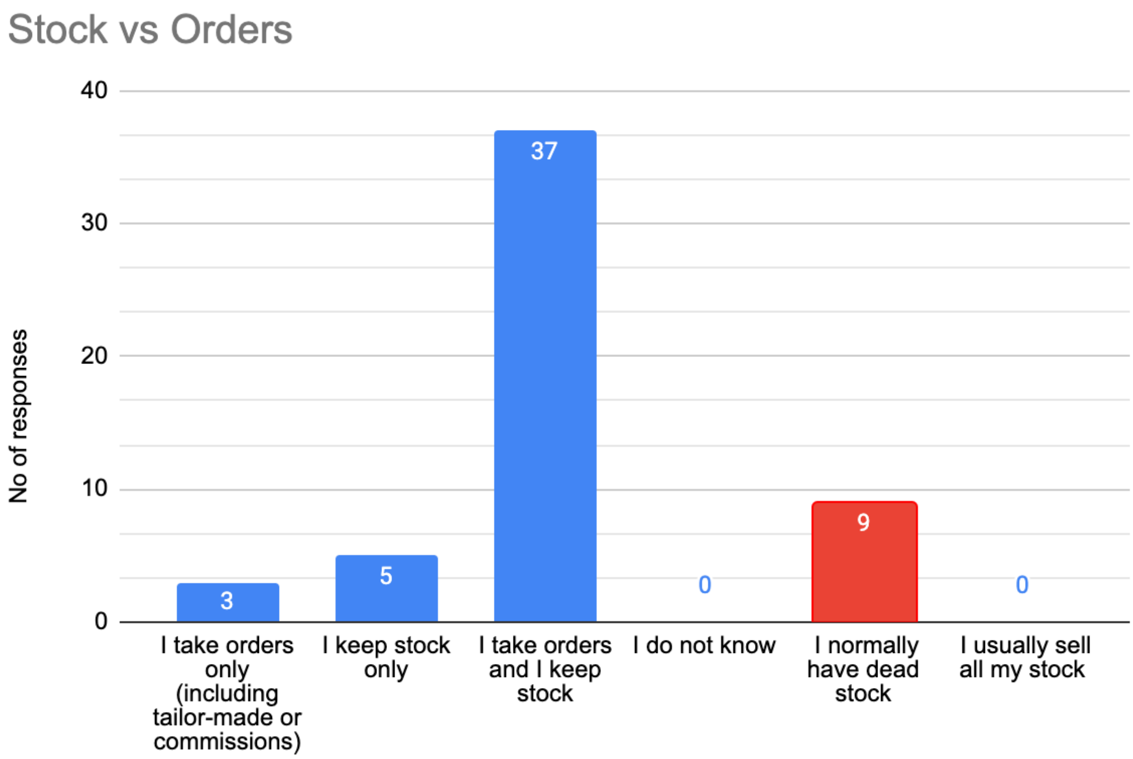
It is interesting that corporate buyers are an important customer group for a significant minority. Looking beyond the tourist market towards events, fashion or interior design for example may offer potential areas for diversification of the customer base. The covid-19 pandemic travel restrictions have highlighted that the dependence on international tourists for many crafts people (up to 90% of the sales of some craftspeople come from this group) is risky. It is positive to note that Azerbaijanis from other regions are the most important group, with 45 respondents selling to them and up to 100% of sales going to this group.



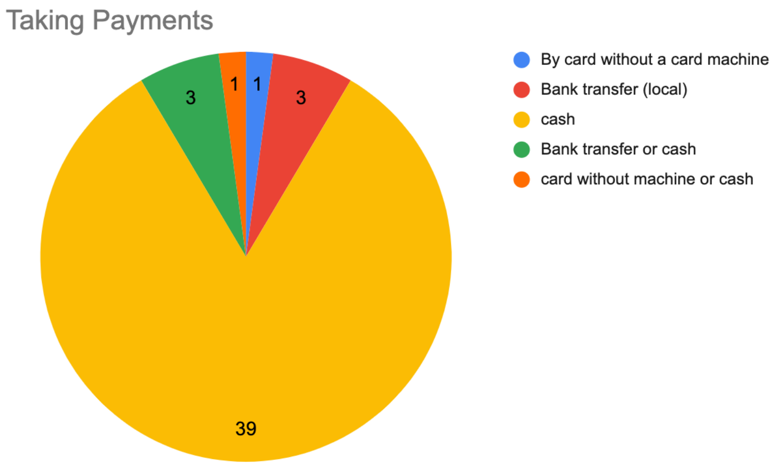
There appears to have been very little change to sales venues during the covid-19 pandemic, with only two respondents indicating more online selling. A significant majority had no changes to sales venues and fewer sales in general. While this is likely due to government restrictions on movement, travel and other activities, it is clear that the pandemic has exposed the vulnerability of small craft businesses who presently depend on physical sales venues.



The majority of respondents keep stock and take orders, with the most frequent split being 50:50 stock versus orders. Dead stock is a problem for approximately 1 in 5 respondents.



Cash is the predominant payment type made to crafts people in exchange for their products, with bank transfer a distant second. This aligns with the limited access to banking that respondents report.



As is the case with craft production in many other places, there is no formal quality control. 46 out of 47 respondents rely on their own skill and knowledge for quality control, with the remaining respondent asking trusted colleagues or teachers to check their work. 16 more respondents also do this. Where respondents employ others or work with others, they check the work themselves with responses like ‘They are working with my guidance and I check their work in working process’ or ‘I control by my skills and I teach my students like me to choose the quality’. Close proximity in making, and its sense of small scale and care, contributes to both learning and maintaining quality.

We asked respondents who their main competitors are. 38 reported that they don’t have competitors, broken down as follows:

- 12 respondents said they have no competitors because they work together as a community or a family, or even a community that are like family to one another. There was a sense of mutual respect, support and cooperation in these responses; crafts people are happy to see each other busy, and offer one another work when they have large orders. (1 from Shamaki, 5 from Lahic and 6 from Sheki)
- 11 further respondents said that they have no competitors, with some giving reasons relating to the individual quality of different crafts people's work (2) or not seeing any one as competitive (3).
- 7 respondents noted that there are very few if any people engaged in their craft and therefore they do not have competitors. Most responses of this kind saw the lack of competition as negative and a sign that their profession is dying.
- 2 further respondents said that the complexity or difficulty of their practices is the reason they are not competitive with one another. 1 said she is too old for competitors.
- 5 respondents saw themselves as beyond competition because of the superior quality of their own products, all from Sheki.

9 respondents mentioned competitors:

- 7 respondents identified other makers working in their profession. Most of these were from Sheki (5) where there are far more craft businesses.

- 2 from Sheki referred to industrial production of imitation products as their competition, but also that they are not comparable in quality or cultural value.

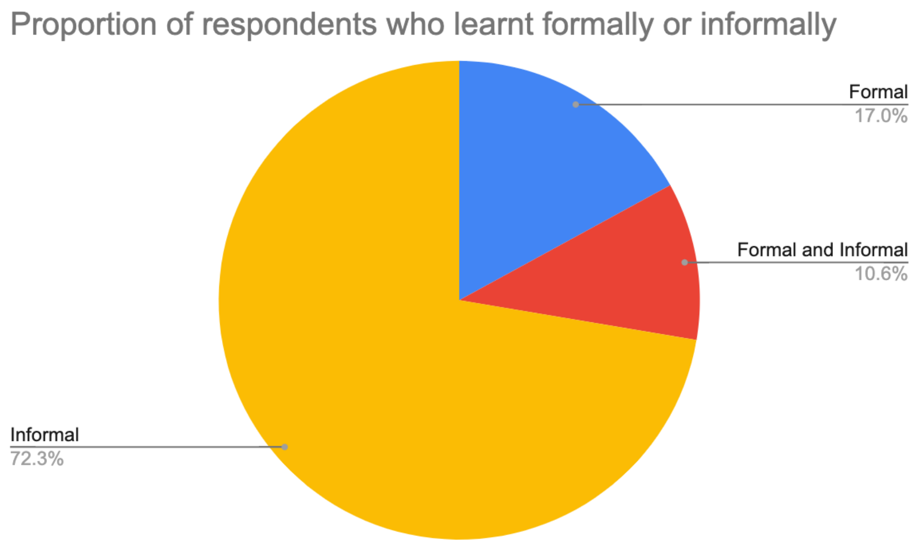
It is clear that mutual cooperation and a sense of community and respect is strong within the craft communities of Azerbaijan, particularly within the smaller communities. There is however a general sense of good will for one another within this particular group of craftspeople who want to see their craft and their community succeed, not just themselves. This mutual cooperation bodes well for the overall quality and standards of production, both physically and culturally. It is interesting that a sense of competition appeared focused in Sheki, where the number of crafts people (and our respondents) is much bigger. If we see competition as a positive driver of quality and momentum, then growing the number of crafts people in each craft centre in a sustainable way, through measured educational interventions, could help to grow the overall market for craft, and prevent intangible knowledge and skill from being lost.

The preceding questions on their crafts helped give a broader picture of the nature of current practice. This included questions that relate to the impact of the covid-19 pandemic to production and sales. While innovation and being responsive to clients is clearly important to many respondents, most would describe their work as traditional and many would describe their techniques as unchanged.

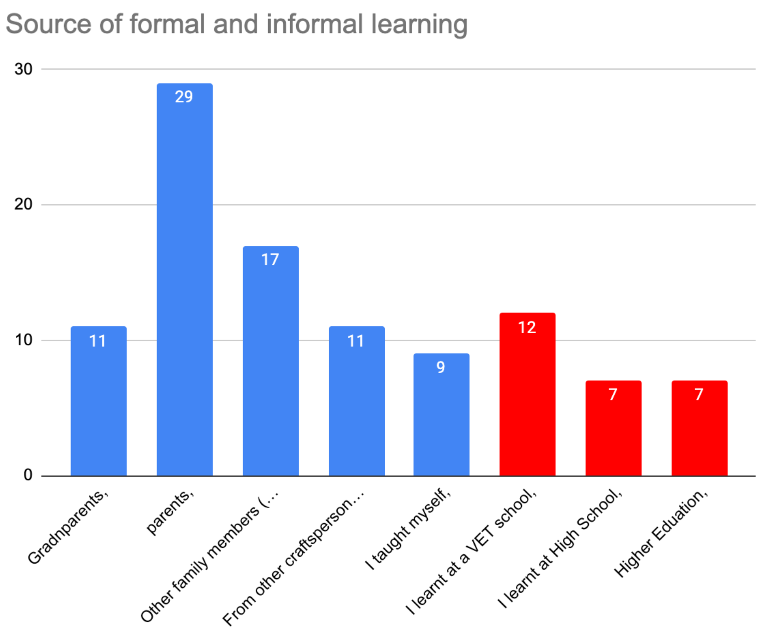
Teaching and Learning

Learning

Respondents were asked about who they learnt their craft from in order to establish the nature of their involvement in intergenerational knowledge transfer.



Respondents were asked where they received their knowledge and skills in their craft. Many respondents learnt from more than one source. 8 learnt in formal settings including VET, High School and Higher Education, 5 learnt both formally and informally, and 34 learnt informally, the majority from parents (29), grandparents (11), and other family members (17), or self-taught (9) but also from other craftspeople (11). Formally educated respondents were concentrated in the Sheki area, mostly working at the ABAD centre.



Where learning takes place in family groups, respondents took pride in explaining family lineages in their craft, particularly metal workers in Lahic, who indicated they were 3rd or 7th generation, for example, or giving the name of the parent or grandparent who was a known master. A textile practitioner in Shamaki said that she learnt: ‘from my mother and I think this came to me genetically’. Another described how her grandmother taught her mother and then passed it on to her.

For those who were trained formally, on the whole they did not have help from within their family groups. There is one example of a stained glass maker who learnt formally from his teacher ‘Master Ashraf’ and has subsequently gone on to teach his children. Another two male respondents who had formal training were also trained or helped by their fathers. The remaining respondents with formal education did not have help from members of their households.

Learning tends to follow the convention of fathers, grandfathers and uncles teaching men and female relatives teaching women, though this is not always the case. A female kalaghai maker in Basqal was taught by male crafts people from outside her family group, and two female takalduz makers in Sheki were taught by their father and sister.

Teaching

Interest and potential

More detailed questions were then asked about who they have taught, and who has shown interest in their craft. 45 out of 47 respondents indicated that they felt comfortable sharing their knowledge and skills with others. Reasons given were as follows:

- The most prevalent reason given was a desire for the craft practice to continue, with 19 respondents answering that they are happy to teach if someone would like to continue their craft.
- 10 respondents referred to a feeling of duty to continue their craft because someone took the time to teach them, answering with phrases like ‘This is our role in life’ and ‘we got craft from someone that should be passed on to someone’.
- A further 7 respondents spoke about enjoying teaching and sharing knowledge.
- 3 respondents explained the value of teaching to their own practice with phrases like ‘teaching is a teacher’ or ‘I believe that while I am teaching others I improve myself and learn for myself too many different things as well’.
- 2 respondents spoke about the economic benefit of teaching someone skills, so they can earn a living: ‘I taught my students and my family members like my uncles taught me, to earn my life’.
- 2 more explained that while they are comfortable to teach, their own economic difficulties make them less enthusiastic about teaching, referring to supply problems and the risk of passing on skills that are not financially sustainable.
- One spoke about his innovation and originality being a reason to pass on his skills.
- One said they would like to teach if they had good conditions to do so.

We asked who has shown an interest in their skills, to gauge potential for teaching, asking questions about young people and those older than them.

30 said that young people have shown an interest in their skills. 4 additional respondents from Sheki, and 1 from Basqal agreed that there was an interest from young people, but it was ‘very low’ or ‘not too much’.

9 said that young people did not show any interest, with 3 more making some interesting qualifying comments:

‘No, because it is a difficult and time-consuming process’ and ‘no it was many years ago’.

The most interesting comment came from a respondent from Lahic who said ‘no, because every person in all families knows this craft from childhood and this is not a new thing for them to show an interest and to learn’. This comment perhaps suggests either benign indifference or that some young people are seeking out novelty that they do not see in their community’s craft practice.

Regarding interest from people the same age or older, it was an even split, with 23 saying yes people are interested, and 24 saying no.

Overall these responses demonstrate there is significant interest and great potential for teaching and learning to take place under the right conditions, and perhaps with appropriate support in place for both crafts people and their students.

Current situation

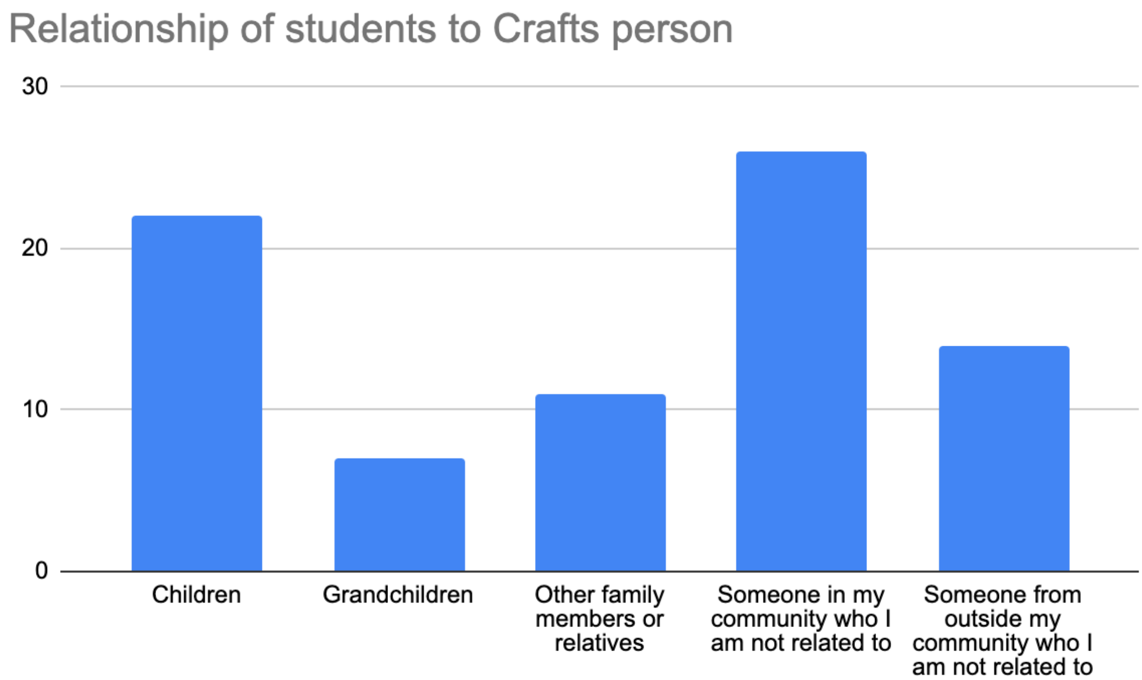
35 respondents consider themselves currently engaged in (largely informal) teaching. 11 are not, with the remaining respondent intending to teach his children when they are older. 2 who responded ‘no’ explained that this was because of lack of interest. When asked if they had taught in the past, most answered the same way. 4 who have previously taught are not currently teaching, and 1 who previously did not teach is now teaching. (38 yes, 9 no). When pressed to say how many people they are actually teaching right now, 26 currently have no students, with 10 saying this is because of the pandemic (one mentioned health issues).

As can be seen in the table below, most have 5 or fewer students but two have as many as 20.

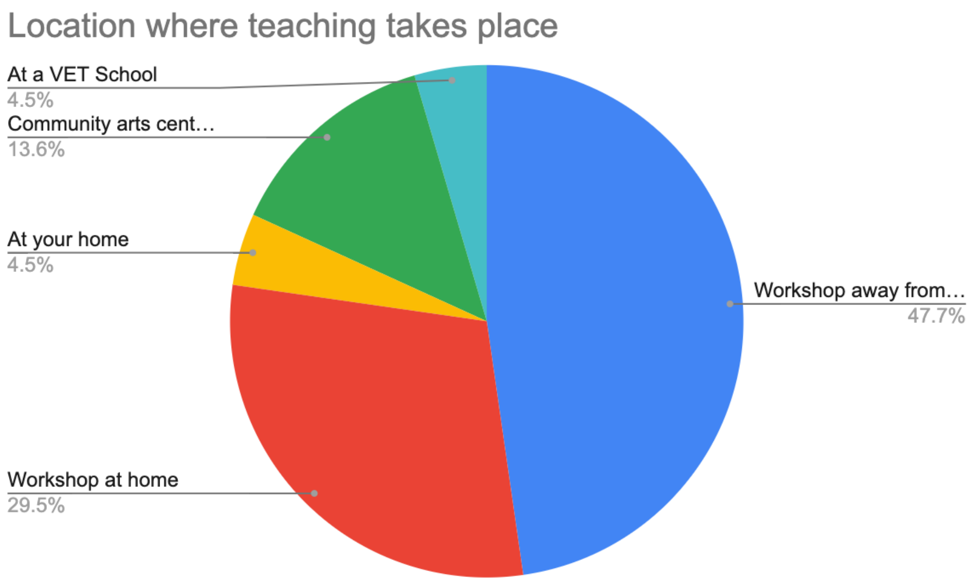
Number of students Respondents have and the frequency this occurs

No.	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**	**8**	**9**	**10**	**11**	**12**	**20**
Frequency	6	2	3	2	2	1	0	1	0	0	0	1	2

Those students have a range of relationships to the respondents (with specified relatives including nieces and nephews, a brother, and cousin’s children):



As we can see most teaching is happening within the community and the family, which is as one might expect with intergenerational knowledge transfer in traditional crafts, but likely exacerbated by the pandemic when teaching people who are not within the community or household would be much more difficult. Teaching appears mostly to be happening in people’s normal workspaces, but a small number of crafts people teaching in community art or culture centres:

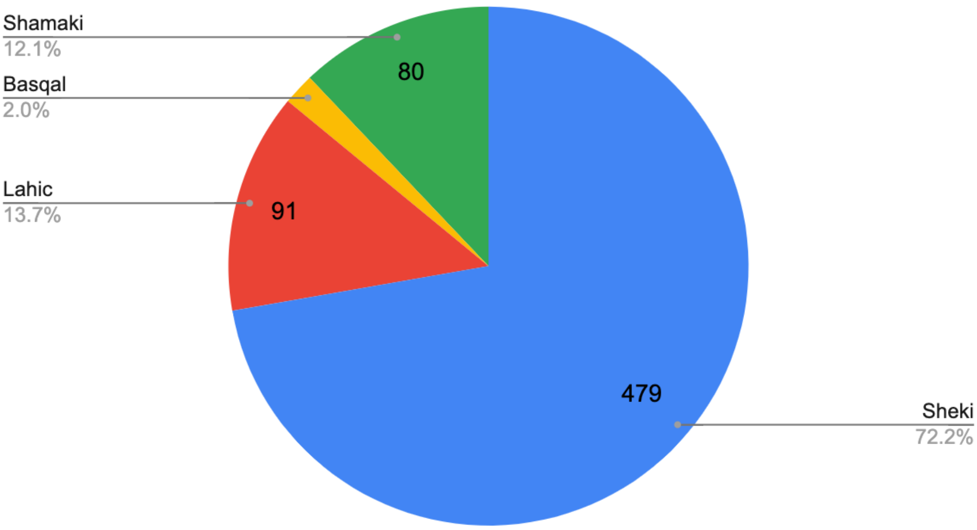


There are some very interesting multi generational and intergenerational relationships. Anecdotally, learning particular crafts within family groups such as coppersmithing seems to be associated with a positive attitude, supportive and non-competitive environment. Such respondents also tended to be positive about sharing skills.

106 students in total were being taught by our respondents at the time they were surveyed. This is largely informal and frequency is sporadic. For most respondents, teaching takes place infrequently. Out of 38 who were able to respond, 25 describe their teaching frequency as ‘rare’, 8 describe it as ‘often’ and 5 describe it as daily or almost daily. Two respondents who teach in VET schools do so twice per week. Those teaching daily are teaching children and grandchildren. The unfixed and generalised way of describing frequency (this was a freeform question) suggests the unstructured nature of much informal craft instruction. While this mode of learning has existed successfully for generations, it could be augmented with an additional support structure such as mentoring to encourage those learning informally to pursue a career in the field.

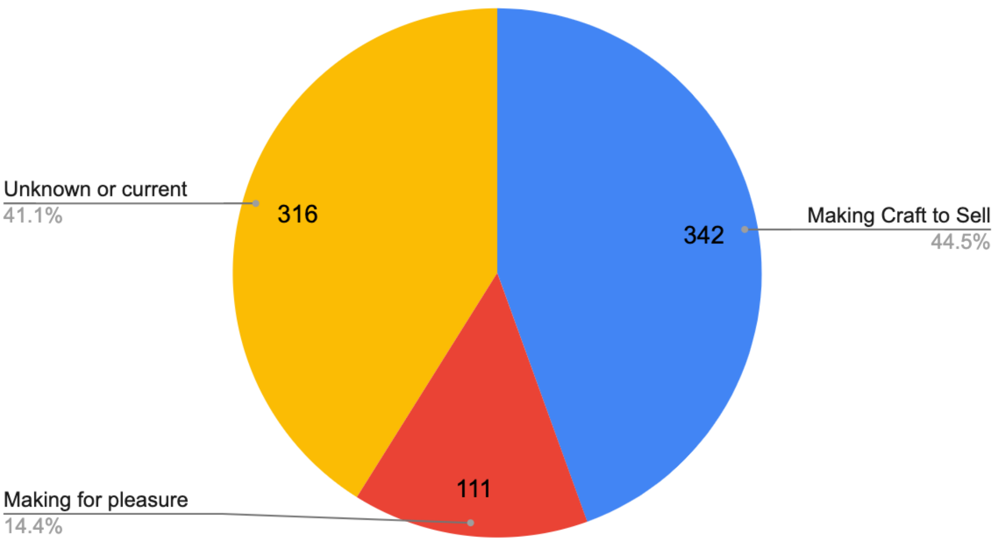
Our 47 respondents have collectively taught approximately 663 students in the past: (541 of these students are younger than the craftsperson).

Total Students previously taught by respondents by region



A proportion of past and present students are making craft to sell or for pleasure/hobbies:

Craft activities of past and present students



Respondents were asked if they received payment for teaching. All respondents who have taught, are teaching, or are willing to teach (46 of 47), share their skills and knowledge for free, with the exception of those who earn a salary teaching in a formal educational environment (2). Responses were emphatic, showing a desire to share skills freely with interested people, and that they do not view it directly as an economic activity (of course it becomes an economic activity if you are teaching people to work for you or within your business).

Economic Situation

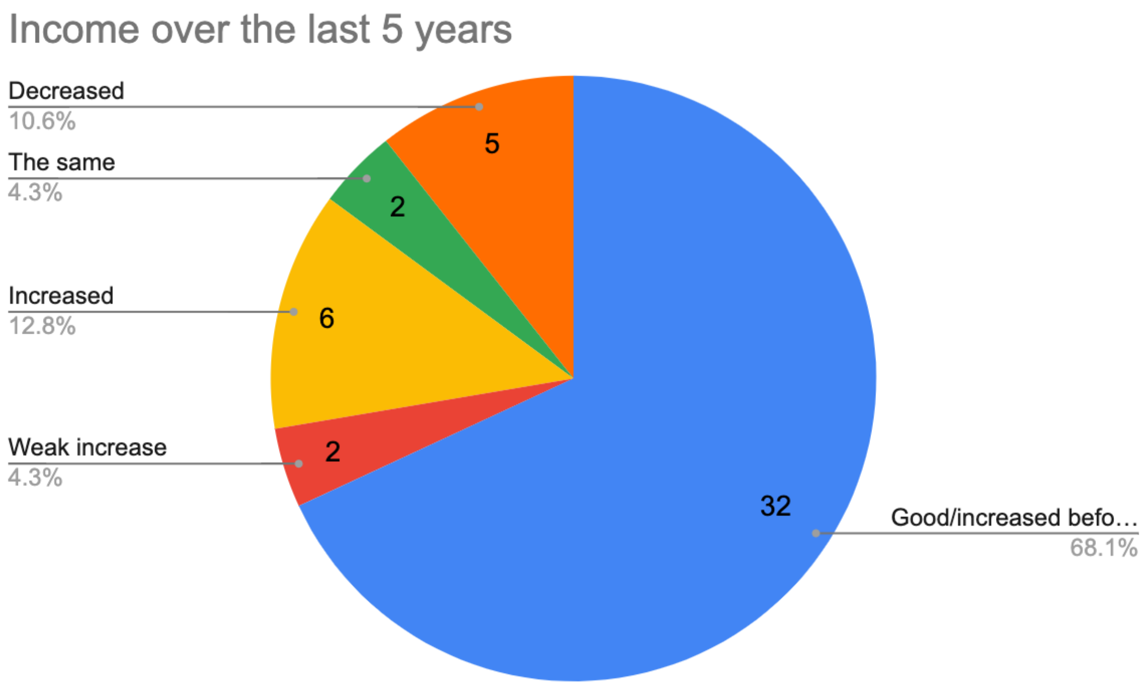
The next section covered income in order to ascertain the perception of the economic conditions within the sector. Respondents were asked about government support, proportion of income from craft practice, and access to banking. To avoid conflict or difficulty respondents were not asked to specify their actual income.

Up until the pandemic, the majority of respondents indicated growth in the last 5 years, but since the pandemic income has reduced. Most respondents were unable to put the effect of the pandemic to the back of their minds to answer in a measured fashion when asked about their income over 5 years. The pandemic has clearly had an extreme effect on people. Typical comments include:

‘The orders very rare now, but there is a demand for good quality product’

‘it was good before the pandemic’

‘Until 2018 it was great because of tourism but after that and during the pandemic decreased’
‘Our products for daily usage that's why it increases, but it was very good before pandemic’.



Half of respondents (24) make 100% of their income from craft. The remaining respondents' percentage of income ranges from 10 - 90%. Therefore the impact on craft income will have had serious consequences for respondents.

When asked what they thought would stimulate growth or be the main driver of growth in their business 37 respondents were able to answer and the answers varied significantly. Stimulation from factors outside of the craftwork itself included: promoting craft (6 mentions), growing tourism (5 mentions), support from customers, government and other actors (5), good conditions (3), location and facilities (2), interest from outsiders (2), international fairs, festival and exhibitions (3). Suggestions centred around production and quality were fewer, and included reinvestment from sales revenue (1), good tools (1), production itself (1). Product quality and creativity came up 3 times; education in the form of craft courses, and VET education (3) and community (1) were mentioned. This suggests craftspeople know what they need and have some good ideas of how to improve their businesses, but perhaps need some support to achieve this. The disparate answers suggest that more dialogue and ideas sharing between crafts people for mutual support and development could be beneficial.

Two respondents harked back to Soviet times and 5 were unable to think of growth in the current economic climate.

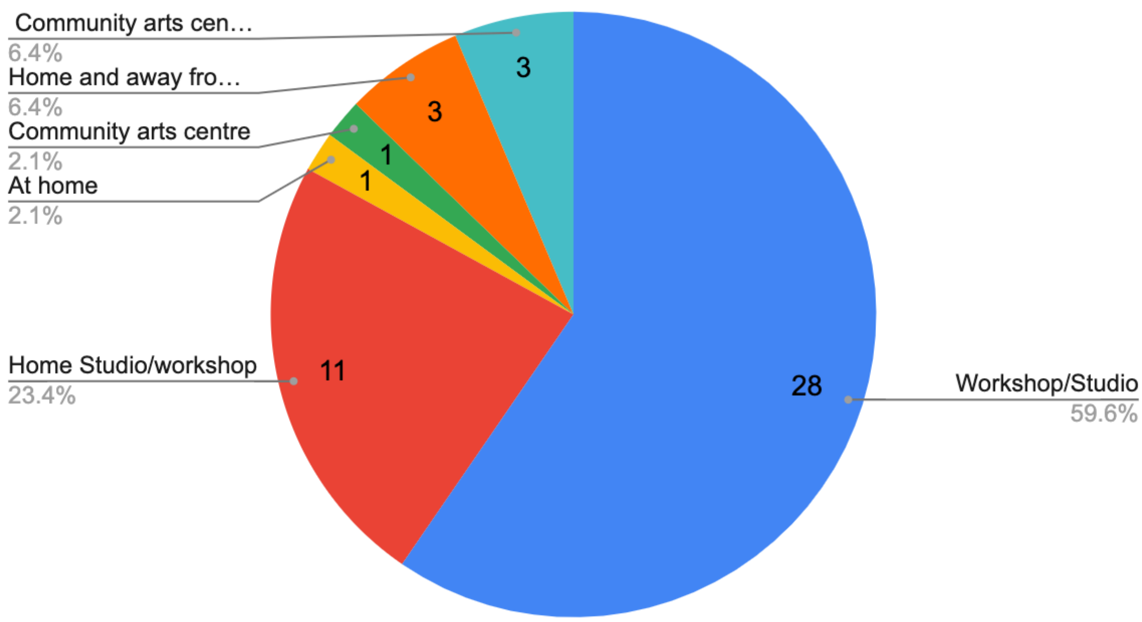
19 respondents said that they have had support from the government to improve their business, while 27 said they have not. One more said they had support during the soviet period. Government support described included: craftspeople being exempt from tax, being involved in international exhibitions and fairs through the Heyder Aliyev Foundation, workspaces, orders for corporate gifts from the government, and some examples of support in the form of materials and equipment. Some respondents mentioned other non-governmental agencies or funds that have supported their work. There is scope for further support, specifically to address the negative impact of the pandemic.

Only 12 respondents have access to banking for their businesses. When asked what challenges they faced in relation to banking, no one answered the question, with one respondent saying they previously worked in a bank, and one person with access to banking who said now that they have their own business they no longer have banking issues. Further research needs to be done to ascertain whether access to banking would be helpful and supportive for the sector, but with the global proliferation of convenient cashless electronic payment options, especially during the pandemic, improving access to banking may be a factor that could support growth.

Craft Making spaces and business arrangements

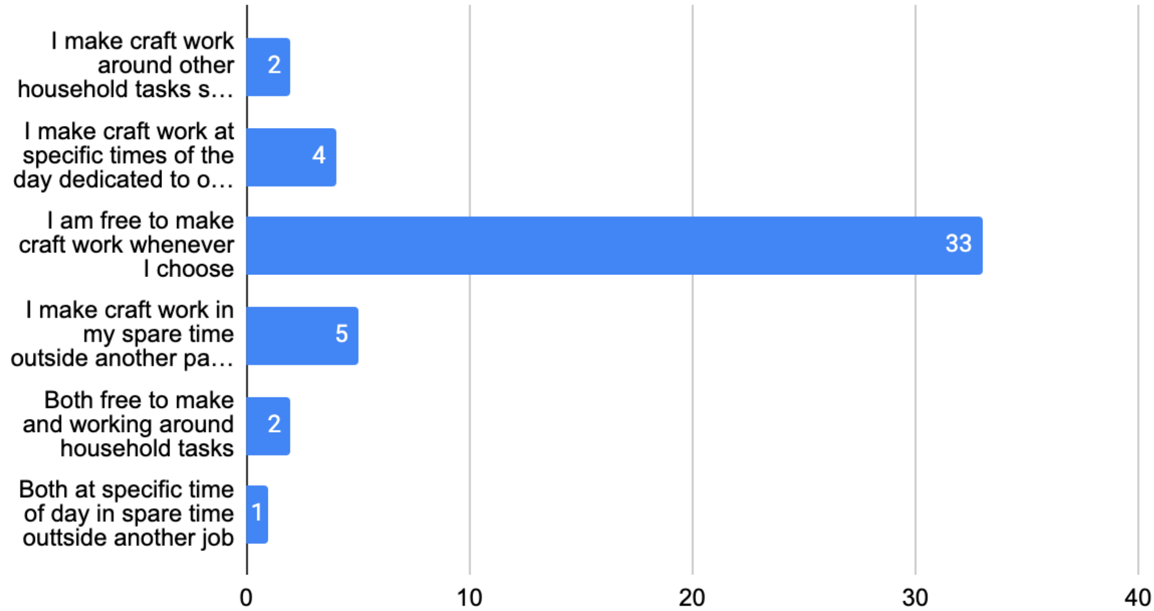
Respondents are generally making their work in dedicated spaces, usually outside the home (28), but sometimes within (11). Very few makers are making at home without a dedicated space. A few work in communal spaces and community arts centres, but this is not that usual.

Location of Craft Production

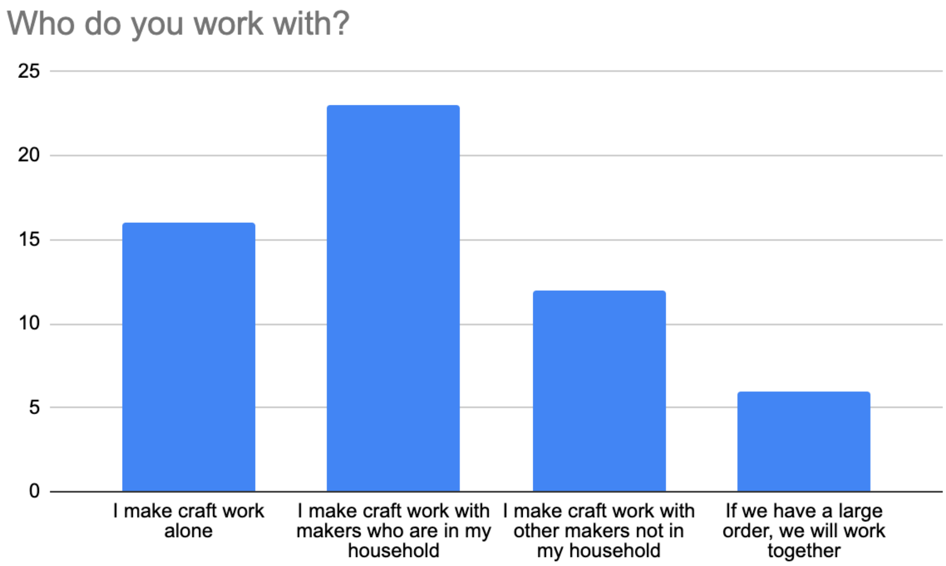


More than half of respondents are free to make their work whenever they wish. A small number work around household tasks or set aside specific times of the day. This makes sense in terms of the age range of the respondents. A significant minority (6) make their work in their spare time outside other employment. This points generally to an autonomous, flexible workforce, and the potential for craft practice to supplement other forms of income.

How does production fit into daily life?

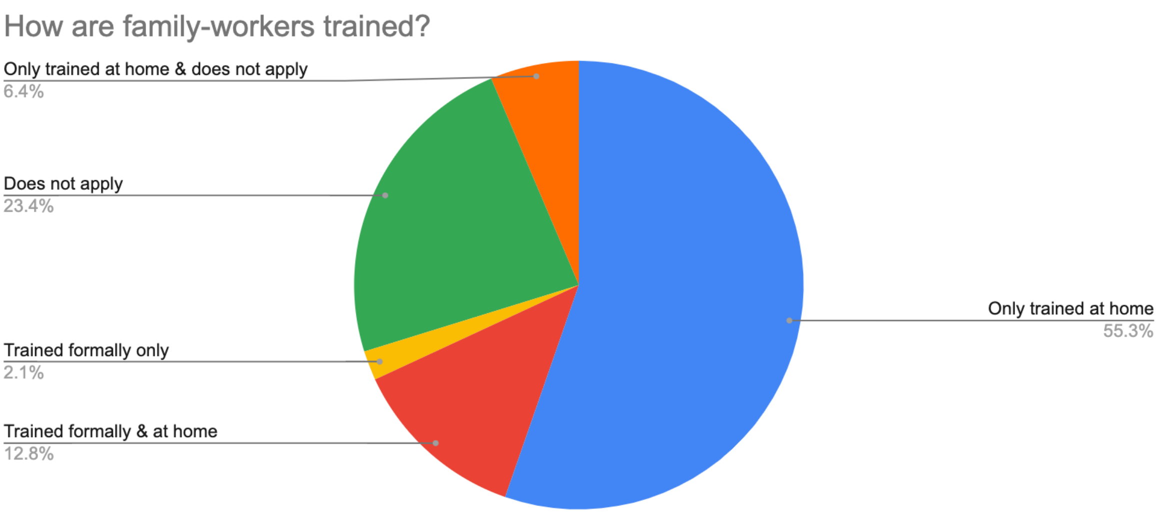


Some respondents work alone, whilst some make with others in different arrangements. The largest group are those who work with others from within their household, though a significant number (16) work alone. Those who work with people from outside their community tend to work with their students or with people they are trained with. Some others work with neighbours. These are close-knit and long established communities. Exceptions are the ABAD Centre in Sheki, where respondents tended to have formal education and therefore have not necessarily come to their craft through these close communities.



Of these makers who work with or alongside others, 29 consider the people they work with to be part of their business. For those makers for whom the question was appropriate, profits are generally shared equally. Exceptionally, one stained glass master in Sheki explained that he pays his employees a monthly salary.

We asked about how those that work with them are trained. Over half are trained at home only, pointing to knowledge transfer generally limited to being on the inside of these groups.

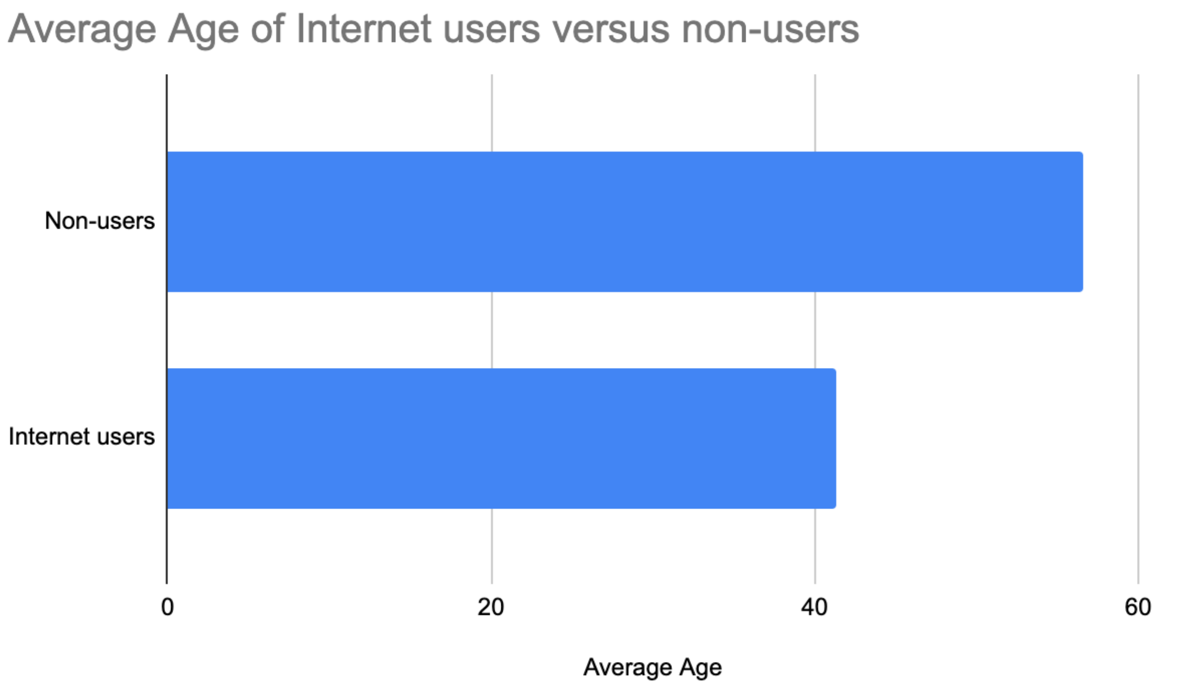


Only 10 out of 47 respondents hire workers from outside their household. Of those, the largest number of workers hired by a respondent is 25 (in Sheki). Another individual employs 12. 8 people hire less than 5 people. These enterprises are small and formal employment is relatively unusual. The respondent who employs 25 people is also a prolific teacher.

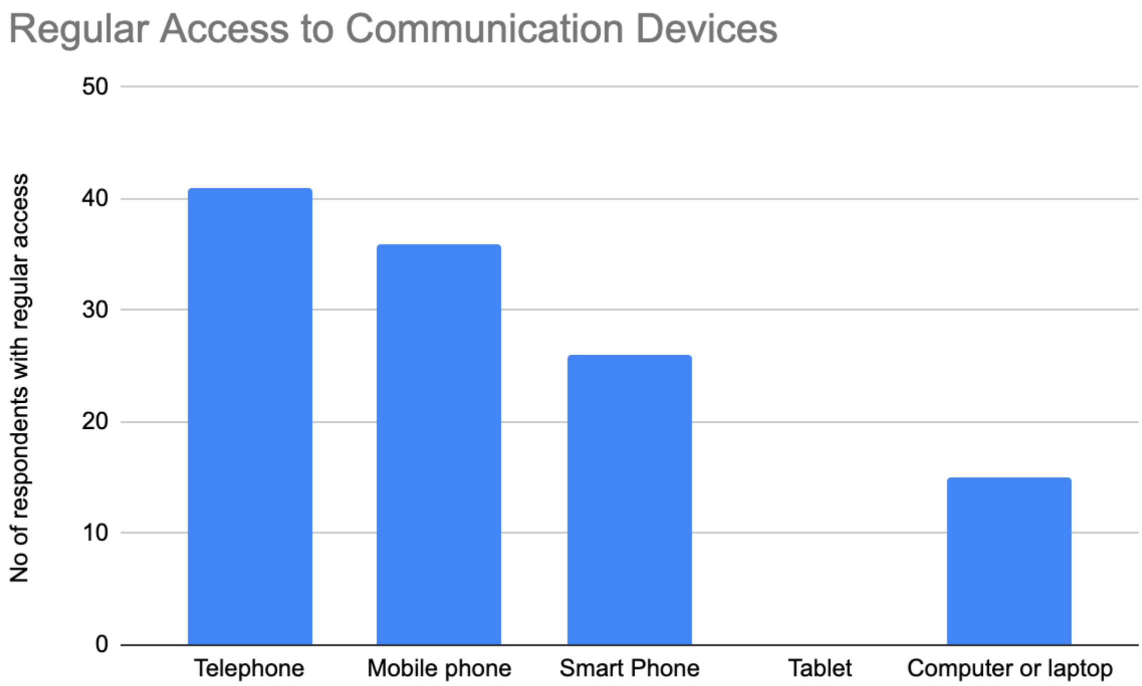
Internet use

Questions on internet use gave an overview of how craftspeople are using the internet. Internet use was fairly high (29 of 47), though it decreased with older respondents (particularly with over 60s), as one may expect. With internet use proving vital to small businesses thriving within the pandemic globally, it is useful data to have, to support craftspeople to become more resilient.

25 out of 47 respondents gave a social media profile or similar form of online social advertising, whilst 18 gave an email address. These are mostly individual, but sometimes representative of a collective or group. This suggests fairly high levels of online communication, and the importance of the internet to marketing and communication for many craftspeople. 19 respondents said that they do not use the internet at all.



Most respondents have access to mobile phones and smart phones rather than computers, suggesting that for any interventions that involve the internet, assistance with phone ready apps would be more useful than computer based software, and communication by telephone should not be underestimated.



Of the 28 respondents who shared which of a list of key tasks they felt comfortable with doing on the internet, 16 were felt comfortable with all 8 basic tasks, 4 with 4 of those tasks and 8 with 3 or fewer. Those with more limited comfort with these tasks were most likely to be able to communicate regularly with others and use social media, which potentially opens this group up to gaining skills in this area fairly quickly, or even of their own volition.

Of the 24 respondents who shared how they use the internet for their craft business, 20 used it to look for ideas and inspiration for new products or design, 11 used it to communicate with buyers, 8 used it to apply for competitions, 6 looked for opportunities to sell work, 4 to arrange delivery services for customers who have bought work, 2 used it to buy materials from online shops in Azerbaijan and one to communicate with wholesalers. This points to a relatively limited use of the internet for their businesses and shows that there is potential for craftspeople to make better use of online services and resources, and their existing skills, to increase their resilience and flexibility.

Overall internet use was particularly good in Sheki, perhaps because of the services and training offered by ABAD.

With their support and interest, assistance, training or support with internet use may be of use to some crafts people, and it might provide an opportunity for community-based interventions that strengthen intergenerational relationships in the form of skills-sharing.

Attitudes to craft and environmental sustainability

9 questions were included that addressed environmental sustainability. This is because it is both an important global concern, but appears to be a particular concern of many crafts people in both their outlook and in how they communicate the narrative of their work. This may also provide an area for future development in education, marketing and personal satisfaction.

43 out of 47 respondents agreed that environmental sustainability was important to them personally, with the remaining respondents saying they didn't know. When asked about how they practise their craft in an environmentally sustainable way, many respondents were unable to answer, with 8 responding that they didn't know, and 18 not answering at all. Those who did answer mostly referred to a strong preference for natural materials, non-toxic materials and natural dyes for both an eco-friendly, human friendly and aesthetically pleasing result. One sculptor referred to the content of his work saying 'I try to show eco life in my artworks'. A halvachi maker tries to reduce energy consumption and plastic packets. There is a sense from these responses of an intuitive, but not very specific understanding of the sustainability of craft practices and an awareness of making a minimal impact on the landscape they inhabit. Follow up questions specifically addressing energy use and natural materials are revealing, demonstrating that when sustainability moves from an abstract concept to a specific example, most are better able to respond. Most respondents named their materials as natural (43). 30 respondents indicated they used local materials and 14 indicated that they do this where possible.

Regarding energy efficiency 38 respondents are not trying to reduce energy consumption and for one, this 'does not apply'. This does not indicate that energy consumption is not a concern, but rather that most labour involved in these crafts practices by the craftspeople themselves does not require energy intensive processes. This applies to textiles in particular. As may be expected for making processes that more obviously use a lot of energy, 3 ceramists explained that they try to maximise efficiency when firing their kilns. The same halvachi maker also mentioned reducing energy in relation to transportation. A hat maker tries where possible, and one coppersmith in Shamaki mentioned, reducing energy while selling. However, no one mentioned material extraction, or the energy cost of materials before they reach the craftsperson, the potential impact of imported materials, or other factors relating to production, such as energy use in metal working. Craftspeople, as in many places, are primarily concerned with their own part of the making process and its impact. Their scale of production is of course much smaller than industrialised production and cannot really be compared.

Regarding the narrative that makers use in how they sell their work and tell its story, environmental sustainability is the 'main narrative' for two Kalaghai producers in Basqal and two coppersmiths in Lahic. For 36 other makers, it is 'part of their story' and for 6 makers they do not mention it to their customers.

Only 1 maker passes on the increased cost of pursuing a more environmentally friendly process (choosing natural over synthetic fabrics in her tailoring), while the remaining 46 either do not charge more (28) or only make environmentally friendly products (18). All 47 makers said no when asked if an environmentally friendly marketing narrative in packaging or other forms of marketing increase sales, though considering the answer to the other questions, it is possible that this is not being formalised. 35 makers said that there is no specific group to whom environmentally friendly products appeal. 9 respondents in Lahic, and one in Shamaki mentioned that it appeals mostly to tourists.

Environmental sustainability is important personally to makers in Azerbaijan, and many use this as part of the narrative they tell to their customers, especially in the perceived naturalness and goodness (and value) of handmade craft. There is scope for more complex conversations and training with makers, who are likely working in a sustainable way, but could build on this in relation to supply chain transparency and understanding carbon footprint, which are becoming increasingly powerful and important parts of marketing for craftspeople globally. In the Azerbaijan craft sector there is scope to tell some very good, very transparent stories about material sourcing and hand-making, and to increase awareness of energy consumption within the whole supply chain.

Perceptions of the Sector

In order to gauge general perceptions of the craft sector by master craftspeople, respondents were asked to agree or disagree with a series of statements. These statements are similar to statements made by craftspeople during preliminary meetings in 2019, and here we sought to gauge whether these initial impressions represented the general attitudes of craftspeople.

37 of 47 respondents agreed that the market for craft in Azerbaijan is growing, though one specified this as slow growth. This may suggest that the loss of income caused by the pandemic is temporary in the minds of the majority of respondents. This is in contrast to the mixed response to ‘I can’t earn a good living from craft’, where 28 agreed and 19 disagreed, suggesting that despite growth or perceptions of growth, craft practices are often financially precarious.

Respondents overwhelmingly agreed that ‘Craft is prestigious’ (44) and disagreed that ‘Craft is old-fashioned’ (44, with two makers from Sheki describing it as ‘traditional’ instead). 44 also agreed that craft is a good option for a career. 42 agreed that craft is relevant to their daily lives. This suggests a sense of pride in their work and career.

Most (40) agreed that it is unusual for young people to be involved in craft professionally. Respondents were split regarding material supplies, with 26 agreeing and 21 disagreeing that it is ‘too difficult to find supplies’. Regarding sales venues, 34 agreed that ‘there are no places to sell craft’ with 3 further respondents qualifying that smaller regional locations may have limited sales options, but they are established and therefore reliable.

Crafts people seem to associate craft with prestige and quality of life and it is growing (apart from the impact of the pandemic) but they also perceive craft as an unusual choice for a young person, materials and supplies are difficult to find and perception of good remuneration does not match with associations of prestige.

Recommendations

There is scope to link interested students with traditional craftspeople and to encourage more informal learning to take place. There was a strong desire and duty communicated in relation to teaching and passing on the craft, however, the craftspeople may need additional support to encourage students to engage with them, or a suitable structure to enable fruitful learning and to manage expectations. Support might also be aimed at students from outside these tight knit community groups, so they understand the process of learning from a master is different from formal education and that cultivating a relationship and a skill base both require patience. Long term learning should be emphasised and explored to promote and develop cultural heritage, though shorter experiences for visitors and tourists could be beneficial if the craftspeople are in control of what they are teaching and feel able to create an authentic experience for both themselves and the students. This should be complementary to their craft practice, enhancing what they are able to offer interested people, rather than changing what they do and how they operate. They might benefit from some clear guidance around expectations, fair remuneration, and encouraging respectful engagement from tourists.

It would be immensely valuable to support interested informal teachers to develop their teaching practice through mentoring, or training, where the needs and expectations of the crafts people come from them directly. Intergenerational learning for older crafts people could be used to support internet use and connectivity as this seems to be an important and growing area in the sector, which could help some of the less popular crafts find willing enthusiasts, students and collectors. All interventions need to take heed of the different (slower) pace and structure of informal learning to avoid unreasonable expectations of progress.

The emphasis on domestic tourists in the current Tourism Strategy provides great scope for development, especially because a large proportion of customers are already domestic tourists. Domestic tourists are also more likely to understand the cultural context, and could be guided to move from buying lower priced souvenirs, to collecting and commissioning high quality craft.

Government or other funding for master craftspeople to be able to take on students with minimal risk to both parties and to explore other modes of teaching and knowledge exchange would be beneficial to the sector. In the shadow of the pandemic, with many craftspeople struggling, it could provide favourable conditions for reinvigorated practices and opportunities for young people.

The Creative Learning Module developed as part of the Crafting Futures programme may provide a suitable framework for arts and cultural centres, or individual craftspeople to teach in formal settings and to provide some approaches they may find interesting and enjoyable. Azerbaijani crafts people generally have a high technical skill level, and many are making interesting contemporary work, but there are many others who would benefit from being given the opportunity to approach their work or their students differently.

There was a strong sense of community and collective endeavour from the communities we engaged with in this project. Supporting the crafts people to further strengthen that sense of community through communication channels, forums and events for their own development would be beneficial for the sector. There is a wide skill base within those communities where sharing can take place across the generations, craft professions and regions, in relation to communication, banking, the internet and teaching practices. This approach will give these communities agency and ownership and therefore enhance their sense of confidence which will benefit the development of their practice and how they tell its story. It will also enable crafts people to use their collective voice to ask for the interventions and support that they feel they need.