

Doctoral Education in Georgia

Research Project Report
Executive Summary
(full text available only in Georgian)

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Tempus

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In 2012-2013 research of doctoral level education was carried out by the group of Ilia State University specialists, with support of TEMPUS national office, Georgia. The study aimed to describe and analyze the findings regarding current situation of doctoral education in the country. With this aim, first a desk study was carried out through considering international and local materials, documents (legislative among them) and websites of Georgian and other universities from Western Europe, United States and Canada. Second, data was collected through a: interviews with 26 university representatives and a representative of the National Quality Assurance Centre (27 interviews in total), and b: online survey of PhD students in Georgia (480 students responded). Below main findings and their analysis is provided after the description of the country context.

Context of the country - Brief description of higher education in Georgia

Georgia's political strive to join European Union is reflected in all spheres of its economy, higher education among them. The new higher education law was introduced in 2004, based mainly on those of the US and European countries. Becoming a member of Bologna process was and still is considered as a major breakthrough to the united European education space. Therefore, we will analyze the data of our research on the background of the European and the US counterparts.

After joining Bologna process in 2005, Georgian higher education system underwent serious changes. Currently, higher education is a three cycle system, starting from bachelor (240 CTS), followed by masters (120 ECTS) and finished by PhD (180 ECTS) levels. Each of the following cycles requires the previous cycle degree as a necessary prerequisite to be admitted.

For the small country with population of 5 million, Georgia has a surprisingly high number of universities, 58 in total, 20 - public and 39 - private ones. This high number is achieved mainly because the private universities mushroomed after the Soviet Union breakdown and independence of Georgia in early nineties of the XX century. At that time, a large number of specialists with higher education was left without any, or a miniscule income and set to find out ways to survive. Many of these private universities have a limited scope of fields of education to offer and a small number of students, respectively.

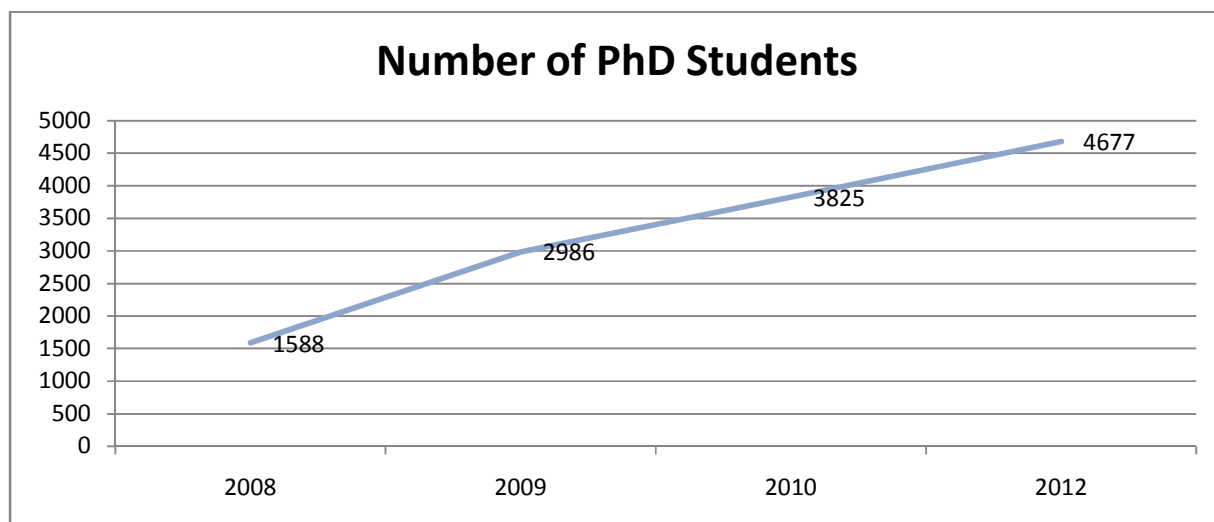
The three tier structure was introduced for universities in 2010. Currently there are 5 colleges with only bachelor level education, 27 teaching universities with master level education and 26 universities, so called major research universities, with all three levels of education. This innovation was introduced to raise the quality of education, as not all universities in Georgia held sufficient amount of qualified professors to be able to carry out research and provide high quality education for master and PhD students.

Alignment of higher education with Georgian market is quite problematic. On the background of almost no respective research data and situation analysis, a general trend of Georgian market is no different from that of many other countries in the world: most of the jobs are provided by service sector. Similar to other underdeveloped countries, unemployment is very high, as well as indirect employment - many works in the sphere other than the degree received; large business is almost nonexistent. Different from the developed economies, though, is the fact that young population, new graduates, find jobs easier than older generation. Bachelor and master level education provides most of the staff for the service sector. Universities have become major employers for specialists with higher education after state bodies, such as ministries, agencies and others. Later we shall see that this fact plays a role in popularity of PhD programs in Georgia.

The main findings

26 universities out of 58 provide PhD education in Georgia, 12 public and 14 - private. Only 4 universities are located outside the capital, Tbilisi – one public university is in Batumi (South-West Georgia), another public university is in Telavi (East Georgia) and 2 universities in Kutaisi (West Georgia) – 1 public and 1 private.

There are 4677 PhD students in Georgia for 2012-2013 academic years. Their number steadily increases from 2008 up to 2012:



Most of these students (3558) study in Tbilisi, at 2 major public universities: Tbilisi State University (TSU) and Ilia State University (ISU). These universities are major research hubs as well.

Most of the universities require payment for study. The exceptions are Georgian Aviation University and Ilia State University. The payment amount varies from university to university and within the universities, according to the field of study, but, in majority of cases, it does not exceed amount of payment for master level.

The duration of PhD programs is mainly 3 years, with minor exceptions. Apparently, many students do not manage to finish in this time period and as a way out, take "leave", thus change their status from that of active to that of a passive one.

Curriculums are quite similar having usual package of subjects to study. Also, students are required to teach through assisting to professors. To sum up the data, there is lack of variety in Georgian universities in all aspects of programs. The reason might be that universities are not fully independent not because the state does not grant freedom, but because the university top management and professors are not ready for independence and innovations. Thus, many universities just copy the processes and procedures of other universities and recommendations of the National Quality Assurance Centre.

Analysis

A percentage of eligible population receiving higher education on bachelor level is currently about 20%, which is much less than that of the developed countries. However, the percentage of PhD students is 4%, which means that, relatively high number of students are interested to continue higher education the third cycle. This can be regarded as a paradox, as there are almost no research organizations in the country able to employ young people with PhD. Thus, the gap with market demands is clear. How can we explain this gap? Our study revealed number of reasons:

1. One of the most frequent answers was the opportunity to carry out research; this answer was provided by the university representatives through interviews and by the students through online survey. However, this reason cannot explain the paradoxical data.

2. Universities are interested in raising professors, as there is lack of qualified specialists, especially in the most popular fields of sciences: law, economics, business, and social sciences. Only 9 universities out of 26 have long history of existence and, respectively, sufficient number of professors. Even these universities have their doctoral students as assistant professors, for example, about 4% of TSU doctoral students and 5.3% of ISU students are assistant professors. Among the "young" and growing universities, Caucasus University has 33% of their doctoral students as assistant professors, Georgian-American University - 55%, IB Euro-Caucasian University - 58%, while 100% of Tbilisi Free University and Georgian Aviation Institute are their assistant professors respectively.

3. Interviews with university top management representatives, as well as an online survey of PhD students showed that one of the main reasons of studying at PhD programs is a university career. As stated in the context description of the report, university jobs are attractive for many, on the background of high unemployment rate in the country.

According to the law on higher education, in order to become an assistant professor, one either should hold a PhD degree, or aspire to hold it in future; this should be proved by becoming a PhD student. This is a usual practice in Europe (there is no assistant professor position as such in European universities, but a similar one) however, there is certain distinction: while in the developed countries PhD students can hold a certain teaching position, they should be on the advanced position of their degrees, at least finished with credits for classes. Another difference is that in the United States, assistant professors are required to hold a PhD degree and in addition, are given certain amount of years to show

their advancement in the field through publications. There is no such requirement for assistant professors in Georgia. At present, there is small number of students, who have had a doctoral student status for 5 years or more with no or almost no advancement.

4. Traditionally high status of PhD, it has always been regarded as prestigious to hold the degree regardless of its need and relevance for obtaining a job. This motive was provided by university representatives during the interviews and by students via survey.

Therefore, motivation of universities is to raise their cadre, motivation of students is to become employed at universities and have a prestigious degree, these motivations meet each other.

It is interesting to note that high unemployment rate in the country is not the reason for becoming a PhD student. Unlike developed countries, where PhD is now quite often regarded as a delayed employment - young people having no job turn to PhD education, this is the case only with very few in Georgia, as the vast majority of PhD students in all universities in Georgia are employed as shown by our interviews. This, on the other hand, means that almost all PhD students are part-time students, the fact not fully realized by some universities, as the duration of PhD studies is mainly three years, which, apparently, is not enough for preparing a good quality dissertation.

5. Research showed that doctoral education is quite cheap in Georgia. The tuition fee in many cases is not more than that of the master's level, and in other cases very low or almost nothing. It is interesting to find out how universities allocate monetary value to doctoral programs; our study was not meant to answer this question. However, based on interviews we can state that universities ask for tuition fees based on financial conditions of potential students and not on the real expenditures of the PhD programs. If universities take into account research expenses that are quite serious in many cases, the program costs would become higher. At the same time, universities know that students cannot afford higher expenses and ask for less. This argument is supported by the fact that, at some universities, business school PhD programs are more expensive than those of natural sciences, while expenditures for research in natural sciences are larger. Therefore, low costs of PhD programs might be considered as one more reason for their popularity.

6. One more reason is a relatively easy admission requirement. In most of universities, applicants are required to pass a foreign language exam and an interview. Different from bachelor and master's level admissions, there is no nationwide test; a relatively low number

of universities requires research project. Also, interviews show that more students apply to universities with less admission requirements.

Duration of PhD studies is another interesting paradox to consider. In the United states, UK and some other European countries, PhD students receive scholarship, which enables them to fully concentrate on the research and not to seek for a job, thus, be able to graduate in three or four years depending on the field of study. Also, universities are reluctant to prolong the duration of the studies, as it automatically increases the expenditures, the longer students study, the longer they receive the scholarship. Thus, 3-4 year limit for the program is desirable. However, such limit is not understandable in Georgia. PhD students receive scholarship only in very limited number of cases as at Georgian Aviation University, Ilia State University, IB Euro-Caucasian University and David Aghmashenebeli University of Georgia, the percentage of such students constitutes less than 3%. In the rest of the cases, students pay for their education, thus, the longer they study, the more they pay. The paradox is, then, that the universities restrict their own source of income! According to our data, representatives of only one university – Saint Andrews Georgian University - perceive PhD students as income providers.

A very important issue to consider is the quality of PhD programs and how the universities ensure this quality. Many universities require publication of an article, or number of articles as a necessary prerequisite for defense. This can be considered as either internal, or external quality assurance, depending on where a publication is required: in international peer reviewed journal, as at ISU and TSU, or in a local one. TSU has provided a bit more flexibility for the students, as they can substitute publication with a review by an international expert - a professor of a European, or the US University. As for the internal quality assurance, some universities – Tbilisi State University, Ilia State University, Kutaisi University, University of Georgia, Grigol Robakidze University, David Aghmashenebeli University of Georgia - have their own journals, thus making it easier for students to publish. The quality of these publications are checked mainly within the universities, though. Another issue to consider is requirements to be admitted for the degree studies. All universities require interview and foreign language test, but not all universities require a research proposal, or motivation essay. Also, according to the interviews, in number of universities, students do not have supervisors from the very beginning; thus, suffer lack of guidance for quite some time.

Most of the university representatives interviewed bring lack of funding for PhD programs as the most important problem. Music, Arts and Medical universities complain especially, as their programs require high expenditures, thus, cost more, thus, less students apply. Lack of

preparedness of students, who apply for the PhD programs is also noted as one of the problems, but by a smaller number of university representatives, namely, BSU and ISU.

Based on data of our research, we detected one more problem: the rate of graduation is very low. 52% of TSU students and 17.3% of ISU students are on so called leave, or, in other words, their status is "frozen". Currently, they do nothing; however, plan to continue their studies in future. This problem is caused from both sides: universities and students. Universities do not provide full guidance and support to students to help them work on their degrees and, in some cases put additional time pressure, while students do not perceive PhD thesis as a very serious work that requires a lot of time and energy, which, they do not have, especially because they work. University representatives noted that students are not prepared for PhD level in neither cognitive, nor emotional maturation. Thus, students should not set unrealistic goals, but universities should not admit such unprepared students.

In conclusion, the study revealed number of problems that are relatively easy to solve, as they do not require large expenditures (for example, legislature amendments). Also, some interesting issues deserve further study. It is interesting to find out, how the monetary value of PhD programs is established by universities, how they see financing of doctoral programs. This issue is intertwined with another one – a research, which is a main part of doctoral education. It is also interesting to find out how universities, the National Quality Assurance Centre and other decision makers and stakeholders understand research. Carrying out research requires corresponding material and human resources; do all 26 Georgian universities possess these? All these are issues for further study.