

PhD Quality Enhancement Project

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

Ilia State University
2014

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Peer Review was carried out by anonymous Education scholars



This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

Introduction

To enhance the quality and build trust towards PhD education in Georgia, a project led by the Georgian academics and PhD students from different universities started in September 2014. The project team collected data from six Georgian State universities in the capital and in the regions. The study focused on Social Studies, including Education. Findings represented in this report rely upon qualitative data collected during fieldwork in 2014 among professors (including PhD advisors and reviewers), PhD Students, and graduates, who defended their PhD Dissertations in Georgia in the past 5 years after introducing reform and structured PhD programs. Reforms included transformation of research degrees to academic degrees, giving universities exclusive right to give PhD and incorporating research institutes in universities.

The first stage of the project focused on the study of the current state of affairs on PhD level, using input, process and outcome based assessments. The project team employed three main methods: in-depth interviews, focus groups, and content analysis. During fieldwork approximately 100 respondents took part in interviews and focus groups. All interviews were conducted under provision of anonymity. For qualitative analyses of dissertations, randomly selected PhD theses in the field of Education were sent to anonymous peer-reviewers in different renowned universities.

Main Findings

The analysis of the third cycle education in Social Studies is structured according to the system model. This conceptual model represents Doctoral Education as a system that comprises three intertwined components such as input data, process and output data. In input the research team considered human, technical and financial resources that build a basis for the third cycle education. In the category of process research team included all the processes, which should enable transformation of inputs in outputs. Under output researchers mean the final outcomes of doctoral education including research products, teaching and learning, and career opportunities of graduates.

Input (Resources)

The study found that there is a consensus among academics, students and recent graduates regarding availability or rather poor suitability of resources (input). Participants agreed that the functioning (process) and output of doctoral education suffers from the lack of adequate human, technical and financial resources. Successful exceptions could be used as models for building a system.

Human resources

One of the most frequently cited problems was the ratio between PhD advisors and PhD students. The number of professors, who can be research advisors, is considerably less than the number of PhD candidates. The mismatch in ratio could be interpreted as a sign of systemic problem: Universities often do not have clear criteria, who can be a research advisor. So e. g. some universities link the right to be an advisor only to status of a professor, not his or her actual research. In such cases universities limit this right only to full professors. The lack of institution-wide agreed criteria for a PhD advisor causes not only a problem of ratio, but also problem of inadequate competencies. The project team found that in universities with status related restrictions, professors only remotely associated with research topic of the PhD study are research advisors. The same regulations or in some cases absence of regulations causes also transparency concerns. Often professors with additional academic or administrative status are more desirable PhD advisors than others. The inadequately high number of PhD students can be interpreted from differently. Some of the universities see PhD students as a source of income (when they are paying fees) or/and cheap labor force (when they are teaching to get teaching credits). For PhD students it is linked with higher status as obtaining a PhD remains an attractive goal for the wider society.

A widely discussed problem was the motivation and competencies PhD students as well. The study found that the motivations of students and expectations of universities differ. The study team found that in cases, where motivation of students meets adequate academic and financial resources at the Universities, the level of satisfaction and completion rate is high. Such cases are almost exclusively linked to the models, when a research team with a funded research project accepts a PhD student, offers intellectual environment and financial support. However this remains rather an exception, though a desired one.

Apart from successful cases where motivation, expectation and resources meet, academics and students reported about their rather disappointing experiences: one is of mismatch between the expectation and the support. There are cases of very motivated students not finding adequate resources while facing high expectations from their universities. The environment and the resources are inadequate. Other examples include less academically motivated students, who either need the PhD student status to avoid obligatory military service or other not primarily academic reasons. Others need the PhD for securing their advance in the career. As expectations vary greatly from university to university, such students either find it very hard to complete third cycle, or manage to advance easily to the defense. The completion data per se is therefore not a success indicator and needs to be analyzed further.

Financing

Financing remains one of the key issues. It includes low or no financing for research in universities or from the third parties, tuition fees for Doctoral education in most universities, or using PhD students as cheap or even free labor force. Universities seldom offer students regular job opportunities. The last changes in the law, which

limited the right to academic positions only for PhD holders, limits further the chances of PhD students to have stable jobs within the academia. Having no regular scholarships for PhD students neither from the state nor from the universities, leaves students forced to be work else-where mostly full-time and do their research in their free time. One of the improvements compared to previous years are research grants for established PhD students offered on merit-based criteria by the Georgian National Research Foundation since 2013. In interviews PhD students emphasized their desire to use the grants besides fieldwork for studying abroad or doing intensive research semester in Western universities in order to compensate for lacking academic support and also to be able to concentrate fully only on research.

Technical Resources

The situation among universities varies greatly. Among positive developments the informants noted that some universities offer a wide range of academic and technical resources, including libraries, e-resources, trainings how to use different media. The equipment of libraries and spaces for PhD students remains generally a problem.

Process

In the last five years universities introduced a range of different regulations to implement structured PhD programs, though many of the regulations seem to function more on paper (e. g. agreements between advisors and PhD students, individual plans and alike). At some universities the research team could observe a transformation from a much regulated structure to a very loose one during the last five years. At the beginning of reforms universities introduced a taught component of approximately 60 ECTS as a main component of structured programs. The quality and the benefit of courses offered at the PhD level is not always clear for PhD students and academics alike. Furthermore it was additional workload for university professors and made the third cycle of education more costly for universities and especially undesirable for universities with no tuition fees for PhD students.

Respondents talked about the need of more suitable academic courses for the third cycle, research conferences, and generally more contacts between universities. University administrators and professors see development of subject specific courses only for PhD students too demanding. A solution would be sharing graduate courses for master and PhD students. This in turn requires some changes in legislation and a more flexible approach. There are some regulations that seem to be obstacles in developing of a better quality. So e. g. the academic exchange between Georgian universities is almost non-existent in daily academic life. The mobility is hindered by new regulations from the Ministry, which does not allow PhD students from one university to take some courses at another university without enrolling, at the same time forbidding the double enrollment. The same is true for allocating

ECTS to PhD research component, which is also regulated by the ministry for all universities and for all cycles in the same way.

The need for networking between universities, and/or between academia and entrepreneurs was one of the main issues addressed by PhD students and academics similarly. Networking, exchange of courses, mobility would allow universities to compensate for lacking courses, human resources, and research capacities. All deficits mentioned in input have great impact on the process, which is defined by the lack of adequate human, financial and technical resources.

Output

The output of the third cycle is shaped greatly by the understanding of the mission of the universities, by the understanding of quality and aim of the third cycle. This difference is apparent in the process e. g. in the regulations, what a PhD student prior to defense should do, but also in the attitudes towards PhD Dissertation as a product itself and chances offered to graduates after completion of a PhD. Regarding the regulations the research team observed a wide array of differences: Some universities require their students to publish prior to defense only in acclaimed international peer-reviewed journals. Others organize an anonymous peer-reviewing of larger parts of dissertations to ensure a better quality and impartial judgment. Still others do not have any such requirements, resulting in great difference in quality and expectations. It also results in differences in the flow of PhD students/graduation rate: some universities have seven graduates in five years, while others claim more than 70. The difference in attitudes was also visible in how universities treat the final products of the third cycle. For some it is on display, still others try not to show them. The study team had to negotiate with some universities obtaining of the completed dissertations for peer-review. The works are not available online. In cases where universities emphasize the quality of the outcome, dissertations were available on web-sites, in some cases larger parts of dissertations were available in English language as well. Furthermore, the universities with higher emphasis on quality also strived to keep the new graduates as academics offering them soon after defense higher academic and/or administrative positions.

Outcomes of content analysis

For the purpose to understand better the state of the PhD level education in Georgia, the study has reviewed dissertations developed and defended during the last five year period. As a sample, dissertations in social sciences, and more narrowly in education have been chosen. PhD in Education is offered both in the capital and in provincial universities in Georgia.

From the database of all dissertations in Education defended since 2009, four have been chosen using the random selection process. Randomization was conducted within clusters of dissertations defended in the universities of the capital, Tbilisi and provincial universities. Two dissertations were chosen from the capital and two from other universities.

These four dissertations were sent for review to two scholars that have advanced graduate degrees in education from the top western universities. Scholars have reviewed the dissertations commenting on the following elements of the dissertation:

1. Organization
2. Aims and theoretical framework
3. Research methodology
4. Analysis and outcomes
5. Ethics

The reviewers had an option to add their additional comments to the suggested structure of the peer-review.

Problems that have been identified by reviewers are the following

Organization

Most of the dissertations that were reviewed have substantive structural deficiencies. The flow of the text is not always logical. Irrelevant discussions on irrelevant themes that are not connected to the aims or methodology of the dissertation are presented unexpectedly. The quality of text is reportedly very low, lacking proofreading. English summaries are sometimes described as incomprehensible.

Aims and theoretical framework

There is a lack of any theoretical frameworks in all of the reviewed dissertations. Literature reviews lack coherence and are rarely used for developing the theoretical background for the study. Some of the dissertations are just descriptive desk research projects. Some have more normative aims, of establishing the case for a certain cause.

Research Methodology

Some of the dissertations that were reviewed are descriptive, desk research type projects. Some claim that aim to collect the empirical data, but rely on purely theoretical discussions. There are cases, when methods used are mistakenly described (e.g. surveys are equated to an experiment). Problems are aggravated by not being able to cite the modern methodological literature on research methods. Most dissertations cite quite outdated methodological literature from the Soviet times.

Analysis and outcomes

The reviewers described all dissertations as lacking substantiated conclusions. Conclusions either they lack empirical evidence, or they are missing. Some dissertations are just historical reviews of certain development without having any closure. Instead of analysis, in many dissertations we see graphs of some data. This data is never discussed and is presented without any narrative. Moreover, data

collection instruments, such as questionnaires or tests are presented as part of the analysis instead of having them in the annexes.

Ethics

There is virtually no mentioning of the considerations of research ethics in the dissertations that were reviewed. Citations are sometimes missing. Therefore, in some cases text leaves reviewers wondering on its integrity. Some dissertations lack proper citations (e.g. years of publications are missing).

Other problems

There has been an indication that the length of the dissertations may be a little too short for a PhD level, compared to the practice in some western academia (e.g. US or UK). Some dissertations that were reviewed were between 20-25 thousand words.

Concluding remarks

The study revealed high correlation between input, process and output of PhD education in Georgia. Lack of resources: human, technical and financial marks the entire process and shapes the outcomes. Lack of adequate support from the state, but also very weakly developed quality culture in universities hinders to overcome existing problems. On a more positive note the team observed some improvement in technical resources e. g. libraries, e-resources. There is an improved situation regarding employment of younger generation of graduates in some universities. Generally, the increasing number of PhD students should be interpreted as sign of increasing attractiveness of academic sphere whether or not the primary motivation of PhD students is to stay in academia after graduation. Most important positive development was openness to build a better system, the desire to change and improve. The universities are ready to own the system. They do not relegate all changes to the state or legislation, though some changes should be implemented on state level as well. The readiness for change should be a fruitful ground for improvement of system. In the second stage the project team will work to cultivate a shared academic space for discussions. At this stage the project will focus on developing tools for quality enhancement. At the third stage the project will provide a set of recommendations for main stakeholders. At this stage some of the quality enhancement mechanisms developed during the life time of the project, will be implemented.