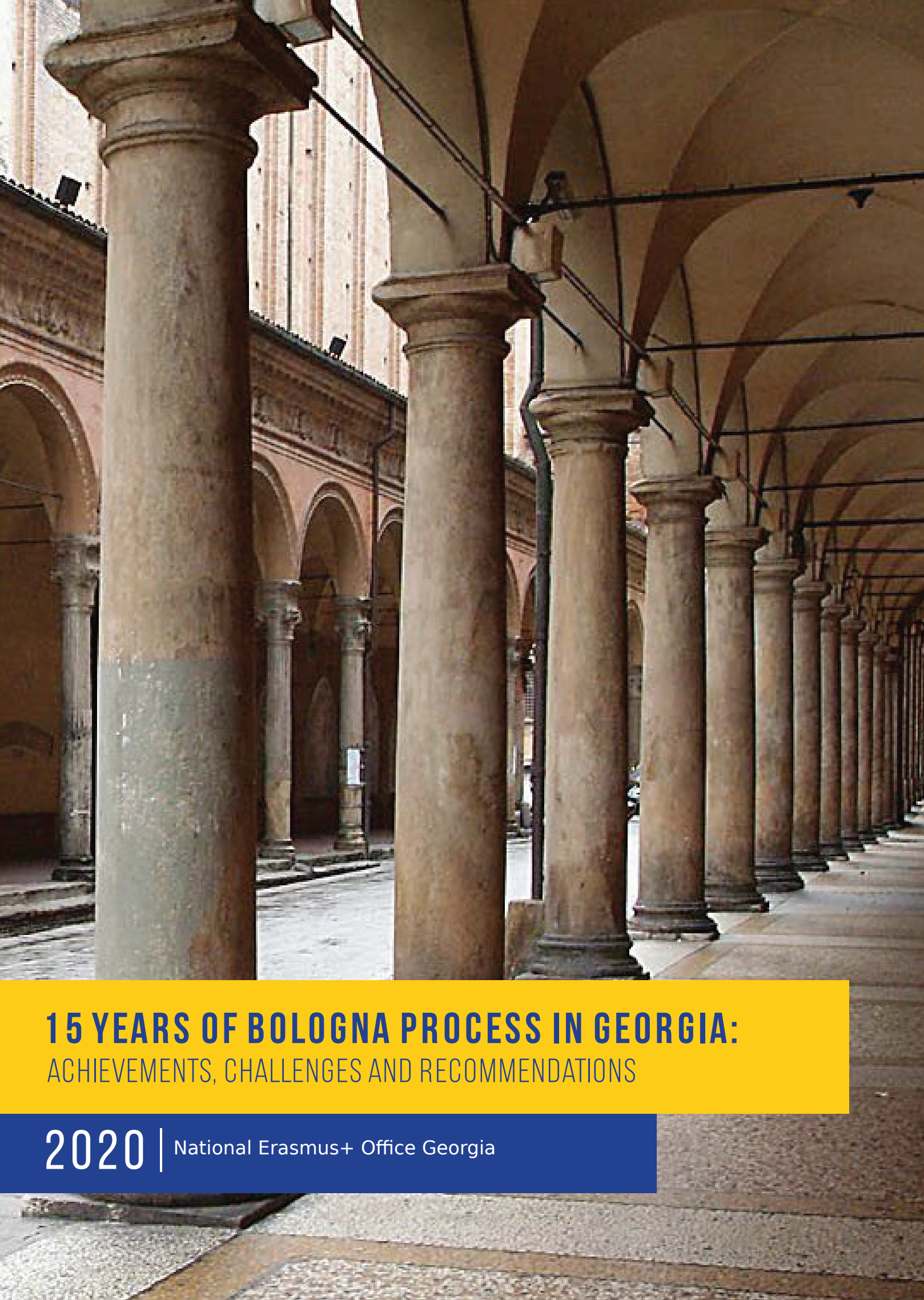

15 YEARS OF BOLOGNA PROCESS IN GEORGIA:
ACHIEVEMENTS, CHALLENGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

2020 | National Erasmus+ Office Georgia

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Georgia joined the Bologna Process in May 2005, and that significantly changed the Higher Education system in the country while bringing it closer to the European standards.

Team of Georgian Higher Education Reform Experts developed policy papers, revising 15 years of HE reforms and providing recommendations for the future actions in line with the European Higher Education Area membership.

We hope that these recommendations will be useful for the development of the National Higher Education Strategy and for the implementation of specific reforms.

National Erasmus+ Office Georgia

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Research in Higher Education Institutions of Georgia: Challenges and perspectives

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report summarizes the findings of the recent studies on research management in Georgia, completed by direct feedback from Georgian universities.

It offers various recommendations, summarized in the form of four main steps, to improve research management in Georgia. These steps must be understood as interrelated milestones that are relevant at both university and system levels.

CONTEXT AND CHALLENGES

After having long been considered as an individual activity, research is now a collective, coordinated business for teams, departments and institutions. A new "research management profession" emerges worldwide, along with its own professional organizations, means of communication and guidelines.

Georgian higher education institutions (HEIs) are adapting to this global evolution, with little funding and additional constraints. Their challenge is to find a functional model fit to overcome these constraints whilst ensuring timely and flexible support schemes adapted to rapidly evolving network of actors and their ecosystems.

THE WAY FORWARD – FOUR MILESTONES

- UNDERSTANDING THE DEMAND

Identifying and prioritizing research needs is a very important, but pending task in the national policy agenda of research management. Currently, the main challenges are:

  - Including different potential interest groups (local government, business, think tanks, informal groups, etc.) in the discussion;
  - Ensuring the transparency and smoothness of the process;
  - Consolidating and merging primary data about the research needs into bigger clusters.

The use of a virtual platform as a shared space could bring the academic research community, policy planners and potential clients or sponsors one step forward in this direction.

- CLUSTERING SUPPLY

Research in Georgia is currently fragmented and this could be due to a lack of governmental or regional priority for research that would encourage the creation of scientific "clusters". Clear information about the demand, if coupled with relevant incentives, may stimulate such regrouping of resources and the creation of new networks, within and between universities.

The proponents of clustering in research claim that the development of such formal or informal groups is important for:

  - Optimizing resources for research (*e.g.* creation of shared laboratories);
  - A quick and effective exchange of information; and
  - The development of complex, interdisciplinary networks, which would increase creativity and efficiency in the process of research.

- HELPING CLUSTERS ADAPT

The data about demand will make it easier to build an incentive system to stimulate regrouping of suppliers for a more efficient provision of demand-driven research.

  - FUNDING SCHEMES. The first powerful instrument in this regard is creating dedicated funding schemes for stimulating research in specific priority areas.
  - SHARED LABS. Apart from funding mechanisms, the support processes may also include creation of shared labs that can be used by multiple institutions for multiple purposes.
  - TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE. Building human resource capacity is another important dimension. Key needs include research methods and research management specifics (e.g. project writing, intellectual property management, project management, establishing networks, dissemination of results...)

- CLARIFYING ACCOUNTABILITY STANDARDS

  - SETTING THE FRAMEWORK: research monitoring and evaluation is not only a tool for measuring progress but also an instrument for communicating the main principles and priorities of research management, both at the university and system levels. Hence the importance to avoid uniformity.
  - UNDERSTANDING AND COMMUNICATING RESULTS: Accessibility and comparability of information about targets and progress are key for supporting research cooperation within and outside of the country. It is important that monitoring and evaluation mechanisms be clearly linked with the goals of research infrastructure development rather than control.

The milestones described above are altogether priority objectives and indicators for a demand-driven research and should be clearly communicated as such to all stakeholders.

INTRODUCTION

This report summarizes the findings of the recent studies on research management in Georgia, completed by direct feedback from Georgian universities.

It offers various recommendations, summarized in the form of four main steps, to improve research management in Georgia. These steps must be understood as interrelated milestones that are relevant at both university and system levels.

I - CONTEXT AND CHALLENGES

A - THE RECENT EVOLUTION OF ACADEMIC RESEARCH

1) A SHIFT FROM INDIVIDUAL TO COLLECTIVE

Research has long been considered as an inherently personal activity, strongly dependent on the ideas and imagination of individuals or groups of individuals. It has always been ultimately linked to fundamental beliefs about academic freedom and the opportunity to challenge longstanding viewpoints. Moreover, research, by its very nature, was always considered as unpredictable, moving in unchartered territories with unexpected consequences. Therefore, it has never easily lent itself to certain forms of control and management (Tailor, 2006).

The contemporary world gradually alters this vision. Modern universities face more and more constraints in performing a research function that requires the application of different types of management frameworks.

A literature review on research management challenges suggests that such flexible, dynamic cooperative networks cannot be established without a strong capacity for research management within and across higher education institutions and without system-wide incentives. Thus, after having long been considered as an individual activity, research is gradually becoming a collective, coordinated business for teams, departments and institutions (Schuetzenmeister, 2010; Taylor, 2006; Kirkland, 2008; Huisman et al, 2015)

Therefore, in modern universities, the emphasis is placed on transforming what was once regarded an individual researcher's tasks into a professional, highly complex institutional activity, which entails major strategic responsibilities (OECD, 2005).

1) RESEARCH MANAGEMENT AS TASK IN ITSELF

Recent developments related to the COVID 19 pandemic brought the issue of research management to a new level and highlighted the areas that need urgent attention: Funding and quality issues require priorities to be agreed upon; adequate resources are needed to be expended and distributed in an optimal manner; activities must be coordinated to increase efficiency and legal and ethical control mechanisms should be applied systematically. Risk-taking also becomes an essential part of institutional vitality of research institutions and accordingly, risks must be properly understood and managed (Tailor, 2006).

The increased interest in institution-led and system-led research management has been driven by several inter-related factors:

- In large cooperation projects crossing organizational boundaries, a disciplinary and functional division of labor seems to be inevitable. Hence, systematic planning, a higher degree of formalization and the definition of interfaces for data and technology sharing, theory connection, and stakeholder participation need to be implemented (Schuetzenmeister, 2010).

- In order to identify their own strengths and weaknesses, institutions have to be far more informed about their own and partners' research activity than they were in the past, and this information must be collected through a centralized mechanism.

- Centralized mechanisms are also needed for universities to assist their researchers in accessing diverse sources of funding and selecting appropriate approaches. Institutions now assume the responsibility for meeting obligations to a wider range of sponsors, under a variety of terms and conditions.

Taken together, these factors have significantly altered the balance of responsibility between individual researchers, departments, institutions and networks. It is no exaggerated to say that a new "research management profession" emerges, along with its own professional organizations, means of communication and guidelines (Kirkland, 2008).

B - THE GEORGIAN PERSPECTIVE

Georgian higher education institutions (HEIs) share these global challenges. Namely, they struggle to:

- Adapt to new realities by absorbing new technologies and widening their networks;
- Compete with others while creating effective cooperation models with them;
- Develop a long-term vision while dealing with fluctuant immediate needs;
- Find exclusive niches in a context of growing demand for diversified products;
- Increase the return on public investment while ensuring financial independence;
- Find a balance between local, national and international.

In addition, as in many other post-Soviet countries, Georgian HEIs face specific, context-related obstacles in the field of research:

- Their recent merger with the research institutes (formerly attached to the Academy of Sciences) brought new administrative and structural problems to the institutional agenda. Universities and former research institutes are still in the process of optimizing and synchronizing their resources, mitigating post-merger tensions and finding synergies;

- Structural changes in universities are accompanied by specific challenges in each field of science:
    - In hard sciences, the major problems stem from obsolete infrastructure, poorly equipped laboratories and the lack of material resources for research;

- In social sciences researchers have to cope with the consequences of a long-term isolation from the wider scientific community in their respective fields.

All these changes are taking place in Georgia with very little funding for higher education and research. The percentage of GDP devoted to research and development is only 0.3%, which is ten times less than the European benchmark for 2020 (UIS, 2018).

According to the UIS data, the number of researchers per million inhabitants (FTE) is also low, thus explicitly illustrating limited research capacity in the country.

A comparative analysis of research output and impact shows that Georgia ranks average in the reference group (Eastern Europe). Namely it holds the 15th place in the SCIMAGO ranking of 23 countries by consolidated H index for all fields for the period 1996-2018.

Recent studies implemented in Georgia taking a deeper view of the structural composition of research in Georgia illustrate that research activities are highly fragmented. There are no research priorities, neither for specific fields nor for research units within universities. Also, the importance of the third mission and applied research is not properly embedded in research evaluation and support mechanisms (European Union, 2017; National Erasmus + office Georgia, 2017, 2016, 2014; Bregvadze and Medjad, 2014; Chakhaia and Bregvadze, 2018).

In the background of the mentioned obstacles, the biggest challenge in Georgia is to consolidate scarce resources in research through creating adaptive and highly flexible network of research units within and across higher education institutions, in order to allow regrouping and clustering of formal and informal groups of researchers for long-term and short-term projects in response to opportunities and changes in the environment.

II - THE WAY FORWARD – FOUR STEPS

Creating research support infrastructure and networks is a big challenge in Georgia and certain important revisions have already been made in that regard.

Nation-wide quality management standards now promote the idea of result-based planning and management of research.

Also, following international best practices, research support units have been created within the universities. These units are responsible for managing and facilitating the research function within the university, *i.e*. coordinating human resources, optimizing spending, making need assessments, proactively settling goals and strengthening the capacity for raising external funding. Some efforts have also been applied with variable success to establish a similar function at the national system management level.

The biggest remaining challenge is to find the most appropriate functional model to ensure timely and flexible support schemes adapted to rapidly evolving network of actors and their ecosystems.

The process of building functional model of the university research management is not an easy task, as the new model needs to gain legitimacy among all actors and stakeholders, build on trust and credibility

in the research community, keep the balance between research management and academic freedom and create relationships consistent with an academic culture.

Another important task is to effectively incorporate a research management strategy in the ecosystem, notably to establish functional links with the other players of the quadruple helix (government, business, and civil society) and create synergies.

A - UNDERSTANDING THE DEMAND

Identifying and prioritizing research needs is a very important, but pending task in the national policy agenda of research management.

On the one hand effective and efficient process of communicating the needs would help stakeholders increase the relevance of university-based research in the country and optimize the use of resources.

On the other hand, the process itself requires a significant investment of time and other resources because it implies an identification, a consolidation and a synchronization of information about potential demand from multiple sources.

Another important concern is the expectation that the available resources will not be enough to respond properly to all those needs. Therefore, some of the beneficiaries might view this exercise as a waste of time and effort.

Currently, the main challenges in the process of gathering information about the research needs are:

- Including different potential interest groups (local government, business, think tanks, informal groups, etc.) in the discussion;
- Ensuring the transparency and smoothness of the process through creating common expectations and common language of communication;
- Consolidating and merging primary data about the research needs into bigger clusters, creating taxonomies.

The use of a virtual platform could bring the academic research community, policy planners and potential clients or sponsors one step forward in this direction. Such platform could serve as a shared virtual space to consolidate and communicate information about the needs from different sources.

The architecture of the platform could be defined in many different ways, but there are several essential characteristics that the platform should hold:

- The platform should allow actors from different sectors and interest groups to participate;
- The interface should be simple and user-friendly, so that potential contributors to the platform could easily state their initial ideas;
- The statements of needs should go through an initial sorting under centralized management and be organized as a multi-layered system of categories (for example: themes, disciplines, geographic breakdown - territory-based, national, European);

The database of research needs could form the basis for subsequent policy decisions such as: Defining short-term and long-term priorities; Clarifying schemes of research funding; Mobilization and development of human resource; and forming complex interdisciplinary groups of institutions and individuals.

B - CLUSTERING SUPPLY

Once the uninterrupted inflow of organized information about demand is ensured, the contours of supply optimization mechanisms will emerge.

Clear information about the demand, if coupled with relevant incentives, may stimulate a regrouping of resources and the creation of new networks, both within and between universities.

A "Collegial network" is defined in the scientific literature as an informal or formal group of productive scientists, who are interacting with each other and work on similar or common scientific problems (Chubin, 1985; Lievrouw, 1989; Mullins et al., 1977, (Crane, 1969). These groups often transcend physical or disciplinary boundaries and are reliant on informal channels of communication. They are characterized by changing membership and adaptive structures.

The proponents of clustering in research claim that the development of such formal or informal groups is important for:

- Optimizing resources for research (*e.g.* creation of shared laboratories);
- A quick and effective exchange of information; and
- The development of complex, interdisciplinary networks that increase creativity and efficiency in the process of research.

Recent studies suggest that nowadays, research in Georgia is fragmented. Scientists working in the same field are aware of the work of each other, but they rarely cooperate. Also, the size of the research teams working on the same research subject does not usually exceed three people (Ilia State University, 2015).

A structural analysis of the current formal and informal groups in research shows that presently, there is no established scientific "clusters" in the country. Inter-institution cooperation takes place at individual, pair or triad levels and even these are quite rare (European Union, 2018).

According to some scientists, this is due to a lack of "external demand". There is no governmental or regional priority for research that would encourage the creation of interdisciplinary groups or effective institutional clusters within disciplines.

C - HELPING CLUSTERS ADAPT

The data about demand will make it easier to build an incentive system to stimulate regrouping of suppliers for a more efficient provision of demand-driven research.

1) FUNDING SCHEMES

The first powerful instrument in this regard is creating dedicated funding schemes for stimulating research in specific priority areas. The funding mechanisms must be defined based on the initial data derived from the analysis of needs of the clients and a capacity analysis of the suppliers.

However, it is essential that these schemes:

- Help finding a balance between national and territory-based research needs;
- Reflect the importance of the third mission of the universities;
- Address both long-term priorities and short-term immediate research needs (to ensure the stability and the flexibility of university-based research strategies);
- Support the idea of inclusiveness (stimulate an inflow of young researchers, new actors, institutions and groups with relatively narrow research profile);
- Communicate on the importance of knowledge transfer and cooperation of universities across tiers.

2) SHARED LABS

Apart from funding mechanisms, the support processes may also include creation of shared labs that can be used by multiple institutions for multiple purposes. Centralized management of such resource hubs may enable the system to optimize spending on equipment, material and data needed to meet the demand and increase access for all the institutions concerned.

3) TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

Building human resource capacity is another important dimension of the support processes. Recent research conducted in Georgia and direct feedback of universities illustrate the need in two areas:

- Shared online or blended courses in research methods linked to priority themes and developed in cooperation with international partner universities;

  The capacity for teaching and implementing research in different universities needs to be aligned with the specifics of demand through expanding knowledge in contemporary context-specific technologies and methods as well as new trends in the field.

  The willingness of the researchers to participate in such capacity building programs greatly depends on their format. An online format is the most advisable option, because it is easier to participate anonymously for those who are reluctant to declare their need for it. In addition, it allows learners to adjust the pace and content of learning to their preferences.

- Consultation and guidelines in research management specifics;

  This sub-direction may include capacity building in the areas of project writing, intellectual property management, project management, establishing networks and ensuring the visibility of the work of the researchers.

D - CLARIFYING ACCOUNTABILITY STANDARDS

1) SETTING THE FRAMEWORK

The composition and strategy of research monitoring and evaluation is not only a tool for measuring progress but also an instrument for communicating the main principles and priorities of research management, both at the university and system levels.

Therefore, the monitoring and evaluation systems should reflect the main ideas of a strategy of HEI-based research management and emphasize the importance of:

- Diversifying the research missions of HEIs, setting context-driven priorities and targets;
- Ensuring the relevance of the research for the community (university third mission);
- Building capacity for applied research and interdisciplinary approaches;
- Knowledge transfer and knowledge sharing within and between academic institutions for a more efficient functioning;
- Balancing national and territory-based research needs;
- Supporting complementarity and inclusivity (involving actors of different tiers, narrow research profile, and young researchers).

The new institutional authorization standards explicitly communicate the message that the research evaluation scheme at the universities should be result-based and that universities are free to elaborate their own indicators and targets, based on the specific context within which they operate.

However, the results of the first cycle of evaluation of the authorization process indicate a high degree of uniformity and an inclination towards the use of indicators that might not always be relevant to the research mission of certain institutions (such as citation indices and visibility indicators in international bibliometric databases) (Erasmus + Georgia, 2020)

2) UNDERSTANDING AND COMMUNICATING RESULTS

Accessibility and comparability of information about targets and progress in research are also important for supporting cooperation of research organizations and individuals within and outside of the country.

Recent studies in Georgia show that data on research goals, productivity and effects is typically:

- Gathered with varying frequency and methods;
- Stored in different formats;
- Processed in different ways.

There are no standard classifiers and it is often impossible to aggregate data for decision making purposes in one university and its unit or in a given field or discipline at the national level (Erasmus + Georgia, 2018). A territorial (geographical) dimension is also missing in the current classification system.

The information database should satisfy the following requirements:

- It needs to be constantly updated;

- It needs to be based on standard classifiers so that aggregation, transformation and analysis of information is possible;
- The classifiers should communicate the main priorities of research described above and should be broad enough to avoid leading universities towards using irrelevant indicators for evaluating research performance.

Access to different parameters of database needs to be diversified (with different restrictions for internal and external actors), but certain part of information must be made available to every interested party.

According to university representatives, the development of such databases is important not only for decision-making process, but also for effective communication between individual and organizational actors involved in research.

It is important that monitoring and evaluation mechanisms be clearly linked with the goals of research infrastructure development rather than control.

III – CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Numerous initiatives in Georgia have served capacity building in research with different clarity or efficiency. Efforts have notably been made to identify and study research priorities and potential, build incentives and introduce support mechanisms.

Nevertheless, there is no clear vision nor policy for research management in the country and this undermines the efficiency of instruments such as, for example, research funding.

The report offers mechanisms to progress in four main directions: understanding demand, clustering supply, helping research clusters adapt and clarifying accountability standards.

Possible interventions may include:

- Introducing online platform for negotiating research needs. The platform will create an opportunity to expand the range and diversity of actors involved in the dialogue and will simplify the formation of a multi-layered model of taxonomy of priorities (e.g. local/ national, short-term / long-term, fields of economy), etc.

- Forming the list of research priorities based on the electronic database of research needs. It is important to ensure balancing of local and national priorities, short-term and long-term needs, as well as highlighting the importance of applied research and the university's third mission.

- Introducing incentives to facilitate regrouping of research resources, formation of effective inter-organizational and interdisciplinary groups and networks. The main feature of these networks should be inclusiveness - the involvement of institutions with narrow profiles, coupling more experienced institutions with less experienced ones and encouraging young researchers to join projects. The incentive packages may include the following:

    - Flexible funding models (it is important that the funding model emphasizes the idea of knowledge transfer and collaboration between universities and helps to balance national and local research priorities.
    - Shared laboratories (for different institutions and groups). This approach would significantly reduce research costs and increase resource availability for all involved actors.
    - Shared technical packages in electronic format (training courses in research methods and research management) for both novice and experienced researchers. Remote learning and counseling platforms are considered the most convenient format because they provide an opportunity to maintain anonymity of learners and adapt the content and pace of learning to individual needs;

- Clarification and diversification of monitoring and evaluation schemes – Diversified missions require diversified strategies of measuring progress. It is important that new, clarified mechanisms of measuring progress incorporate relevant indicators which are closely linked to specifics of particular research projects. Overall, the monitoring and evaluation system should be directed towards development rather than control and serve as an instrument of communication between actors.

Finally, it is important that interventions described above are understood as sequential steps, where each step represents the basis for the other. Whilst sequencing is important, it is crucial to present the steps as interconnected and as constantly evolving parts of a larger system that serve the overarching goal of improving demand-driven research capacity in Georgia.

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Internal Quality Assurance and Institutional Effectiveness

1. Executive Summary

The policy paper aims to demonstrate, on the one hand, links between internal quality assurance mechanisms, strategy, and institutional effectiveness of higher education institution, and, on the other hand, the need for a review of concept of quality assurance.

The document is composed by three main parts: the first part explains what institutional effectiveness is and how it is related to internal quality assurance systems; also, several international examples are discussed to present which unit may be responsible for this process. The second part reviews the effectiveness of quality assurance mechanisms in the Georgian higher education system, highlights existing strengths and weaknesses. In the final part, main findings and recommendations are given, which may help the relevant actors of the Georgian educational system to review the system.

The creation of the document was preceded by a desk-review – the existing studies on quality assurance and institutional effectiveness issues in the Georgian and European education area was discussed; a survey on the characteristics of institutional effectiveness and their evaluation mechanisms was conducted among the members of Quality Assurance Thematic Group[1]; examples of best international practices have been found, on the one hand, by analyzing information, and on the other hand, through interviews with representatives of partner universities[2].

2. Internal Quality Assurance and Institutional Effectiveness

> "Quality in higher education is a multi-dimensional, multi-level, and dynamic concept that relates to the contextual settings of an educational model, to the institutional mission and objectives, as well as to specific standards within a given system, institution, programme, or discipline. Quality may thus take different, sometimes conflicting, meanings depending on (i) the understanding of various interests of different constituencies or stakeholders in higher education (e.g. students; universities; disciplines; the labour market; society; a government); (ii) its references: inputs, processes, outputs, missions, objectives, etc.; (iii) the attributes or characteristics of the academic world worth evaluating; and (iv) the historical period in the development of higher education."
>
> Vlasceanu Lazar et al., pp 70-73. *Quality assurance and accreditation: a glossary of basic terms and definitions*. UNESCO European Centre for Higher Education, Revised and updated edition UNESCO-CEPES 2007, First Edition 2004, Bucharest.

[1] The mentioned thematic group was established on December 6, 2019, at the second session of the Rectors' Permanent Conference of. The aim of the thematic group is to promote the development of quality culture in higher education institutions by sharing the experience gained and best practices, discussing challenges and creating opportunities for professional development. The thematic group on quality assurance will be a platform for discussing quality assurance topics and will deepen cooperation between higher education institutions; The group will also cooperate with external stakeholders at the national and international levels. https://tsu.ge/ge/government/administration/departments/pr/information/CbvSAaUvqEE37Qca/?p=1

[2] René 1 University (France), Tallinn University (Estonia).

Internal quality assurance of higher education, first, implies the evaluation of the effectiveness of the mechanisms of quality assurance of teaching, learning, research, administration in higher education. According to Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG, 2015), the main priorities for quality assurance are: accountability and development, which builds confidence to the performance of higher education institutions. First standard of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG, 2015) is devoted to internal quality assurance, namely, Standard 1.1 - **Policy for quality assurance.**

„Standard: Institutions should have a policy for quality assurance that is made public and forms part of their strategic management. Internal stakeholders should develop and implement this policy through appropriate structures and processes, while involving external stakeholders.

Guidelines: Policies and processes are the main pillars of a coherent institutional quality assurance system that forms a cycle for continuous improvement and contributes to the accountability of the institution. It supports the development of quality culture in which all internal stakeholders assume responsibility for quality and engage in quality assurance at all levels of the institution. In order to facilitate this, the policy has a formal status and is publicly available."

In European higher education area internal quality assurance systems could be viewed in two different ways: one that implies a close link between strategic management and quality assurance is the latter considered to be a supportive mechanism for achieving institutional goals; and the second, which provides quality assurance as determining and evaluating the learning outcomes of an educational program related to the National Qualifications Framework (these approaches are mainly observed in institutions focused on professional higher education). These approaches are often dictated by external quality assurance mechanisms and also depend on the level of development of the internal quality assurance system (Gover,Loukkola,(2018).

Quality assurance is a system that ensures the fulfillment of the goals set out in the mission and strategy through regular evaluation of processes, procedures and services. It is important to evaluate institutional effectiveness through this system. This evaluation requires a combination of measurable indicators based on the analysis of valid, regularly collected data.

"A solid management information system is essential to a university's IQA system, as it affects the availability of necessary data on student profiles, progression, and completion. It also provides data to support a university dialogue on quality improvement. The absence of a solid management information system was problematic for staff in several case universities, who reported that important data were often outdated and unreliable" (IIEP Policy Brief, Martin, 2018).

Institutional effectiveness is the systematic, explicit, and documented process of measuring institutional performance against mission in all aspects of an institution. A commitment to continuous improvement is at the heart of an on-going planning and evaluation process. It is a continuous, cyclical process that is participative, strategic, flexible, relevant, and responsive. An approach to institutional effectiveness includes all programs, services, and constituencies; is strongly linked to the decisionmaking process at all levels; and provides a sound basis for budget decisions, resource allocations, and plans for institutional improvement.

SACS COC Resource Manual for the Principles of Accreditation: Foundations for Quality Enhancement, March 2012, pp 13-14. available https://sacs.fsu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/sacs-resourcemanual-2012.pdf

According to a report “Exploring Higher Education Indicators” published by European University Association on May 25, 2020, the use of institutional effectiveness indicators is due to three external factors: external quality assurance, funding formulas, and rankings. The types of indicators used for different purposes are mostly the same. “The higher education sector needs to address the demand for data so to be transparent, accountable and to facilitate evidence-based decision-making. Reliable data is also needed to rationally assess the status and developmental needs of a higher education system or institution” (Loukkola, Peterbauer, Gover, 2020).
The unit responsible for quality assurance and, consequently, for assessing institutional effectiveness may vary according to countries and institutions, for example, the Quality Assurance Service; Department of Strategic Development; Department of Academic Affairs, etc.

"Independent quality assurance units have not been established in Estonian higher education institutions in order to ensure that responsibility is not focused on one unit and is equally distributed to all parties. However, there is a Department of Academic Affairs that also includes quality assurance functions. In this structural unit there may be a position of quality officer responsible for ensuring the professional development of the personnel. And ensuring the quality of the processes is the responsibility of the process owner. Program coordinators are responsible for creating the program, collecting data, developing it, internationalizing it, and mobilizing resources. Evaluation of institutional effectiveness is based on the collection, comparison and analysis of numerous data supported by powerful electronic programs” - ***Head of the Department of Academic Affairs at the University of Tallinn (excerpt from the interview).***

"In French institutions, there is unit responsible for quality assurance of the processes (e.g. Steering, evaluation and management control assistance department, „Direction d'aide au pilotage, à l'évaluation et au contrôle de gestion“) or a person who collects and analyzes the data needed to assess institutional effectiveness. The Academic Affairs Department is responsible for creating programs, mobilizing resources, developing staff, and meeting accreditation standards. ”- ***Head of the International Affairs Office at René 1 University (excerpt from the interview).***

Unlike European universities, many US educational institutions have a specialized department - Institutional (Effectiveness) Research Office. This office is responsible for evaluating processes, procedures, and services through data collection and, consequently, for monitoring mission and strategy performance; as well as bringing the institution in line with external quality assurance standards. For example, the mission of this type of unit at Harvard University is: “To collect, synthesize, and analyze institutional data to fulfill mandatory reporting requirements and support University decision-making. Objectives are to offer accurate, timely, and digestible research, tailored to diverse audiences, with the goal of promoting informed decision-making and furthering the core missions of the University. Scope includes Primary source for major University facts and figures: Fact Book, Common Data Set, IPEDS, and other major reporting; Support for key University-wide committees; Systems analysis and information-sharing partnerships within Harvard and among peer institutions; Planning and policy analysis; evidence-based recommendations” (Office of Institutional Research, 2020).

Generally, despite the structural differences, the function of all of the above units involves the collection and analysis of data needed to evaluate institutional effectiveness, which in turn is related to the

implementation and monitoring of the strategy. These processes are automated and supported by appropriate software.

3. Quality Assurance Mechanisms in Georgian Educational Context

Quality assurance in the Georgian higher education area is regulated by a number of legal acts: the Law of Georgia on Higher Education; The Law of Georgia on the Educational Quality Enhancement and other by-laws, as well as internal university regulatory documents. Evaluation of quality assurance mechanisms is an integral part of the authorization standards of higher education institutions (Standard 2.2) and the accreditation standards of educational programs (Standard 5.1, 5.2, 5.3).

Since external quality assurance mechanisms have once again undergone changes and got based on Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG, 2015), new approaches to quality assurance have been developed, and particular emphasis were placed on: the involvement of all stakeholders and the mobilization of appropriate human, information and material resources to effectively manage the quality assurance processes of the University; the continuous evaluation of the institution's activities, resources and services and the use of these results for the further development of the institution's activities; assessment of the effectiveness of the quality assurance mechanisms provided by the institution (Order of the Minister of Education and Science of Georgia, 2018 № 07/N). More attention was paid on the university output assessment, such as assessment of research outcomes, learning outcomes, employment rate and others.

Understanding of institutional effectiveness in the Georgian higher education area was introduced by the updated standards of authorization (Order of the Minister of Education and Science of Georgia, 2018 № 07/N), and this document also redefined the concepts of quality assurance: subject, stakeholder and implementing body.

It is especially important that standards made quality assurance of processes the responsibility of the university community as a whole and focused on ensuring the quality of the institution's mission, which includes: teaching-learning, research, administration and service to the society, through properly selected mechanisms based on regular research and data analysis. This is an institutional understanding of quality assurance and presents scope of quality assurance units and their connections with the implementation of the institution's strategy in a different way.

Studies on internal quality assurance in Georgia (Bregvadze T. 2009, Javakhishvili N. 2010,Darchia I. 2013) conducted in different periods indicate that the functions of the units responsible for quality assurance are mainly related to the evaluation of educational programs, preparation for accreditation and, in this context, determining compliance between human and material resources and the program.

There are units in institutions that are responsible for quality assurance - quality assurance services. The Law of Georgia on Higher Education defines the existence of quality assurance services both at the university and faculty levels in higher education institutions which are established as legal entity of public law, and lists their functions (Law of Georgia on Higher Education, 2020), including: systematic internal evaluation of the quality of professional development of educational and research work, as well as academic and scientific staff; cooperation with relevant services of international partner universities; promoting the provision of a high level of teaching quality through the preparation of self-evaluation for the authorization/accreditation process.

In 2009, the amendment (The Law of Georgia on Amendments and Additions to the Law of Georgia on Higher Education, 2009) was made in the Law of Georgia on Higher Education and the definition of quality assurance was changed. Also, the amendment (The Law of Georgia on Amendments to the Law of Georgia on Higher Education, 2011) of the same law in 2011 changed the name of Article 25 of the Law ("Quality Assurance Service") and was formed as follows - "Quality Assurance in Higher Education Institution". The difference between the first and current versions of the law can be seen in the following data:

Article 2 "z[33]) Quality Assurance - Internal and External Evaluation Procedures, the implementation of which facilitates the improvement of **education** (primary edition - *teaching*) quality at higher education institutions";

Article 25. "2. A quality assurance mechanism shall exist at a higher education institution, including at the main educational units (primary edition - *quality assurance services is created*), operating in compliance with the statute of the higher education institution, for the purpose of the systematic assessment of the educational, scientific research work conducted by the institution and the quality of the professional development of its personnel.

3. In order to develop transparent criteria for quality control and the methodology for the assurance of those criteria, a higher education institution (primary edition - *the Quality Assurance Service of the higher education institution*) shall establish links and cooperate with the appropriate offices of foreign countries and foreign higher education institutions.

As we can see, in case of clarification of the term, quality assurance is related not only to teaching, but also to the quality of education, which in itself implies the research activities and other activities of the institution. Quality assurance was established as a mechanism and it was not defined as the responsibility of only one unit. However, this change did not affect the quality assurance service at the level of the main educational unit (Article 31. Quality Assurance Service of the main educational unit, Law of Georgia on Higher Education, 2020) and again this unit remained responsible for the implementation of quality assurance mechanisms.

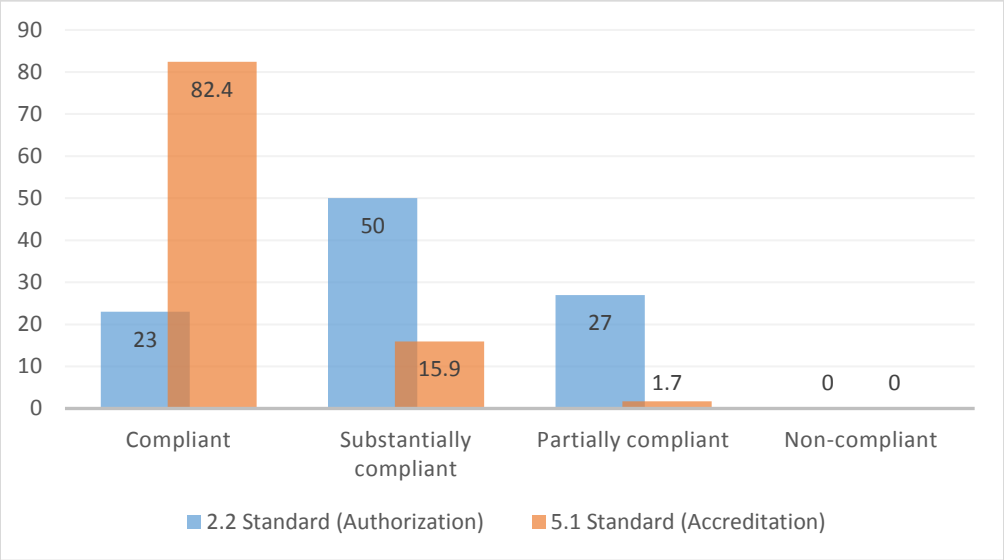
At the same time, in 2015 the Law includes another amendment, and the obligation of the Quality Assurance Service arises to establish the rules of internal evaluation of the scientific-research activities of the scientific-research unit and to evaluate the activities of the unit on its basis (Article 31, Law of Georgia on Higher Education, 2020). The reason for the changes in the explanatory card is as follows: the need to eliminate the problems caused by the lack of relevant legislative mechanisms, which is related to the integration of scientific research institutions with higher education institutions, as well as the need to improve the education system in terms of teaching and research integration (Explanatory card on the Draft Law of Georgia on Amendments to the Law of Georgia on Higher Education , 2015).

According to the definition of the law, the Quality Assurance Service additionally becomes the unit responsible for ensuring the quality of these processes, which is inconsistent with the essence of the reform, according to which quality assurance is the responsibility of each and everyone.

According to a survey (Darchia I.,Glonti L.,Grdzelidze I.,Sanikidze T.,Tsotniashvili K., 2019) conducted by Higher Education Reform Experts in 2019, involved higher education institutions in their self-evaluation reports named as strengths: experience in introducing quality assurance mechanisms and taking into account quality assurance results; structured internal regulations. As for areas for improvement, they

considered: Review of quality assurance mechanisms and evaluation system and increase awareness of internal regulations by all stakeholders of the University (Darchia I.,Glonti L.,Grdzelidze I.,Sanikidze T.,Tsotniashvili K., 2019). “Regarding the QA mechanism, the evaluation reports emphasized the need for development of system that collects valid data and generates results that feed with decision making and programme revision processes. HEIs are expected to ensure that the quality cycle is completed, and all relevant staff and units address the finding of internal quality assurance results. Development of the IQA capacity in terms of the staff and technologies has also been pointed out as key issues for efficient operation of the internal quality assurance system” (Darchia I.,Glonti L.,Grdzelidze I.,Sanikidze T.,Tsotniashvili K., 2019).

An analysis of the quality assurance substandard of the authorization report of 27 higher education institutions and the accreditation report of 176 educational programs conducted in 2018-2019 (2.2 substandard of authorization standards, 5.1 substandard of accreditation standards) revealed that the quality assurance evaluation is much higher in program context, than at the institutional level (Grdzelidze I.,Buchashvili G.,Karchava M., 2019).



The reason for the abovementioned case can be named inappropriate understanding of main responsibilities of quality assurance service over the years, like it was mainly responsible for developing educational programs and bringing them in line with accreditation standards.

"It is important that a large number of experts point to the need to perceive quality assurance as an integral part of the institution's strategy and management process, and not an independent mechanism / system that is less integrated into the strategy. Experts note that these procedures are public, but the maximum involvement of stakeholders remains a challenge" (Grdzelidze I.,Buchashvili G.,Karchava M., 2019).

Quality assurance mechanisms should measure institutional effectiveness in the performance of its core functions by a higher education institution, as it is an integral part of organizational development, and the latter itself is a continuous process, the successful implementation of which depends on internal and external factors. High standards in the activities of the University can be ensured only by satisfying all the

stakeholders and international or local requirements with an effective balance of internal and external factors, which ultimately is a precondition for deepening trust and respect for the University.

For the university development it is important to create mechanisms for evaluating the effectiveness of the management system based on objective key indicators. These indicators should provide a simultaneous and objective description of the processes. They should be introduced not only at the top management level, but at all structural units in the institution. Based on these indicators, it should be possible to assess key university processes and use the "Plan-Do-Check-Act" (PDCA) cycle in strategic institutional governance processes and educational/scientific-research activities for their improvement and development.

A survey was conducted among the members of the Quality Assurance Thematic Group on the mechanisms of quality assurance and institutional effectiveness. The group consists of representatives of 43 higher education institutions. Representatives of 26 institutions took part in the survey. According to the results obtained, in about 59% of respondents there is a database in which data is regularly collected for the evaluation of processes/ procedures /resources; In the rest of the institutions, such a system either does not exist or is in the mode of introduction. About 93% of respondents use the collected data in the process of monitoring the strategic plan. In most cases, this process is administered by quality assurance services, in rare cases, by collegial bodies or strategic development services. At the same time, 86% of respondents believe that it is desirable to have an administrative unit responsible for creating a strategic plan, monitoring and developing its implementation in the institution; And 51% of respondents name the Quality Assurance Service as such.

According to the results of the survey, the institutions regularly (already have twice or more evaluated) evaluate the teaching process and the activities of human (academic, administrative) resources. The scientific research evaluation system is in the process of implementation, while the third mission (service to the society) is almost not being implemented or is in the process of implementation. Of the 26 higher education institutions surveyed, only 4 indicate that they evaluate management effectiveness.

According to a survey of members of the Quality Assurance Thematic Group, the following picture has emerged: quality assurance of educational programs among other quality assurance mechanisms remains a priority in Georgian higher education institutions. In most of them, resources and processes evaluation is ongoing or in introduction mode. The process of collecting the data needed to monitor a strategic plan and assess its institutional effectiveness is not complex and does not form a single basis that can, if necessary, become a solid basis for conducting the process. Also, the need for a unit responsible for creating a strategy and monitoring it in a higher education institution was identified.

In addition to the above factors, we believe that the challenge for the education system is the rights and responsibilities delegated to quality assurance services at both the university and faculty levels (it is common to duplicate functions among them); raising the qualification of employees; the attitude of the university community towards them, etc. Although authorization and accreditation standards have required the introduction of new approaches - maximizing the involvement of stakeholders in the process and the appropriate distribution of responsibilities, quality assurance services remain the leading units focused on meeting external quality assurance standards.

4. Key Findings and Recommendations

In terms of quality assurance the biggest challenge for institutions is to create a mechanism for assessing institutional effectiveness that comprehensively presents, on the one hand, the connection of an institution's activities to its mission and strategy and, on the other hand, evaluation of the processes, procedures and outcomes defined by the institution's mission and strategic plan. The mechanism for evaluating institutional effectiveness should include collection and analysis of valid, numerous, accurate data and, based on this, the improvement of the main activities of the institution (teaching, research, administration, service to the society).

The use of an institutional effectiveness evaluation system among higher education institutions will establish the practice of sharing results, as well as the creation of Excellence Centers, which will contribute to the continuous improvement/development of the system.

Another challenge of the education system is the definition of quality assurance at the legislative level and the function and responsibilities of the unit responsible for it, both at the university and the main educational unit levels. Also, understanding that quality assurance is fully the responsibility of the university community and not of any one unit.

Given the need for a review of concept of quality assurance and institutional effectiveness assessment, we present some recommendations:

- ✓ Legislative Amendment
  - It is desirable that the amendment is made in the higher education regulatory legislative acts and quality assurance, at the level of both the university and the main educational unit, is uniquely defined as a responsibility of a whole institution and not of one particular unit;
  - Since quality assurance should be linked to the evaluation of institutional effectiveness, teaching, research, administration, and the performance of the third mission of the University, the evaluation of one unit should not be separated from the functions of the Quality Assurance Service (e.g., evaluation of works of independent research institute);
- ✓ Higher Education Policy
  - It is desirable to create such system using institutional effectiveness indicators that will allow the State to plan teaching and research policies in the higher education system based on the comparison and analysis of valid, regular and multifaceted data; Institutional effectiveness indicators system can become the basis for performance-based funding;
- ✓ Authorization Process
  - It is desirable that the standard of authorization stipulate the existence of databases in the institution that allow the collection and analysis of valid, real and interconnected data;
  - It is desirable that during the visit of authorization experts to the higher education institution, attention is paid to the relationship between quality assurance, institutional effectiveness assessment and strategy monitoring, and the mechanisms for collecting and analyzing relevant data in this direction;
- ✓ Internal Quality Assurance

- Planning, implementing and monitoring the strategy of a higher education institution, quality assurance and assessment of institutional effectiveness are one complex issue seen from different angles. It is therefore important that the institution understands well the connection between these processes and ensures their mutually agreed implementation;
- It is desirable, that in the institution there is an administrative unit responsible for monitoring the strategy, which collects and analyzes the data to assess institutional effectiveness;
- Assessing institutional effectiveness, monitoring the strategy and quality assurance should be based on the regular collection, comparison and analysis of numerous, valid and reliable data supported by powerful electronic programs, which should be allocated by the institution to appropriate financial and information technology resources. All interested parties should have access to this program;
- The analysis of these data should be carried out regularly, in relation to benchmarks set out in the strategic plan and should be evaluated by performance indicators;
- The higher education institution should create its own institutional effectiveness evaluation indicators and the operational functions of their implementation;
- Quality assurance should be defined as a responsibility of all units and stakeholders (academic/scientific/administrative personnel, program coordinator, student, etc.) in the internal regulatory acts of the institution;
- All ongoing processes in the institution should be assessed in relation to the PDCA (Plan, Do, Check, Act) cycle. Therefore, there should be a unified database of processes, procedures, resources, and indicators and complex mechanisms for their evaluation.

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Internationalization of higher education in Georgia

Summary

The internationalization of higher education in Georgia is important both for the quality of research and teaching and for the positive impact on society in general, as it allows the openness of the academic space. Georgia's internationalization of higher education is increasing at the expense of both mobility outside the country and the attraction of international students and staff within the country. The steps taken towards internationalization have a positive impact on both the quality of teaching and research, as well as the motivation of students and staff.

This policy paper has a special focus on the issue of access to internationalization and equity. After a general overview, it analyzes the internationalization of higher education in Georgia: opportunities and challenges. Discusses 1. Internationalization outside the country: International mobility of students and staff, 2. Internationalization within the country: International programs and universities operating in Georgia. The paper presents the main problems related to both types of internationalization. The recommendations address these issues.

In recent years, the number of people involved in internationalization both inside and outside the country has increased. As the number increases, it is important to conduct research to assess: 1. What effect does internationalization have on the quality of higher education, 2. Who has access to internationalization, and 3. What can be done for broader engagement.

Despite the steps taken in recent years towards internationalization, the main problems are:

• Fragmentation of state policy;

• Unequal access to all forms of internationalization: both international mobility and international programs within the country and virtual involvement in the international academic space;

• Implementation of such forms of internationalization that contribute to the formation of separate islands within the country and have little effect on the overall academic space.

The recommendations address each of these problems at the state and institutional level.

Internationalization of Higher Education: Opportunities and Challenges

When discussing Georgia's involvement in international higher education, this policy paper uses the definition of internationalization as a working definition, according to which: **Internationalization at the national, sectoral and institutional level is defined as the introduction of international, intercultural or global dimension in higher education goals, functions and processes (Knight, 2003**). Internationalization includes the involvement of students and academic staff in international curricula, as well as international cooperation within the framework of joint educational programs and research projects within the country.

Along with the 2020 pandemic, internationalization has gained special significance without physical mobility. Accordingly, the present policy essay will focus on these three main lines: international mobility (internationalization outside the country), internationalization within the country, and virtual internationalization (using remote involvement), identifying problems, and making recommendations.

Internationalization can have different types of motivation and driving forces (Altbach, Knight 2007). When discussing internationalization, its positive impact on improving the quality of academic space is emphasized. Involvement in the international academic space is increasingly perceived as part of academic culture (Shields 2013).

The internationalization of higher education also has a wider impact on society. Part of the researchers emphasizes an interesting correlation: in countries in this region where the degree of democracy is high, the number of people in governing positions who were members of the international education system at any stage of academic activity is higher than in less democratic countries (Chankseliani 2018). Although it is difficult to establish a cause-and-effect relationship and we do not know whether the democracy of countries leads to openness to the international academic space or whether this openness leads to more democracy, this positive correlation is noteworthy when developing a state strategy.

Annex 1 - Table 1

Given the positive effects of internationalization on members of the university space, higher education system and society, the problem of access to internationalization is becoming increasingly acute. This policy paper draws special attention to this aspect. Other issues related to internationalization are discussed in other policy documents (Gurchiani 2016, Chanturia 2016, Janashia 2016). Internationalization, which is seen as an instrument for improving quality, can become an instrument for deepening inequality. Consequently, reasoning about internationalization should be based on an agreement on what kind of society and academic space we want to establish. The starting point of this document is the assumption that access to all the benefits of higher education, including internationalization, should be accessible to the widest possible strata. The idea of access is also one of the foundations for the Bologna Process, which has become one of the main drivers of internationalization in Georgia. The present document is also limited to institutional internationalization and due to lack of data cannot discuss individual initiatives.

Situational analysis of higher education internationalization in Georgia

Since 2005, when Georgia became part of the **Bologna Process**, internationalization has soon become one of the main goals of higher education. The development of tools such as the Credit System (ECTS), the National Qualifications Framework, and program accreditation made it possible to compare Georgia's higher education programs with those of other countries involved in the Bologna Process. The Bologna Process was an important impetus for the development of joint curricula and research projects. During this period, existing programs were continued and developed, new programs were formed.

Georgia is a partner state of the **Erasmus+ program**. Through the program, students and staff can participate in a variety of majors and grant competitions. Over the years, Erasmus+ has become one of the main actors in the field of internationalization.

Internationalization is part of the policy of the Georgian state. Involvement in the international space has become one of the priorities of education reform. In this regard, the **International Center for Education** (www.iec.gov.ge) is especially noteworthy as a government structure that funds Georgian students at leading universities around the world. The center is also involved in other internationalization projects. The main driver of the internationalization of science in Georgia is **the Rustaveli National Science Foundation**, which implements bilateral and multilateral projects. Part of internationalization is the process of evaluating projects based on international peer review, introducing such incentive mechanisms and success indicators that contribute to being part of the international space.

One of the drivers of internalization is the **National Center for Quality Enhancement** (www.eqe.ge). Program accreditation with the participation of international experts has become one of the most important parts of internationalization of education.

Important actors for individual or structural internationalization are:

- **Fulbright - Fulbright Foreign Student Program funded by the U.S. Department of State;**
- **German Academic Exchange Service DAAD;**
- **French Institute of Georgia;**
- **Bank of Georgia and the Chevening Scholarship Program for the United Kingdom;**
- **Scholarship program of the Swedish Institute for the citizens of Georgia** and many others.

There are regional cooperation programs, be it Caucasian (Azerbaijan, Armenia), East. Many programs in individual countries in Europe (Poland, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, etc.), the Far East (Japan, Korea, China), and the Middle East for both individual and structural internationalization. Some of the listed programs serve only one-way exchange, while some serve the development of the structure, joint program development and two-way exchange. Consequently, their impact on the internationalization of higher education in Georgia is different.

Center for International Education (https://cie.ge), which was established on the basis of the Open Society Georgia Foundation's operational program - the International Education Advisory Center, plays a major role in coordinating international programs. For years, **the Open Society Foundation** has funded programs to internationalize Georgian students and academic staff. Among them are:

- To improve the qualification of academic staff (Faculty Development Fellowship and Global Supplementary Grants Programs);
- Open Society Scholarship for Scientific Publication, which included a scientific visit to US universities and then an international publication (Global Faculty Grants Program).

In recent years, the number of projects, programs and universities aimed at attracting international students to Georgia has also increased. The opening of international campuses in Georgia is a relatively new trend. Below the policy paper will review the main trends in **internationalization outside the country and within the country.**

Internationalization outside the country: International mobility of students and staff

This policy essay is based on the data and research published by the largest actors involved in internationalization, as the state does not keep a systematic account of students who left Georgia to study. Analyzing the problems, the essay envisages national and international studies on international credit mobility under the auspices of Erasmus +. As the broadest program, both in terms of area and area, the statistics and research related to this program show several significant trends, which in general indicate the tendencies of internationalization of higher education in Georgia.

Erasmus + International Mobility Program (ICM - International Credit Mobility) has been operating since 2015 and is the largest actor in Georgia in terms of internationalization of higher education. The program involves short-term two-way exchanges (see Bregvadze et al. 2019 in detail).

1. The involvement of students and staff from Georgia is growing from year to year.

Annex 1 - Table 2

2. The area of internationalization is expanding in Georgia. Out of 55 authorized higher education institutions operating in Georgia, 32 are included in the Erasmus + mobility program (50% are public, 50% are private higher education institutions). As for the universities of partner countries, their numbers have increased greatly in recent years and the geographic area has expanded. Annex 1 - Table 3.

It should be noted that the selection of partners and the growth of internationalization do not serve any pre-determined policy and are often accidental. The 2019 survey makes it clear that a large proportion of universities do not have a clear policy on internationalization (Bregvadze et al. 2019).

3. Unequal geographical distribution of USDs involved in internationalization within the country. The results of the study show that access to internationalization is unequal. 70% of the mobility of academic and administrative staff is limited to a total of five universities. All five are located in Tbilisi. These data indicate geographical inequality and various types of constraints. These include:

• Lack of resources, which in turn leads to differences in competencies (eg, differences in foreign language proficiency);

• Lack of information;

• Lack of experience;

• Difference in expectations (for detailed analysis, see Bregvadze et al. 2019).

International research also points to the low involvement of non-privileged groups in mobility schemes (Davies 2019). The low rate of involvement of such groups can be considered as an indicator of many other problems. This picture corresponds to the general picture of higher education that is confirmed by studies. According to the latest research, rural youth living in Georgia have much lower access to all the benefits of higher education than young people living in the city (Chankseliani, Janashia, Gorgodze, and Kurakbayev 2020).

4. The number of joint programs and the number of students involved in them is increasing. One of the main mechanisms for such mobility under the auspices of Erasmus + is Joint Master Degree Programs

(JMD), which shows a sharp increase in both scholarship holders and the number of applicants. Annex 1 - Table 4.

Joint master's and doctoral programs have also been launched in recent years as part of various partnerships (beyond Erasmus+). Joint doctoral programs are especially important as a complex internationalization scheme when engagement in the international space applies to both teaching and research. One example of this is the Friedrich Lehmann-Haupt School of Medicine, founded at Ilia State University with the help of the Volkswagen Foundation and the Rustaveli National Science Foundation. At the initiative of the Rustaveli Foundation, Georgian universities have more and more opportunities to involve scientists in the international space (see Gurchiani 2016). There are other dual-quality programs at Georgian universities that have been operating for years (for more on these programs, see Chokheli 2012).

5. The internationalization of Georgian science is also on the rise, although there is no systematic study of these trends. According to a 2015 study, Georgian scientists were less involved in the international collaboration (Gzoyan et al., 2015). The situation is changing. The internationalization of science is growing. According to Scopus statistics, international cooperation, as well as the number of international publications, has increased and Georgia is leading in the region (see https://www.scimagojr.com/countryrank.php?region=Eastern%20Europe).

The European Union's special research scholarship program, Marie Skłodowska-Curie actions, aims to internationalize science, but it is less popular.

Internationalization within the country

According to the available data, the number of foreign students coming to Georgia as well as the number of joint programs at Georgian universities is increasing. The trend is positive, but it is also noteworthy that a large proportion of foreign students study in programs exclusively designed for them. These programs are not available to the broad masses of Georgian students due to their growing tendency to demand higher fees and being tailored according to business model in line with the commodification of education.

Chanturia's policy paper analyzes the trends and problems of migration to Georgia for international programs and studies by 2016. By 2020, the same trends continue. The main trends of internationalization within the country are:

1. Increase in number of students who came to Georgia to earn a degree. In recent years, the number of mobile students and their target area has increased worldwide (Annex 1 -Figure 5). Mobility from southern countries to southern countries has become part of the global trend (Altbach, Knight 2007). From countries where access to higher education is limited, students move to countries where it is easy for them to enter the profession of their choice. The number of foreign students is growing in Georgia as well.

2. The main attraction of Georgia as a target country is mainly due to:

• Membership in the Bologna Process as a guarantee of comparison and recognition

• Low tuition fees;

• Variety of desirable programs;

• Low cost of living;

• Easiness of obtaining a visa and residence permit.

3. Sectoral narrowness: limited range of field of studies. The international students mainly come to Georgia to obtain medical and business degrees. Annex 1 - Table 6.

4. Geographical niche. Georgian universities are focused on attracting students from several countries: India, Nigeria, Azerbaijan.

5. Increase in the number of students coming for temporary mobility. The number of students arriving with Erasmus + mobility, as well as students and lecturers with temporary scholarships from DAAD and other organizations, is increasing. A noticeable trend during these five years is how the number of people who have left Georgia to EU partner countries and wo arrived in Georgia from EU partner countries is starting to equalize, which is a positive trend of internationalization within the country.

International Universities in Georgia

The establishment of international universities in Georgia, which are being introduced with different models, is a relatively new trend in internationalization. Most of the attempts are related to the development of technological field of studies in Georgia. Only one of the planned projects has been implemented so far. A consortium of the United States and Georgian state universities has been implementing undergraduate programs in Georgia since 2015. Under the auspices of the US San Diego State University, undergraduate programs were implemented at Tbilisi State University, Georgian Technical University, and Ilia State University. Under this project (2016-2020), bachelors enrolled in engineering, technology and natural sciences will receive American diplomas in Georgia. The programs developed within the framework of the project continue to exist on the basis of Georgian universities. Its visible results are international programs, trained staff, infrastructure. One of the most important results will be the graduates of four cohorts of young people studying in the international program.

Georgian-French University will start functioning in September 2020. The aim of the project is to create double and de-localized degree programs in tourism, agriculture and informatics in cooperation with Georgian and French universities.

In 2020, the opening of Webster University Campus in Georgia was announced. It intends to open a campus on the territory of Silicon Valley Tbilisi in cooperation with the University of Business and Technology (BTU).

Kutaisi International University plans to receive its first program in 2020, the programs of which were created in cooperation with the Technical University of Munich. The University intends to introduce an online teaching component for more effective involvement of the international component. Such a model would be useful for other universities as well. It is important in this regard to eliminate legislative barriers that prevent other universities from enacting the same mechanism.

The development of such a university in the region will be effective if it becomes part of the common academic space. It is important that we do not adopt isolated islands based on such projects as the islands will not affect the academic space in Georgia. The tendency of isolation is also seen in case of Kutaisi

International University in the fact that it is out of the legislative space for all other universities and is regulated by a special law.

Conclusions

Georgia's internationalization of higher education is increasing at the expense of both mobility outside the country and the attraction of international students and professors within the country. The steps taken towards internationalization have a positive impact on both the quality of teaching and research, as well as the motivation of students and staff.

Here are some of the problems that should be addressed to help the successful internationalization of the higher education system:

• Lack of state and institutional strategy. The effect of internationalization on the quality of education is not analyzed at the state or institutional level (Bregvadze et al. 2019);

• Accessability and equity. Despite the increase in the number of students involved in mobility, studies conducted in 2019 (Davies 2019; Bregvadze et al. 2019) show that access to internationalization is unequal. A number of groups have been studied, which are excluded due to lack of resources, belonging to disadvantaged groups. This applies to both mobility outside the country and participation in international programs within the country;

• Difficulties with virtual internationalization. Legislative regulations for virtual internationalization are obstructive, resources are unexplored, and ways to solve problems are unknown;

The 2020 pandemic has shown that virtual involvement in the international space is also limited for disadvantaged groups. Consequently, the restriction of physical mobility during the pandemic and switch to the virtual internationalization has not become a great equalizer, as the preliminary review shows. Given the new reality, a systematic solution to these problems is essential so that internationalization does not become a mechanism for deepening the exclusion;

• The problem of involving international programs in the larger academic space. Internationalization projects within the country are often aimed only at narrow groups. Thus it is difficult to achieve synergy;

• Absence of a common space for foreign and Georgian students. Instead of diversifying Georgia's academic space, international students staying in Georgia remain invisible or excluded. Such internalization within the country will have a difficult impact on the openness of society and the quality of academic space;

• Infrastructure problems. According to a small study conducted for this politicy paper, foreign students face many practical problems. During the pandemic, practical problems and insecurity of foreign students in Georgia were especially revealed;

• Globalization is oriented without taking into account the local: the islands are formed without analyzing and accessing the resources needed for equal involvement. Under the current model, international projects, programs, and universities within the country are separated from the Georgian educational space both academically and socially.

Recommendations

The starting point for internationalization policy should be to see internationalization of education as public good. States and institutions can take steps to make the process more efficient.

General recommendations

• Development of internationalization strategy with an emphasis on accessibility;

• Identification of underprivileged groups and developing a strategy to help them;

• Promoting the implementation of joint programs. Such programs will solve the problem of critical mass in some areas and enable synergy in universities;

• Development of a state strategy and plan measures to encourage internationalization within the country (creation of tools such as *studyingeorgia* website, development of student-infrastructure, development of foreign language programs, development of Georgian language courses);

• Conducting research to measure the effect: Study of direct and indirect beneficiaries, analysis of the impact of internationalization on improving the quality of the system or institutions, study of the sustainability of international programs and projects.

Promoting international mobility at the institutional level

• Defining strategic goals and policies;

• Linking goals to the mission of universities;

• Internal mechanism to ensure more equity and increase wider engagement in mobility programs;

• Identification of non-privileged groups;

• Activation of mechanisms to help;

• Monitoring and evaluating the mobility process;

• Improving procedural issues;

• Diversification of mobility forms, including encouraging a blended or fully online approach.

Promoting doctoral degree and research internationalization

• Caring for the qualification of scientists (introduction of academic leave (sabbatical), introducing research indicators, dissemination of information on international associations and networks and promotion of involvement in it);

• Encouraging professors and doctoral students to join international networks;

• Facilitation of mobility for professors and other scholars, both financially and by allowing time for research (academic leave) (see Gurchiani 2016. Policy Essay “Internationalization of Science in Georgia);

• Promoting innovation at the international level;

• Promoting research programs (e.g. Maria Skladovskaya-Curie Program).

Promoting virtual internationalization

• Development of online teaching. This includes changes in the law on Higher Education that restricts distance learning only to teaching within Georgia;

• Implement legislative changes in the law on Higher Education to include online courses in doctoral studies;

• Increase online engagement based on problem and resource access analysis;

• Discuss the possibilities of integrating non-formal education (MOOC) courses to diversify teaching and overcome the problem of critical mass (see Policy Essay on MOOC and Online Teaching, Janashia 2016);

• Promoting the development of a foreign language learning tools;

• Analyzing and solving infrastructural problems.

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Appendix 1

Table 1, Democracy and Internationalization (Chankseliani 2018)

Table 1
Political leaders of former Soviet countries who have studied abroad.

Country	Proportion of political leaders educated in EU/USA	Proportion of political leaders educated in Russia	Proportion of political leaders educated elsewhere (abroad)	Proportion of political leaders educated only in their home country	Overall number of Presidents and Prime Ministers since 1991
Georgia	40%	20%	15%	25%	20
Kazakhstan	20%	40%	10%	30%	10
Lithuania	17%	22%	0%	61%	18
Estonia	15%	0%	8%	77%	13
Latvia	11%	6%	6%	78%	18
Moldova	11%	22%	11%	56%	18
Armenia	6%	24%	6%	65%	17
Kyrgyzstan	4%	63%	0%	33%	24
Azerbaijan	0%	36%	0%	64%	11
Belarus	0%	63%	0%	38%	8
Russia	0%	n/a	0%	100%	12
Tajikistan	0%	73%	18%	9%	11
Turkmenistan	0%	67%	0%	33%	3
Ukraine	0%	16%	0%	84%	19
Uzbekistan	0%	33%	0%	67%	6

Table 2. Erasmus + Georgian National Office, Erasmus+ student mobility

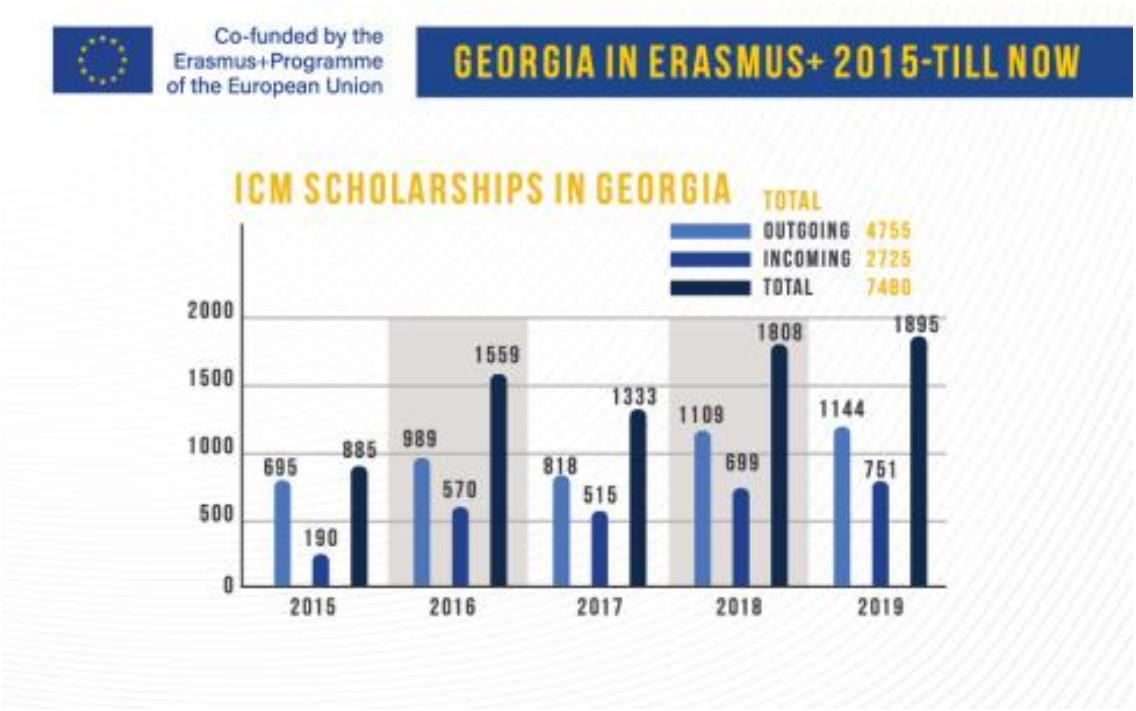

Table 3, Erasmus + Georgian National Office, Partner countries and their geographic distribution

Table 4. Erasmus + Georgian National Office, Joint Master's Programs

Co-funded by the Erasmus+Programme of the European Union

GEORGIA IN ERASMUS+ 2015-TILL NOW

JOINT MASTER DEGREE PROGRAMMES
NUMBER OF APPLICATIONS AND SCHOLARSHIPS

GEORGIA	SCHOLARSHIPS	APPLICANTS
2015	8	137
2016	15	238
2017	26	231
2018	21	297
2019	40	346

Table 5. Internationally mobile students

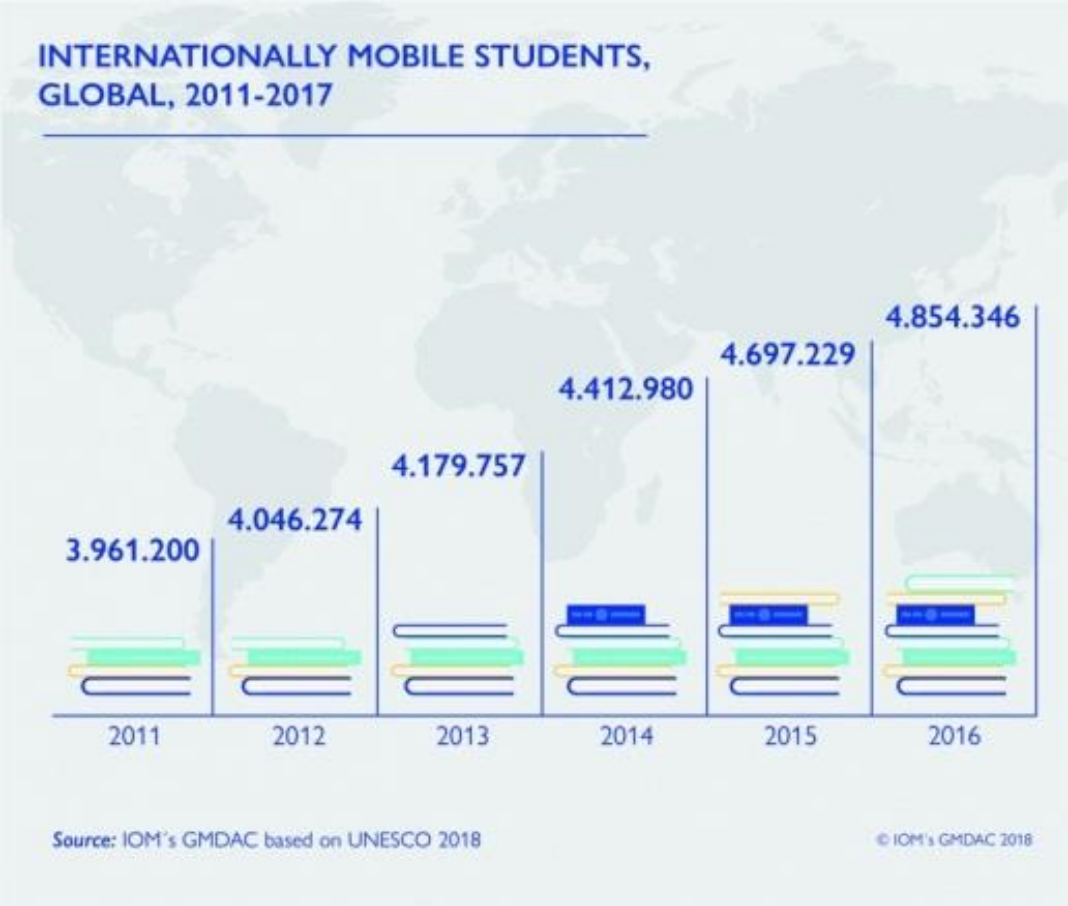

Table 6. Statistics Office, Foreign Students by fields of study

A	N	O	P
	2019-2020 school year		
	Bachelor programme	Magistracy, Certified physician(Veterinarian) or Residency	Professional Programme
Number of students, total	**2 943**	**10 382**	**2**
of which by programmes:			
Education	5	-	-
Humanities and Arts	133	21	-
Social sciences, business and law	1 143	216	-
Science	205	41	-
Engineering, manufacturing and construction	191	5	-
Agriculture	-	1	-
Health and welfare	1 222	10 097	-
Services	44	1	2
of which females, total:	**937**	**4 285**	-
of which by programmes:			
Education	3	-	-
Humanities and Arts	66	10	-
Social sciences, business and law	285	98	-
Science	48	18	-
Engineering, manufacturing and construction	30	2	-
Agriculture	-	-	-
Health and welfare	498	4 156	-
Services	7	1	-

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Doctoral Education in Georgia in the context of a unified European Educational Space

1. Doctoral Education and the Common European Educational Area: Principles of Salzburg

In the 21st century, special importance is attached to the knowledge economy and society in the formation of which universities should play a key role, especially through their scientific research and innovative activities. One of the necessary preconditions for this is the development of doctoral studies. That is why doctoral education is one of the top priorities of the European Research Area (ERA) and the Common European Educational Area (EHEA), the membership of which requires our country to formulate a targeted policy and pursue it consistently. "Reforms are vital to the sustainable development of Europe and are also essential for the global research community. Europe is becoming a global leader in doctoral education reform" (Salzburg II Recommendations, 2010). Therefore, it is important for Georgia, as the country is embarking on European integration, to get acquainted with and share the best European experience in the field of doctoral education.

Georgia is the first country in the Eastern Partnership to provide a transition to a three-tier system of education. This is certainly welcome, but the rapid pace of reforms, sometimes hasty and unreasonable steps, insufficient funding and a lack of human resources concerning relevant knowledge and readiness have led to a number of problems and challenges at the stage of doctoral studies that have already been identified in various studies (Javakhishvili, Tsereteli, Khujadze, Tiabashvili, 2012; Gurchiani, Bregavdze, Janashia, Dalakishvili, Rcheulishvili, Tsotniashvili, 2014.)

The present document aims to assess doctoral education in Georgia and to present the prospects for its development in relation to the Common European Educational Area.

Doctoral education became part of the Bologna Process after the Berlin Ministerial in 2003, and the main trends, priorities and challenges for the development of doctoral education within the Common European Educational Area are presented in three documents, conditionally referred to as the Salzburg Principles, Recommendations and Guidelines (2005, 2010, 2010).

"The Salzburg Principles" were adopted in 2005 as conclusions and recommendations of the Bologna Seminar's "Doctoral Programs for the European Knowledge Society" (Salzburg II Recommendations, 2010). In 2010, in order to clarify, enrich and expand them "the Salzburg Initiative II" was implemented and the so-called "Salzburg Recommendations" were developed under the auspices of the Doctoral Education Council of the Association of European Universities (Salzburg II Recommendations, 2010). In 2015, another document was prepared under the leadership of the same organization - "Doctoral Education - Ahead, Towards Salzburg - Implementation and Challenges", which is considered to be a guiding principle of the reform.
A defining role in the development of the conceptual framework for doctoral education in the Common European Educational Area has been played by the Doctoral Education Council (EUA CDE), which was established in 2008, by the European University Association and is the most accountable force in European doctoral policy (https://eua-cde.org). Thus, it is recommended that higher education institutions

implementing doctoral education in Georgia join the Doctoral Education Council (EUA CDE) of the Association of European Universities. Cooperation on an individual, institutional level is undoubtedly beneficial, but doctoral studies in Georgia will move to a completely new, qualitatively different stage of development if it becomes possible to establish strategic, more complex and large-scale cooperation with the Council of European Doctoral Education.

In this case, the function of the unifying force and structure may be acquired by the Board of Rectors of the higher education institutions of Georgia based on the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports of Georgia.

As already mentioned, the main trends, priorities and challenges for the development of doctoral education within the framework of the Common European Educational Area are presented in the Salzburg Principles, Recommendations and Guidelines (2005, 2010, 2015).

Taking these documents and best international practice into account, doctoral education can be thought of as the third, crowning stage in teaching, for which the following factors and aspects are particularly important:
Creating new knowledge and developing existing knowledge through original research; "Teaching by research" - a learning component as a supportive, ancillary instrument of a scientific-research component; effective and collaborative scientific leadership; meeting labour market demands and modern challenges; integration of doctoral education in the institutional strategy; enhancing the personal and professional development of doctoral students, their career advancement; joint programs at national and international levels; joint interdisciplinary, intersectoral programs; structured doctoral programs and doctoral schools - a flexible and efficient management system; transparent, objective and fair procedure for admission of doctoral students; mobility and internationalization; sufficient and sustainable funding; research ethics, digital challenges and global science.

2. Doctoral education in Georgia and the Salzburg Principles

2.1. PhD and the Unified Strategy for Education and Science 2017-2021

Doctoral education occupies a specific place in the Unified Education and Science Strategy and Action Plan, approved by the Government of Georgia on December 7, 2017 by Resolution N533 (MES Strategy_2017-2021). The document mainly focuses on strategic issues relating to the integration of scientific research and teaching including a number of activities to promote the development and internationalization of doctoral degrees in Georgia. However, only certain items planned for 2018-2019 have been implemented: funding of PhD students (since 2014) and jointly funded structured programs and doctoral programs in collaboration with Volkswagen and the DAAD Foundation under international commitments.

Given the strategic importance of doctoral studies and the challenges it faces, doctoral education should have been presented in a more definitive way in a unified government strategy. However, if the responsible and partner agencies determined in the action plan of the strategy had allocated the appropriate financial resources, consistently carried out the planned activities and, consequently, took effective steps to achieve their strategic goals and objectives, the quality of education and educational environment would have improved. As well as this, good prerequisites for the improvement of the educational quality of the doctor's education in Georgia would have been established.

For the further development of doctoral education in Georgia, it is important not only to formulate the correct policy, determine priorities and strategic planning, but also to ensure reforms with proper and sustainable funding and systematic and consistent implementation of relevant policies.

2.2. Availablilty of Doctoral Education

At present, 31 higher education institutions have the right to implement doctoral programs in Georgia (one of them, Kutaisi International University plans to receive the first cohort of students in the 2020-2021 academic year), and according to the LEPL Education Management Information System, as of May 5, 2020, there are **8,626** students studying doctoral studies. Of these, **5,109, or 59%** of the total number of doctoral students, have suspended student status.

Of the doctoral students, **4,641, or 54**% of the total number are women. **2,699** female students, or 58% of female doctoral students, and **2,410** male doctoral students, or 60% of male doctoral students, have suspended student status. The age distribution of doctoral students is quite diverse (on average 23 to 69 years), which shows the availability of doctoral education at least in terms of age.

There is currently no recent research based on evidence to support the reasons for the suspended status of most doctoral students. Therefore, in order to solve one of the issues facing doctoral education, namely to increase graduation rate and therefore give the PhD *students an opportunity to finish their studies in a reasonable time, developing an effective goal-oriented policy, providing it with appropriate financial resources and finally, its consistent implementation is critically important.*

2.3. Definition of doctoral education

The Law of Georgia on Higher Education offers an explanation of the basic concepts and terms related to doctoral education (Article 2, s, t, t[1]). They reflect the principal, general characteristics of doctoral studies (the third stage of teaching and its place in the national qualifications' framework, teaching and research unity). However, this definition does not show the peculiarities of doctoral studies and especially the fact that at the third level of teaching, the teaching and research components, should not be considered as instruments of equal importance. Doctoral studies should first and foremost be research that uses the learning component, transfer skills development activities not as a core but as an ancillary, supportive tool.

In accordance with the Salzburg principles and recommendations, doctoral studies can be defined as follows: Doctoral Education Program - the third level educational program of higher academic education, the learning outcomes of which correspond to the results of the generalized learning component defined for the 8th level of the National Qualifications Framework. Based on the scientific-research component and the auxiliary learning component, the doctoral program aims to create new knowledge through personal research and personal and professional development of the doctoral student.

Based on the above, it is recommended to make the definition of doctoral program more precise in the Law of Georgia on Higher Education and / or to develop special guidelines and recommendations for universities in order to implement the Salzburg principles, modernize doctoral education and improve quality.

2.4. Ensuring the quality of doctoral education - accreditation

According to Georgian legislation, accreditation of a doctoral program (as well as regulated specialties) is mandatory. This indicates the importance and priority of the quality of education at the third stage of education, despite the challenges encountered in the process of internal and external quality assurance. I will be describing the latter later.

The process of accreditation of educational programs began in 2011. According to the Center for Quality Assurance, from 2011 to 2017, the Accreditation Council reviewed 294 doctoral programs, 279 of which were accredited and 15 were denied accreditation. In 2018-2019, the Accreditation Council discussed 91 doctoral education programs; 78 of them were granted accreditation, while 13 were denied accreditation.

These data show that in 2011-2017, 95% of the submitted programs were accredited by the current standards, and in 2018-2019 - after the renewal of accreditation standards - 85% of the submitted programs were conferred accreditation. It should be noted that despite the still high rate of accredited programs, their number in the country has decreased after the introduction of updated authorization standards. Some universities have decided to cancel doctoral programs in certain areas, due to the stringent requirements for authorization standards. According to the LEPL Education Management Information System, EMIS, there were 260 doctoral programs in 2017, and in 2019 the number decreased to 195.

As the data show, the turning point for external quality assurance concerning doctoral education programs started in 2018-2019, when the updated standards of authorization and accreditation came into force, resulting in a reduction of the number of accredited doctoral programs. Nevertheless, questions still remain regarding the quality of existing, accredited programs, given that doctoral studies are "teaching through research, creating new knowledge through the original scientific work". Only a few Georgian universities are competitive in the international market concerning their scientific research productivity and quality. As well as this, fundamental and applied research grants by the state are also implemented at only a few universities. These clearly indicate that the quality assurance system of the doctoral education needs to be revised and updated.

According to the Salzburg principles and recommendations, "doctoral education should be developed independently and should not employ the same tools that are used at the first and second stages of teaching." Consequently, the process of assessing the quality of doctoral education cannot be based solely on those evaluation criteria and indicators employed while assessing the bachelor's and master's degree programs.

According to the Salzburg principles, the following issues and aspects determine the peculiarity of doctoral studies and therefore are especially important for its quality: 1. an original research project; 2. a learning component, not as a guiding but as an auxiliary tool; 3. an open and transparent procedure for admission of doctoral students; 4. a reasonable number of doctoral students; 5. scientific guidance; 6. a research environment; 7. doctoral support services; 8. connection with the labor market; 9. internationalization; 10. internal quality assurance.
The analysis of the current standards for accreditation of educational programs reveal that only some of the key issues related to doctoral education can be assessed utilizing the appropriate criteria, evidence and indicators in accordance with the current standards (Darchia, Glonti, Grdzelidze, Sanikidze, Tsotniashvili, 2019).

In particular, one of the components of the second standard of accreditation (teaching methodology and organization, appropriateness of appraisal assessment of mastering of the program), - assesses the existence of appropriate, transparent, fair, public and accessible preconditions and procedures for admission to the program. According to one of the components of the fourth standard of accreditation (providing teaching resources), namely, one of the criteria concerning human resources, the number of doctoral students must correspond to the workload of their supervisors. One of the indicators for evaluating this component is the ratio of scientific supervisors and doctoral students. Authorization and accreditation standards pay special attention to issues related to scientific supervision. The assessment criteria of the third standard of the accreditation component [3.1] Student Counseling Services - include aspects related to internationalization, such as students' participation in international projects, events, conferences and research, and international mobility. The components of the fourth standard of accreditation (providing teaching resources) include assessments for the qualification of human resources and especially the scientific supervisors of doctoral students and their professional development; library, material and technical resources.

The above evaluation criteria and indicators of accreditation standards are very good, but not sufficient prerequisites for external quality assurance of doctoral education. There are a number of key issues that need to be addressed to specify existing components, criteria and indicators and the highlighting of additional components and self-standards. *Therefore, it is recommended to diversify accreditation standards - to develop different approaches to external evaluation of doctoral education programs, which will include a more complex assessment of the research component and other specific aspects of doctoral studies.*

- ✓ Taking into account the standards for accreditation of doctoral education programs provided by the Salzburg Principles and Recommendations, it is desirable to consider the following issues.
- ✓ Evaluation of the scientific-research component - research topics and methodology, originality of the dissertation research and its results through internationally recognized, measurable criteria of science, as well as peer review, taking into account the specifics of different fields and the state of their development in Georgia.
- ✓ A more flexible format of bachelor's and master's degrees employed while forming the learning component of Doctoral programs, more intensive and effective use of e-learning and mixed learning, introduction of specific methods and approaches to adult education. Modification of the evaluation criteria of the doctoral study component and taking into account the relevant format of the third stage of teaching.
- ✓ Employment of specialized manuals for the professional development of scientific supervisors, organizing professional development events (training, workshops, seminars), sharing experiences and best practices both within the institution and between different institutions.
- ✓ Thorough evaluation of the research environment and scientific-research activities, using both measurable criteria and collegial evaluation, taking into account the specifics of different fields. Replacement of scientific-research activities in the Arts directions with creative, executive projects whereas in the case of practice-oriented, professional fields with practice-based projects (Cherkezishvili, Sanikidze, Gibbs, 2020).
- ✓ Evaluation of research ethics, academic good faith, plagiarism regulation mechanisms and their implementation.
- ✓ Determination of the relationship of the third level of teaching with the labor market and employment, which will be possible only through the joint efforts of various stakeholders -

both public and private - by consolidating human and financial resources and coordinated activities.

- ✓ Separating out internationalization as an independent component of the evaluation consideration of the following issues during the evaluation: international publications of the doctoral student, supervision / co-supervision of the foreign specialist, involvement of foreign specialists in the evaluation process of the dissertation, etc.
- ✓ Evaluation of the internal quality assurance mechanisms of the doctoral education program taking into account the specific requirements of the doctoral studies.
- ✓ Evaluation of the establishment of anti-plagiarism systems by external stakeholders, independent education experts and NGOs.

Finally, the following should be noted: Doctoral accreditation is mandatory in 7 countries of the Common European Educational Area, 9 countries have certain restrictions or requirements for the right to pursue a doctoral program, and 13 countries do not require accreditation. *Therefore, in the process of diversification of accreditation standards, it is recommended to study and take into account the experience of European countries where doctoral accreditation is mandatory.*

2.5. Joint programs - cooperation at the national, international and intersector levels

The implementation of joint doctoral programs at the national, international and intersector levels contributes to the consolidation of human and material resources and is relevant not only for such a small country with limited resources as Georgia, but also for much richer countries and universities.

Currently, 31 out of 56 higher education institutions authorized in Georgia are universities, which - according to the LEPL Education Management Information System - are implementing 195 accredited doctoral programs as of November 1, 2019. Only two of them - Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University and Ilia State University - have joint doctoral programs in collaboration with leading European universities.

The following preconditions should be in place for the development and implementation of joint international doctoral programs: A) a legislative basis, which, through its flexibility, facilitates the implementation of joint programs, recognition of credit and research results, awarding double and joint academic degrees, and mobility of doctoral students and academic personnel, etc; B) international Partnership Relations between Georgian and Foreign Universities, which will be based on mutual trust and mutual recognition; C) current, internationally recognised scientific-research activities at Georgian universities; D) a critical number of students with the knowledge and skills which will enable them to pursue successful and effective learning and research activities in a competitive environment; E) financial resources that provide financing for the activities determined by the joint doctoral program, for example, long-term (one or two-semester mobility) of a doctoral student at a leading foreign university, doctoral research supervisor and co-supervisor travel and other living expenses of foreign dissertation evaluators.[3]

[3] It should be noted that in the context of the pandemic of Covid 19, the experience gained by Georgian and foreign universities during emergency, remote teaching may be a turning point for the internationalization and quality development of the third stage of education. It is possible that in the future, the stigma relating to distance learning will be overcome and online, virtual communication will become a necessary attribute of joint international doctoral programs (doctoral seminars, pre-dissertation and final defense can be done online after the pandemic). This will save travel expenses for the PhD students, foreign co-supervisers, external reviewers invited from abroad and members of the Dissertation Commission or Committee.

The following points are important for the implementation of joint, so-called national and intersector PhD programs: A) a legislative base, which provides solutions to legal issues related to the implementation of joint programs (such as enrollment of students in one of the partner universities, joint use of human and material resources, credit recognition systems, etc.); B) Improving communication between Georgian universities, scientific research units and the private sector, industry and business; C) motivating stakeholders and stimulation of the implementation of intersectoral joint programs by launching a special scheme regarding their funding.

From the above, it is obvious that there are certain objective factors, problems and barriers that hinder the implementation of joint international, national and intersectoral doctoral programs and which can be eliminated through targeted, consistent and financially sound long-term policies. I will focus exclusively on two aspects - the legal framework and the funding mechanism, both of which can be regulated in the short term, with some legislative changes and the rapid implementation of a special program.

A number of articles about the Law of Georgia on Higher Education (f^1, n, gg^{14}, gg^{48}; Article 49^1, 8, 9; Article 49^1, 1, 5; Article 63, 1^3) create good preconditions for the implementation of joint international and national programs, but it is desirable to specify and determine the so-called double degree and multiple degree academic degrees; In addition, the representatives of private sector, business and industry should also be added to the subjects implementing joint educational programs. While current legislation does not limit the possibility of such collaboration, appropriate legislative records may become an additional incentive for universities to expand their area of cooperation.

It is desirable to prepare a sub-legal act that will regulate the content and legal aspects of the diploma in cases of awarding a joint academic degree (ie. will specify the logo, signature and seal issues of the institutions implementing the program and the authorized persons. There might be additional discussion needed concerning the Georgian coat of arms as in the case of foreign universities, the state attributes are not indicated on the diploma, which can cause additional inconvenience in the case of issuing a joint diploma, etc).

In addition, the technical and legal problems and barriers arising in the case of implementation of the joint master's program by several Georgian universities under the Erasmus+ project, have shown that sub-legal acts need to be clarified in terms of student enrollment, funding and other organizational aspects.

Based on the above, it is recommended to implement legislative changes that will specify the technical, administrative and financial issues related to the implementation of joint international, national and intersectoral programs.

Therefore, it is recommended that special programs are created for financing joint international, national and intersectoral doctoral programs, which can be administered by the Rustaveli Foundation, based on its mission and experience.

2.6. Structured doctoral programs and doctoral schools

One of the key concepts of modern European doctoral studies is their "structure". The growing trend of structured doctoral programs and doctoral schools reveals a priority for many European countries and universities.
According to the Salzburg recommendations, the main features of the structured doctoral program are as follows: transparent doctoral admission procedure, research environment for individual scientific activities, qualified and consistent scientific leadership, training component for the development of transfer skills, various professional development opportunities, professional and personal development mechanisms, monitoring a PhD student's progress to complete the dissertation on time and within a reasonable period, etc.

For the effective functioning of the above-mentioned "structures" it is necessary to manage the relevant processes - their planning, implementation, monitoring and continuous development, providing a critical number of doctoral students, finding additional funds and their purposeful management, establishing national, international and intersectoral connections.

As the experience of many countries and universities has shown, the most flexible and effective organizational structure for the coordination and effective use of human and material resources is the doctoral school. Doctoral schools have already been established at individual universities in Georgia, but their activities have not yet had a real impact, and the doctoral "landscape" has not yet changed, *which is explained primarily by the lack or even absence of appropriate funds. Therefore, it is recommended to encourage the establishment and development of doctoral schools in Georgian universities, to create and implement mechanisms for their financial support.*

2.7. Funding for doctoral education

The tenth, final principle of the Salzburg recommendations emphasises the importance of adequate and sustainable funding for the third level of education, which can be related to the following aspects of doctoral education: doctoral students' grants, salaries, activities and necessary equipment facilitating scientific-research, doctoral program management, PhD students; support structures and their career development, etc.

Although doctoral education was introduced in some Faculties of a number of universities in the 2006-2007 academic year, from 2007-2008 the entire country switched to a three-level teaching system. Until 2014 there was virtually no stable funding mechanism for either doctoral programs or doctoral students which, naturally, had a negative impact on the development of doctoral studies in Georgia.

In 2010-2016, doctoral students were funded under the Grant Internship Competition for Young Scientists Abroad. Out of 247 applications, 167 projects were funded)[4] and a total of 2,361,442 GEL was spent. In 2010-2014, funding was provided to young scientists as part of the President's Scientific Grant Competition. Out of 420 applications, 187 projects were funded and a total of 922,595 GEL was spent.

[4] This competition was replaced by the grant competition for mobility and international scientific cooperation in 2017 (grants for individual travel, conference and seasonal schools), which is designed for both doctoral students and young as well as experienced scientists.

Since 2014, a grant competition for doctoral education programs has been launched, under which a total of 447 doctoral students have been funded over 6 years and 11,476,284 GEL has been spent. Most grants were issued in 2014 (135) and the lowest in 2017 (41). The highest rate of project applications was recorded in 2015 (376), and the lowest - in 2018 (160), which indicates a decrease in interest in this program.

In addition to the above-mentioned mechanisms for financing doctoral students, the Rustaveli Foundation implemented several targeted programs in 2011-2019 aimed at promoting the development of doctoral education. In 2011, a state grant competition was held for the co-management of doctoral education programs, within the framework of which three projects were funded, and their budget amounted to 68,000 GEL.

In 2013, the competition "Support of Young Georgian Scientists" was held, within the framework of which 8 projects out of 11 project proposals were funded and 91,888 dollars were spent.

In 2016, a grant competition for the development of structured doctoral educational programs was held. Out of 18 registered projects, 8 projects were funded, the total budget of which amounted to 1,746,262 GEL.

In 2017, in cooperation with the Volkswagen Foundation, a grant program for the co-financing of joint structured educational doctoral programs was implemented, for which 827,507 GEL was allocated. Out of 8 registered projects, 4 were funded.

In 2017, the Rustaveli-DAAD Joint Scholarship Program for Young Scientists was established and still runs, with 50 doctoral students being funded (2017 - 7, 2018 - 18, 2019 - 25).

In 2017-2018, a joint research-educational program for masters and doctoral students was implemented by the Rustaveli Foundation and the German Julich Research Center, within the framework of which 7 masters and doctoral students received funding.

In 2018, the Rustaveli Foundation established an award for the best young scientists and scholars of the year. 23 project applications were submitted, of which 4 projects were funded and a total of GEL 18,500 was spent.

In 2019, a competition was launched for young scientists to win 7 scholarships, in which 61 researchers participated.

In addition to the Rustaveli Foundation, doctoral students are provided with scholarships and the opportunity to study at leading foreign universities by the LEPL International Center for Education, which, among other activities, implements several programs in support of doctoral students. These are international doctoral programs, scholarship programs in Hungary and scholarship programs in Italy, which aim to train qualified people to promote the country's public, economic and social development, then return them to their homeland and integrate them into the Georgian labor market. Georgian doctoral students at leading European universities are given the opportunity to study and research using the European Commission-funded Erasmus+ Scholarships in Doctoral Studies and Marie Sklodowska Curie Research Scholarship Programs. It should be noted that the programs of both the International Center for Education and the European Commission have great importance for the development of scientific potential, but do not have a real impact on the development of doctoral education in the country.

An analysis of the funding mechanisms for doctoral programs and doctoral students over the past ten years and the amount of money spent on their professional development can be summarized as follows:
A) during the 15 years of reforms, the state failed to create a sustainable funding system that would facilitate the quality and competitive development of the third level of education (especially since doctoral studies was a fundamental novelty that required extraordinary financial and intellectual support);
B) until 2014, there was virtually no targeted funding program for doctoral students (doctoral students had the benefit of internships and presidential grants);
C) the budget of the grant programs for doctoral education programs, which came into force in 2014 is decreasing and the efficiency of the allocated funds is reduced, taking into account inflation and the GEL exchange rate;
D) in 2011-2019, separate, seemingly positive initiatives were no longer pursued, nor were their results analyzed and evaluated for effectiveness;
E) scholarships for doctoral students (administered by the International Education Center and the Rustaveli Foundation) are a welcome and important activity, a necessary condition for the development of the country's scientific potential, although they do not have a direct impact on improving the quality of doctoral programs at universities;
F) according to 2019 data, 56 students received doctoral grants, which is 0.7% of the total number of doctoral students and not even 2% of the active doctoral students. It should also be noted that the interest in the competition itself is not overwhelming (in 2015, the maximum number of applications was 376, and in 2018 - the minimum, 160). In 2019, 203 applications were made, which is 2.4% of the total number of doctoral students and less than 6% of the number of doctoral students with active status. This indicates a lack of real interest, time and possibly, potential interest in doctoral studies, research and development. Lack of funds can also have a negative effect on the motivation of doctoral students.
As already mentioned, there is a tendency in Europe to diversify the sources and mechanisms of funding for doctoral education. Not only doctoral research activities and related activities are funded, but also special funds are allocated to support services for doctoral schools. Therefore, it is important to elaborate mechanisms not only to provide doctoral students with grants but also create the mechanism for funding joint international, national and intersectoral, structured doctoral programs and for improving the research environment (education and science development strategy and action plan for 2018-2019 foresaw funding of the above-mentioned activities in 2018-2019; however, this plan failed to materialize).

Although there have been funding mechanisms for doctoral programs and doctoral students in the country since 2014, inadequate and unsustainable funding for the third level of education is one of the main challenges facing the higher education system and needs to be addressed as soon as possible. Otherwise, there will be a real threat to the development of scientific research in the country, and a lack of integration with the unified European scientific and educational space and the formation of the knowledge economy and society will be hindered.
Therefore, it is recommended to increase the funding of doctoral education and diversify funding mechanisms by providing sustainable funding for doctoral research grants, joint, structured programs, and doctoral schools.

3. Recommendations

To the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports of Georgia

1. Establishment of a doctoral education development strategy and action plan, its provision with appropriate and sustainable funding, systematic and consistent implementation.
2. Establishment of strategic, complex and large-scale cooperation with the Council of Europe for Doctoral Education under the auspices of the Board of Rectors of the Higher Education Institutions of Georgia on the basis of the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports of Georgia and / or the EU Eastern Partnership Policy.
3. Clarification of the definition of the doctoral education program in the Law of Georgia on Higher Education and / or development of special guidelines and recommendations for universities in order to implement the principles and recommendations of Salzburg, modernize doctoral education and improve quality.
4. Implementation of legislative changes that will clarify technical, administrative and financial issues related to the implementation of joint international, national and intersectoral programs.
5. Increasing the amount of funding for doctoral education.
6. Diversification of doctoral education financing mechanisms by providing sustainable funding for doctoral research grants, joint, structured programs and doctoral schools.
7. Exploration of the needs of the labor market in cooperation with various stakeholders, universities and representatives of the business sector in relation to doctoral education.

To LEPL Shota Rustaveli National Science Foundation

8. Creation and implementation of special grant programs for the financing of joint international, national and intersectoral doctoral programs.
9. Creation and introduction of special grant programs for the financing of structured doctoral programs and doctoral schools.

To LEPL National Center for Education Quality Development

10. Diversification of accreditation standards - development of different approaches for external evaluation of doctoral educational programs which will include a more complex assessment of the research component and other specific aspects of doctoral studies.
11. Exploration, taking into account the experience of European countries with mandatory doctoral accreditation in the process of diversification of accreditation standards.
12. Thorough assessment of the research environment and scientific-research activities in the process of accreditation of doctoral programs, using both measurable criteria and peer assessment and taking into account the specifics of different fields.
13. Reflection of the mechanisms of research ethics, academic good faith and plagiarism regulation in the accreditation standards of doctoral programs.
14. The separation of internationalization in the accreditation standards of doctoral programs as an independent component, during the evaluation of which should be taken into account the issues such as international publications of doctoral students, leadership and co-leadership of foreign specialists, involvement of foreign specialists in the process of dissertation evaluation, etc .
15. Defining specific doctoral requirements as criteria for evaluating the internal quality assurance mechanisms of the program in the accreditation standards of doctoral programs;

To Higher education institutions implementing doctoral programs

16. A better understanding of the "Philosophy" concerning doctoral education and modernization of the structure and content of doctoral programs in accordance with the Salzburg principles and recommendations.
17. Intensive and effective utilization of a more flexible teaching format, electronic and mixed teaching different from BA and Master's studies, formation of specific methods and approaches to adult education in the formation of the doctoral program.
18. Implementation of double and joint programs for conferring academic quality at national and international levels.
19. The use of specialized textbooks widely employed in leading Western universities for the professional development of scientific supervisors, organizing professional development activities (training, workshops, seminars), sharing experiences and best practices both within the institution and between different institutions.
20. Creating support structures for professional development and career advancement of doctoral students.
21. Raising the awareness of doctoral students about research ethics and academic integrity;

To non-governmental organizations working in the field of education:

22. After the introduction of the new standards of authorization and accreditation, the higher education institutions of Georgia should study the effectiveness of the development and implementation of anti-plagiarism policies.

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Inclusivity and Non-discrimination in Education

Aim

The aim of this paper is to inquire about the idea of "inclusivity" in education. In particular, to asses it in conjunction with "non-discrimination" and with some other key terminology, i.e. "personalized" and "student centered", used in connection with education. Specifically, taking into consideration the idea embodied in the word "education" itself, it is focused on the insignificance of differences that appear while comparing the basic idea of inclusivity with that of non-discrimination. If the line drawing difference appears to be tiny, there might not be room for some currently open discussions and it ("inclusivity") could be accounted for as a subcategory or even considered as another word for describing "non-discrimination" in education.

Methodology

As for methodology of the current paper, the electronic search was carried out on international instruments related to the regulation of inclusivity and non-discrimination in education as well as published literature selected according to the criteria of using different adjectives in conjunction with education. In particular, preselected documents and articles for analysis were referring to education as "inclusive", "personalized" or "student centered". The research included only those articles written in the English language. After further preselection it was narrowed down to those articles having to the current paper higher relevance, thus articles mentioning selected adjectives in different context and/or with different aim were excluded.

Starting Point

As starting point, or preliminary theses can be taken the statement or (even) understanding that putting the labels "student-centered", "personalized" or "inclusive" before "education" become "superfluous" (Paludan, 2006). One needs to focus on such basic ideas that are inherent to the concept of education. The meaning of "education" in 21st century implies to be "student-centered", "personalized" and "inclusive".

Equally important is that while professors teach "student-centered" or even "community-centered", students learn "self-centered". This is an idea of education as contribution to development of an individual's own-self. It builds on individual's talent, learning styles, skills or "Intelligence", the latter defined as "capacity… that is geared to a specific content in the world" (Gardner, 1997). If we put it in constitutional law context – education is the contribution to free development of personality (The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948). If not doing so, would it still be considered as education? Would "professor-centered" education still account as education? Or non-inclusive education coupe with the goals of education at all? Could we accept education that discriminates? – i.e. excluding some individuals from the opportunity given equally to all humans? Certainly not, education defined as a contribution to free development of personality is a common good and thus nobody shall be discriminated in the context of having reasonable access to education or even more broadly of being educated.

This further helps us to define the meaning of education as something equally accessible to everyone only because they were born as humans and have right to free development of personality. This is gear/tool to comprehend and enhance their own capacities. The meaning of "education" in 21st century further implies being "civic", i.e. caring and engaged in contributing to the wellbeing of society.

Discussion

The personalized, inclusive or student-centered approach in education aims at getting apart from all forms of discrimination and stigmatization in education. Labels indicating any form of physical disability will disappear (if not already have disappeared), but the challenge remains to cope with intellectual, social and emotional differences, such as emotional disturbance or behavioral problems as well as economic disadvantages (e.g. poverty), the latter being especially vulnerable if it is not connected with some particular gift.

Ever since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (adopted by UN General Assembly in 1948) proclaimed that "Everyone has the right to education… Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit" (The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948), equalization of opportunities become the key driving factor in finding the best approaches to education. Equally, the same Declaration identified the ultimate goal of education as a human right: "Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms... (The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948)" Respectively, the purpose of education is to contribute to "full development of the human personality" and while doing so, to aim at "strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms".

Even so the discussions and proposed solutions predominantly focus on secondary education, many deliberations both in Georgia and at the international level are equally relevant for all kinds of education, including higher education. Respectively, the study of the Georgian inclusive education system conducted with the aim to "highlight the current position of inclusive education in Georgia" (Tchintcharauli, Javakhishvili, 2017) was concentrated on secondary education, but includes findings relevant to highlight in the current context. In particular, the authors concluded that "Georgian legislation can be qualified as partially supportive of inclusive education, with some effective, but mostly insufficient practices and slow progress in the development of inclusive education… the practical implementation at the individual level of each person with special educational needs is nevertheless inhibited by different barriers (the lack of special teachers and school psychologists, problems with parents' involvement, lack of knowledge regarding alternative and augmentative communication strategies)" (Tchintcharauli, Javakhishvili, 2017).

Equally, the spirit of the UNESCO Salamanca Statement (The Salamanca Statement, 1994), contains statements valuable for the shift of paradigm in the general idea of education. It requests education to ensure that people with "special educational needs" are approached in a manner that stresses their abilities and advantages instead of their limits or disadvantages. It highlights the need "to promote the approach of inclusive education, namely enabling schools to serve all children..." (The Salamanca Statement, 1994) and to "reaffirm… commitment to Education for All, recognizing the necessity and urgency of providing education for children, youth and adults with special educational needs within the regular education system…" (The Salamanca Statement, 1994).

The Framework for Action on Special Needs Education underlines that "the trend in social policy… to promote integration and participation and to combat exclusion… are essential to human dignity and to the enjoyment and exercise of human rights. Within the field of education, this is reflected in the development of strategies that seek to bring about a genuine equalization of opportunity (The Salamanca Statement, 1994)."

Conceiving right to education "as a universal human right" resulted in actions transforming educational institutions "to break down barriers for people with disabilities, to empower them as agents of change…" and "adapting teaching practices to cater for all" (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2015). This very much reflects our "inclusive" society in which it is estimated that more than one billion people have some form of "disability" (World Health Organization and World Bank, 2011), and over four in five persons face economic obstacles as they live in developing countries (International Labour Organization, 2007/ Stloukal, 2006).

Therefore, this "genuine equalization" should occur through learning adapted to the needs of the individual instead of "*one size fits all* - mentality towards education" (The Salamanca Statement, 1994). In particular, it underlines that "sound pedagogy… assumes that human differences are normal and that learning must accordingly be adapted to the needs of the child rather than the child fitted to preordained assumptions regarding the pace and nature of the learning process" (The Salamanca Statement, 1994). Respectively, Salamanca Statement develops the fundamental idea of the "inclusive school" characterizing inclusive society at large and calls to substitute "special" schools by "ordinary" schools, bearing in mind continuum of support and services to match everybody's individual needs (The Salamanca Statement, 1994). It maintains that "regular schools with this inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all; moreover, they provide an effective education to the majority of children and improve the efficiency and ultimately the cost-effectiveness of the entire education system" (The Salamanca Statement, 1994).

For example, Irish Guidelines for Supporting Students with Behavioral, Emotional and Social Difficulties (Guidelines for Supporting Students with Behavioral, Emotional and Social Difficulties, 2013) identify "Whole school approaches (Support for All)" that are generally applicable for the entire student body and promote positive student behavior and learning environment for all as well as specific Level 2 "School Support (for Some)" and Level 3 "School Support Plus (for a Few)" student-centered approaches. This is well justified by the fact that emotional disturbance and/or behavioral problems (including aggressive or anti-social behavior; inattentiveness; distractibility and impulsiveness; a general inability to cope with the routine of daily tasks; attention-seeking behaviors such as negative interactions or a poor attitude towards work, peers or teachers; and depressed behaviors such as withdrawal, anxiety and mood swings, (Irish National Council for Special Education) etc.) may occur on a continuum from mild or transient difficulties to its significant and persistent complications.

Therefore, also response to the students' needs should be diverse employing general support system available to all, i.e. general measures like "Creating a positive, safe and caring school climate that promotes good behavior" or "Creating positive learning environment" should coexist with specific measures for students with more severe and/or persistent needs, for whom a more intensive, coordinated and even individualized response is required (Guidelines for Supporting Students with Behavioral, Emotional and Social Difficulties, 2013). It is further suggested that in consultation with student(s),

parents, relevant teachers, Student Support/Care Team, and the school management, should be drawn up, implemented and reviewed an individual education plan that has “realistic, achievable targets with the criteria and timeframe for their achievement clearly stated, along with identifying the necessary resources and supports, paying particular attention to consistent implementation across the school setting…” and further to agree on “strategies for teaching appropriate [including pro-social] behaviors and social and emotional skills using available school resources” (Guidelines for Supporting Students with Behavioral, Emotional and Social Difficulties, 2013).

If approached adequately Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorders (AD/HD) may turn out to be an advantage rather than a disadvantage. It is all about the attitude towards it. One will then gain a team member with another individual approach to common issues, if instead of the imposition of disciplinary sanctions, educational institutions employ the personalized strategy for responding to such “misbehavior”.

Sensory (hearing and vision) difficulties, physical and intellectual disabilities, speech and language disorders make one also distinguished but should not make disadvantaged. We leave in the world where more than one billion people have “some form of disability” (World Health Organization and World Bank, World Report on Disability, 2011). Thus, diverse group in educational setting mirrors the reality outside the (otherwise) isolated context.

Further, taking into consideration also the need of such individuals who need long periods of hospitalization, growing up small children, support elderly family members, or who simply for various reasons need to work to earn for leaving and simultaneously support their education, become another important challenge to the modern education system. Similarly, Covid 19 pandemic made apparent that one needs to place more emphasis on diverse and interchangeable methodologies in education to achieve desired learning outcomes.

Generally, effective organization of teaching may be achieved through a combination of various learning tools and methodologies to cater to different levels of ability, learning styles and interests. For example, in some cases learning by/through teaching, mixed ability teaching, cooperative learning, team-teaching etc. may ensure achievement of learning goals in diverse audiences. One may also emphasize the positive impact that may be characterized in many different ways: defining it as employment-centered, practice-oriented, etc. education. But at the end it comes to its ultimate goal - to ensure that acquisition and organization of knowledge match with its practical application.

At the same time, such an approach helps to reduce the stigma of “special education”. It was even argued that the terminology of “special educational needs” still “masks a practice of stratification which continues to determine children's educational careers by assigning to them an identity defined by an administrative label” (Skidmore, 2004, Runswick-Cole and Hodge, 2009) . Therefore it was opined that for the shift of paradigm the adoption of the phrase “educational rights” would be relevant. It suggests that such “a linguistic turn” will have positive impact and will be significant for the lives of children currently falling under the category of those having “special educational needs” (Runswick-Cole and Hodge, 2009).

The concepts of “inclusive”, “student-centered” or “personalized” learning describe learning process adapted to the learner, bearing in mind each individual’s interests, priorities and advantages (including

skills). It highlights both what the student wants to learn and how the student wants to learn (that what he/she wants to learn).

Whereby referring to different “intelligences” or learning styles (even if Howard Gardner would hate this comparison) – as he considers first (“Intelligence”) to be “capacity, with its component processes, that is geared to a specific content in the world (like musical sounds or spatial patterns)” rather than concept of style that he defines to be “a general approach that an individual can apply equally to every conceivable content” (Gardner, 1997) – education should amount to support the individual to identify what is best working for him. Thus having understanding of own self, referring to both “capacity” (or competence) to learn and “approach” to apply, would contribute to practical application of this knowledge.

Howard Gardner initially underlined existence of (“at least”) eight intelligences in individuals. These are: linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, musical, body-kinesthetic, interpersonal, intra-personal, and naturalistic intelligences (Gardner, 1997). He underlined that predominantly one concentrates on the first two, putting them “on a pedestal”, and making those also dominant selection criteria of students for educational programs, like IQ (intelligence quotient) and SAT (scholastic aptitude test) (Gardner, 1997). By his Multiple Intelligence (MI) Theory he challenged the “uni-dimensional view of intelligence” and advocated for the diversity of solutions in “an individual-centered school” (as opposite to “uniform school”) (Gardner, 1997). This is the “one geared to optimal understanding and development of each student’s cognitive profile” (Gardner, 1997) with “multiple intelligences curriculum” that with his own words echoes the traditional Chinese adage “let a hundred flowers bloom”(Gardner, 1997) . Later, at the Blackboard's conference in 2016 he (informally, i.e. stating that he lacks scientific evidences so far) amended those eight with two other “candidate” intelligences: existential and pedagogical intelligences (Gardner, 2016). Whereby the first (existential) he describes as one of the Big Questions like who are we, where are we heading, what is love, why we die etc. The latter (pedagogical) he considers to be ability to teach others, particularly relevant for learning by teaching approach in education (Gardner, 2016).

To sum up, “inclusive” or “individual-centered” school is the one that ensures “a genuine equalization of opportunity”, where an individual’s ability and strength are promoted and any difference turns to become an advantage. Ultimately it contributes to free development of personality through education.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The phrases containing the words “inclusive”, “personalized”, “student-" or “individual-centered” aim to highlight the modern idea of education. They derive from the broader concept of “non-discrimination” in education. At the same time, one may well argue that they all are implied in the concept of education.

Right to Education is a basic human right itself, is inherent to human dignity, and (it is) concretized from more specific concept of the right to free development of personality. Respectively, it contributes to the development of personality of any individual (without discrimination and stigmatization) and does so in the most suitable manner for this very individual.

What accounts to education for any single individual equally derives from the interests and the capacities (“intelligences”) of this very person – ultimately, its content is shaped by the learning goals of this very individual.

How this person will be able to achieve those aims of his/her own education is inherent to his/her abilities, competences and strength. This is highly individual as there is only one exactly the same person at the same stage of development and in the same dimension of time.

The best approach to learn for any person is acquisition and organization of knowledge in a way he/she deems to use it in future life. And finally, for fulfilment and grater accomplishments he/she rather do so with the purpose to contribute to the wellbeing of society.

The action plan on how to perceive/comprehend education for the inclusive society cannot be simply imposed by the law, bearing in mind that any additional regulation may cause additional ground for stigmatization. It should become inherent to society itself. But certainly, one can promote respect to diversity, both in the actions of the governmental bodies and the society at large.

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The policy for promoting lifelong learning- accomplished outcomes and challenges

1. About the document

The purpose of the policy paper, as a result of the study, is to determine the status of fulfillment of the obligations undertaken by the state at different times to promote lifelong learning and other interventions, implemented in national eduction system in this regard, describe today's situation and present certain recommendations for policy-makers in order to further support the implementation of life-long learning principle.

As part of the study, we review the systemic changes that have taken place since the Bologna Process, including the policy for promoting lifelong learning, the status of implementation of European Parliament recommendations for the alignment with European Policy and Practice in the field of education and training and will describe the impact of fulfillment of the obligations on the education system of Georgia.

More specifically, we shall discuss the main tool of lifelong learning - recognition of education, which involves the recognition of both formal and informal education, for the purposes of access to learning, progress, completion and employment.

For the purpose of the study, the desk research method has been selected, which analyzed relevant documents, including the national legislative base supporting lifelong learning and has developed recommendations for addressing some of the shortcomings that exist today.

2. Current status/review

Georgia joined the Bologna Process at the Bergen Summit in 2005 (Bergen Summit, 2005) , one of the most important voluntary processes in Europe. Concurrent with the Bologna Process, meetings of European Ministers and a wide range of agreements between European countries have ensured the formation of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), comparability / compatibility with qualification standards and quality, support for lifelong learning and more. By joining the Bologna Process, Georgia has committed itself to further modernizing the national education system and contributing to the key goals of establishing European Higher Education Area and promoting the European Higher Education System around the world.

On June 27, 2014, the Association Agreement (Association Agreement, 2014) between Georgia on the one hand and the European Union and the European Atomic Energy Community and its member-countries on the other (The Association Agreement), was signed, which was ratified by the Georgian Parliament on July 18, 2014. Given the content of Articles 358 and 359 of the Association Agreement, it is important for the country to strengthen lifelong learning and international cooperation in the academic field, to ensure the quality of education, as well as to promote progress in recognition of qualifications and competencies. Among the documents referred to in Annex XXXII of the Agreement, the recommendation of European Parliament and the Council of 22 May 2017 on the establishment of the "European Qualifications

Framework" (2017 / C 189/03) for lifelong learning is significant, which provides the mechanisms of comparability and recognition of learning outcomes-based qialifications.

Supporting the learning outcomes-based qualifications system and lifelong learning is the key priniciple of the document. It is noteworthy that the Government of Georgia, by Resolution 533, has approved the "Unified Strategy for the Development of Education and Science 2017-2021", which reflects the directions of fulfillment of the obligations under the Association Agreement for lifelong learning (Unified Strategy for the Development of Education and Science 2017-2021).

The existence of an internationally compatible and transparent National Qualifications Framework and a study field classifier is an important precondition for the implementation of the principle of continuous education. Therefore, it is necessary to have a supportive legislative base in the country. The establishment of a supportive legislative framework will contribute to the availability of internationally compatible and comprehensible qualifications, which will greatly simplify the process of international mobility, ensure the interconnection of general, vocational and higher education, and exclude the existence of educational deadlocks (gaps) in the system.

The Qualifications Framework should provide a reflection of changing requirements in the education system and stimulate the description of its relevant, renewable qualifications. The legislative base should also provide support for the implementation of such important measures in the wake of the Bologna Declaration, as the establishment of a full-fledged credit accumulation and transfer system. Credits must also be obtained outside of higher education, including, for example, lifelong learning, provided that they are recognized by relevant universitie (Bologna Declaration, 1999).

Following the Bologna Process, the Georgian education system has undergone a number of significant changes. The regulatory framework has been changed and important legislative acts have been developed:

2005 - "Law of Georgia on Higher Education"

2007 (2018) - "Law of Georgia on Vocational Education"

2005 - "Law of Georgia on General Education"

2010 "Law of Georgia on Educational Quality Enhancement"

2010 - The National Qualifications Framework

2010 - The Rule of Mobility

2010 - The rule for Verification of Authenticity of Educational Documents Issued in Georgia and Recognition of Education Received Abroad and Approval of Fees

2005 - 2011 - The Forms of State Higher and Vocational Education Documents – Diploma and Vocational Diploma

2007 – The Rule of Calculation of Higher Education Credits (2010 – Vocational Education)

2011 The Rule of Maintainance of Higher Educational Institutions Registry (National Center of Education Quality Enhancement, legal and sub-legal acts);

The National Center for Educational Quality Enhancement was founded in 2006 and it was reorganized later (2006-2010); Three cycle system has been introduced in Georgia since 2005. The full transition to this system took place from the 2009-2010 academic year (except for medicine, dentistry and veterinary). To complete the higher education level, it was defined to accumulate the required number of credits: the first cycle: Bachelor's program-240 ECTS credits (from Y2018- minimum 180 ECTS credits);

Since 2007 the Certified Specialist Program has been introduced with 120-180 ECTS credits. A certified specialist is entitled to pursue studies at the undergraduate educational program on the basis of passing the unified national examinations. Recognition of credits, accumulated within the Certified Specialist Program is available. The second cycle: Graduate Program- 120 ECTS credits (from Y2018- minimum 60 ECTS credits); The third cycle: PhD Program- not less than 3 years and educational component not more than 60 ECTS credits (before 2018- 180 ECTS credits).

Medical (a certified doctor-360 ECTS credits), dental (a certified dentist-300 ECTS credits) and veterinarian (a certified veterinarian- 300 ECTS credits) education has been transformed into one-cycle integrated education and has been equaled to the second cycle of higher education by its learning outcomes.

Legislative changes were implemented in terms of teacher's education and veterinary in 2015-2018 and Teacher Education (300 ECTS credits) and Veterinary (300 ECTS credits) integrated Master's programs were created.

The changes, made to Laws on Educational Quality Enhancement, Higher Education, Vocational Education and General Education, adopted by the Parliament of Georgia in October, 2018, are very important for the system development, as these changes, based on Articles 358 and 359 of the Association Agreement, refer to promotion of progress in terms of lifelong learning, enhancing international cooperation in the academic field, increasing international mobility, educational quality assurance, relevance and accessibility of all levels of education, as well as fostering progress in terms of recognition of qualifications and competencies.

To this end, the Government of Georgia initiated the package of legislative changes in the Parliament of Georgia in December 2017, which was approved by the Parliament and entered into force on October 6, 2018. Changes have been made to the Laws on Educational Quality Enhancement, Higher Education, Vocational and General Education. The explanatory note to the draft law reads (Explanatory notes to Law of Georgia on Education Quality Enhancement – changes adopted by the Parliament of Georgia, 2017) : "the purpose of the law is to establish a legislative base, necessary for the approval of the National Qualifications Framework and the classifier of the study fields, as well as for the development and approval of bylaws related to them." The draft law also aims at having relevant definitions of the National Qualifications Framework and Classifier of study fields at the legislative level to ensure uniform understanding of important terms and making them common and acceptable for the whole system (in terms of higher, vocational and general education) and public in general.

As a result of legislative changes:

- Definitions, related to qualifications framework, have been defined (among them, terms: "formal education" and "informal education" have been defined);

- An obligation has been arisen to approve the new Qualifications Framework and the Classifier of Study fields;
- An obligation has been arisen to approve the rule of governing, developing and monitoring of qualifications framework, developing qualifications electronic registry and its rules of administration, as well as the procedures and the instructions for recognition of informal education.
- Definitions “Associate degree” and “Short-cycle educational programs” have been introduced, which will play an important role in eliminating “educational deadlocks”.
- The ways of implementation of short-cycle educational programs and recognition of accomplished learning outcomes have been determined.

- New regulations related to the volume of undergraduate and graduate programs will be launched, in particular, exceptional cases will be identified, which will enable higher education institutions to develop undergraduate programs with not less than 180 ECTS credits or/and graduate program with not less than 60 ECTS credits. The obligation has also been defined to develop a rule that defines the prerequisites for admission to the program, the constituent components of the program, and the principles of credit distribution (The Law of Georgia on Education Quality Enhancement, The Law of Georgia On Higher Education, Policy-brief_EQF, 2019).

3. Outcomes of the Study

The outcomes of the study show that from 2005 to the present, a number of important steps have been taken to promote lifelong learning. Among them, the issues of recognition of education were significantly regulated, as a result of the legislative changes in 2018, within the new framework of qualifications the deadlocks related to vocational education were eliminated, etc. However, our legislation still needs to be refined, including recognition of prior learning.

According to the 2003 Berlin Communique (Berlin Communique, 2003), ministers considered the recognition of prior learning as one of the most important mechanisms for the implementation of lifelong learning. For this purpose, EHEA countries had to create appropriate legislative and strategic frameworks. In the process, it is important to define, agree and establish the right terms and definitions. For example, the term "Recognition of Prior Learning" is not found in Georgian legislation. However, this term is used in the “Unified Strategy of Education and Science in 2017-2021” in the list of challenges of the higher education system (Unified Strategy for the Development of Education and Science 2017-2021).

In a common European education area, "recognition of prior learning" means the validation of learning outcomes obtained within formal education or beyond formal education. Validation of learning outcomes is a method of assessment that determines whether a person is able to demonstrate that he or she meets the requirements for assessing the learning outcomes of a particular learning unit. In other words, a person already has the relevant knowledge, understanding and skills, and he or she does not need to develop them through undertaking a learning unit.

According to the European Commission, formal education is provided in an organized and structured environment, specially designed for learning, which is usually completed by awarding qualification, in the

form of certification or diploma. It includes general education, vocational education, and higher education.

The issue of recognition of formal education has been significantly addressed in Georgia through appropriate regulatory documents / procedures. Among them:

- Laws of Georgia on General, Vocational and Higher education;
- The order N98/n of the Minister of Education and Science of Georgia, dated by October 1, 2010, on the approval of "The rule of Verification of Authenticity of Educational Documents Issued in Georgia and Recognition of Education Received Abroad and Approval of Fees". Changes have been made on November 3, 2016 (Order N147/n);
- The order N224/n of the Minister of Education and Science of Georgia, dated by December 29, 2011, on the approval of the "Rule of submission and review the documents by entrants/ applicants for Master's degree/students, entitled to study in higher educational institution without taking Unified National/General Graduate Examinations;
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- Recognition of Education of Refugees and Internally Displaced People and persons who cannot prove their education or qualification as they studied at institution, which were liquidated or ceased educational activities (https://eqe.ge/geo/static/217) ;
- Recognition of Education received on Occupied Territories (https://eqe.ge/geo/static/225) (Legislative base for Recognition of Formal Learning https://eqe.ge/geo/static/119/legal-acts, https://matsne.gov.ge/)

It should also be noted that as a result of the recognition of formal education, a person is entitled to study or continue his / her studies at the desired higher education program. The person is awarded a number of pre-determined ECTS credits corresponding to the learning outcomes obtained. Consequently, it is possible to accumulate credits throughout life .

The case of education received beyond formal education is not so unambiguous.

There are Council of Europe recommendations, guidelines and reports on recognizing education received beyond formal education. Among them there are the following documents:

1. Council Recommendation of 20 December 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning (2012/C 398/01);
2. European Guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning (Cedefop, 2015);
3. European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning 2018 (Cedefop, 2019);
4. The European Higher Education Area in 2018: Bologna Process Implementation Report (Euridice, 2018);;
5. European Universities' Charter on Lifelong Learning (European Universities' Charter on Lifelong Learning. EUA, 2008);

6. ECTS User's Guide, 2015 (ECTS User's Guide, 2015).);

The definitions adopted by the Council of Europe and UNESCO (UNESCO guidelines for the recognition, validation and accreditation of the outcomes of non-formal and informal learning, 2012) distinguish two types of education received beyond formal education:

One type, defined as **informal education,** is derived from daily life activities, work, family, or entertainment. This type of informal learning may be intentional, but it is a less organized and / or structured process. In most cases, this is not intentional, but accidental education. For example: skills acquired through life or work experience (project management, computer skills, etc.), knowledge of foreign languages and intercultural skills gained from living in other country, knowledge and skills acquired while volunteering, cultural events, sporting events, working with young people and working at home (e.g., childcare).

The second type, defined as **non-formal** learning, is institutional, targeted and planned by the education service provider, however, as a result of its completion, the document / certificate confirming the learning outcomes / qualifications is not recognized by the educational authorities as a formal qualification at the national level, or, in general, qualification is not awarded within such an educational process. Such non-formal education is mostly a part of lifelong learning process, with the addition of formal education as an alternative, complementary mechanism. At the same time, it is a more structured process than in the case of the first type of informal learning. Typical forms of this type of education are corporate training and seminars to develop employees' work skills; structured online learning (for example: by means of MOOCs); courses organized by civil society organizations for members, target groups, or the general public; attendance of compulsory language courses by migrants and others.

It is less possible to determine the absolute difference between these two types of informal education. Sometimes in the literature they are united in the education received beyond formal education. This is exactly the case in Georgia.

The concept of informal learning first appeared in Georgian legislation after the reforms implemented in the education system in 2005-2007 (The Law of Georgia on Vocational Education, 2007). The clarification of definitions (formal and informal education) and the formation of mechanisms for the recognition of informal education actually began in the wake of legislative changes in 2018. Today, according to the existing legislation, informal education is a part of a lifelong learning system that implies obtaining "knowledge and awareness," "skill" or/and "responsibility and autonomy" beyond formal education (The Law of Georgia on Education Quality Enhancement, The Law of Georgia On Higher Education, Policy-brief_EQF, 2019).

It should be noted that informal education can be recognized by the current legislation of Georgia only at the level of vocational education. On the basis of the legislative amendment of 2018, on September 6, 2019 the Minister of Education, Science, Culture and Sports of Georgia approved the rule of recognition of informal education, in which the procedures are fully renewed and comply with the recommendation of the Council of Europe and the European Parliament. However, recognition of informal education remains a challenge for higher education goals, which is also implied in the recommendations of the Council of Europe and the European Parliament. Due to its importance, the National Center for Education Quality website has a separate section dedicated to the recognition of informal education https://eqe.ge/geo/static/873/.

Most EHEA countries recognize informal education for higher education and / or qualification purposes. As a rule, countries recognize informal education within the framework of existing legislation at the national level. More specifically, there are laws, guidelines and relevant recommendations that oblige higher educational institutions and / or help to determine the internal procedures required for recognition. However, in some countries (in 6 of them) higher education institutions have de facto recognition procedures in the absence of state legal frameworks. Countries have different approaches to the volume of informal education recognition in order to complete and qualify for a higher education program. Typically, national legislation sets permissible norms and determines the extent to which recognition is possible within the framework of recognition procedures. In some countries, the number of credits that can be awarded to a person on the basis of informal education recognition under a higher education program is defined (for example, 10 ECTS in Liechtenstein, 12 ECTS in Italy). In some countries, the maximum number of credits to be awarded is defined as the share of credits required to complete a higher education program. In Portugal, for example, one-third of total credits may be granted as a result of a recognition procedure within a specific cycle. In Germany and Poland, the proportion is 50%. Some countries do not indicate the upper limit of the number of credits to be awarded, although they specify part of the curriculum that must be met without recognition of prior education. In the French community of Belgium, 60 ECTS must be accumulated as a result of ordinary, compulsory involvement in study process. In Estonia, a thesis cannot be granted credit on the basis of informal recognition. In some countries, there are no restrictions on the volume of possible recognition. For example, in the Flemish community of Belgium, Denmark, France, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Russia, as a result of informal education recognition, it is possible to award a higher education qualification (Euridice, 2018).

4. Policy Outcomes/Recommendations

Recognition of informal education is an important tool for expanding access to education. In addition, the recognition of informal education (e.g., in the form of ECTS credits) by the higher education institution as part of the educational program will help students to complete the educational program and help them learn and accumulate credits throughout their studies.

By joining the Bologna process with the purpose of further development and modernization of national education system by Georgia, for fulfilling voluntary commitments duly, it is important to take effective steps for the further development of the national legislative framework, including the introduction of appropriate mechanisms for the recognition of informal learning at all levels of education.

Therefore, at the initial stage, it is advisable to thoroughly study the experience of countries that have introduced the mechanisms for the recognition of informal education for higher education purposes. It is necessary to analyze the expected results of the introducing similar mechanisms at the national level and assess risks associated with it. With the close cooperation of higher education institutions, education policy makers and implementing institutions, the right approaches should be selected and measures should be planned to adjust national legislation. The readiness of the implementing higher education institutions is crucial for the full implementation of the recognition mechanisms. In order to achieve the best results, higher education institutions should be supported and strengthened.

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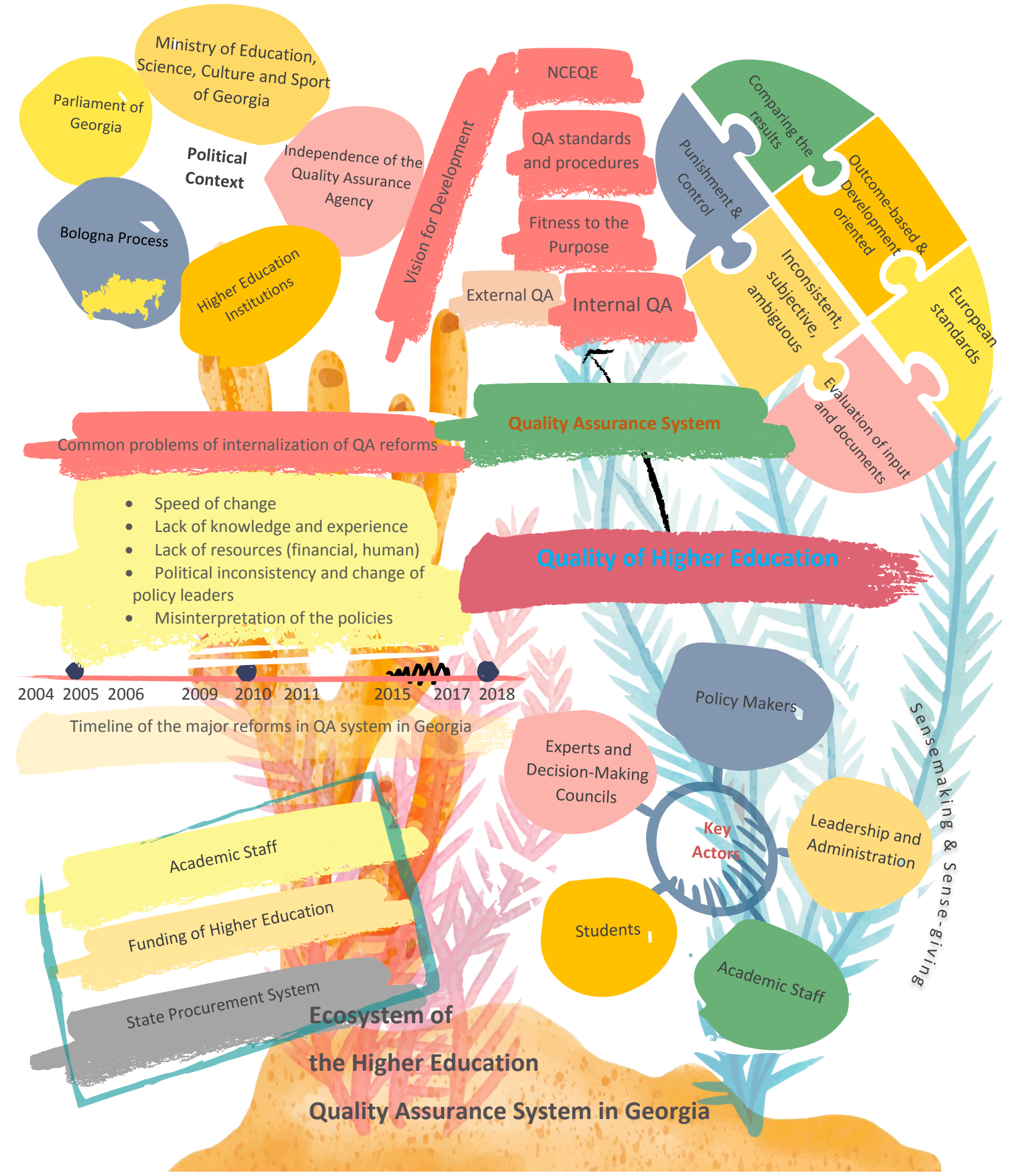
Ecosystem and Internalization of the Higher Education Quality Assurance System in Georgia

The purpose of this policy brief is to analyze the ecosystem and the interconnected factors that influence the implementation and internalization of the higher education quality assurance (QA) system reforms in Georgia. It also highlights the setbacks related to the implementation of the three waves of the QA system reforms and sheds light to the areas that still need to be articulated and attended by policymakers. Although I will focus on the most recent reform that was carried out during 2015-2018 and the state of play of the system implementation, it should be recognized that the historical memory of the initial implementation of the system (2004-2005) and following revision of the QA mechanisms in 2010 still influence current practices and perceptions of various policy actors. Also, I will try to explain some problematic common themes of QA reform processes that still challenge the system and impact the status quo. I will try to map the existing ecosystem of the quality of higher education and explain the factors that constrain internalization of the QA system reforms and limit its potential to achieve desirable outcomes.

For mapping and identifying the factors influencing and constraining the implementation and internalization of the of the QA reforms, I relied on the findings revealed during the previous Erasmus+ research project on "Implementation of Development and Implementation of the Authorization Mechanism for Higher Education Institutions" (2019)[5]. Additionally, to dig deeper into the heart of the problems, I have consulted and interviewed representatives of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), National Center for Educational Quality Enhancement (NCEQE), students, and experts in specific areas (10 Interviews).

[5] Implementation of Development and Implementation of the Authorization Mechanism for Higher Education Institutions (2019)


Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sport of Georgia
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Introduction

Timeline of the major reforms in QA system in Georgia

Higher education quality assurance system was implemented in Georgia as a part of the higher education system reform aiming at transforming and modernizing the Post-Soviet education system. In this higher education reform process policymakers made the major reference to the European higher education policy - Bologna Process. As the major goal of the Bologna process was to harmonize the higher education systems across Europe, this decision implied not just the transformation of the national higher education system, but also its integration into the European higher education space. Georgia started the initial implementation of the higher education quality assurance system in 2005, along with other Bologna process inspired higher education reforms. The reforms implied increased competitiveness and quality of higher education and its relevance to the labour market needs and the market economy.

While the policymakers throughout the years clearly put emphasis on the Europeanization of the higher education, the implementation of the reforms in terms of making the intended impact has been challenging. Although European aspiration of the policy change was shared and supported by various actors, the implementation process of the higher education QA system was frequently criticized and resisted, especially by the higher education institutions.

Although, Georgia introduced the QA system in 2005 (dubbed Institutional Accreditation), and the system went through two waves of revisions, the national QA agency only managed to align the national system to the requirements of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG, 2015)[6] in 2018 and became the member of European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) in 2019. Despite this achievement the system still faces incoherent implementation of the external QA mechanisms and lack of internalization of the QA processes at the institutional level. In the next section, I will try to explain the major reasons behind this delayed progress and persisting challenges of the system.

Common Errors and Challenges of QA Reforms and Political Context

If we look at the experience of implementation of the QA reforms for the last 15 years, we can see that the initial and subsequent practices still influence every next implementation of the revised system. Besides, some common patterns of limitations can be identified that hampered the policy implementation and resulted in its malfunction.

[6] The ESG is a set of standards and guidelines for internal and external quality assurance in European Higher Education area, which is adopted by the Ministers responsible for higher education.

First of all, to understand the character of QA reform implementations in Georgia, we should look at the political context of the system. I would like to discuss the implementation of the QA system in line with the Bologna process agenda through the lenses of "policy borrowing" process. The term, as used in professional literature (Phillips, 2005), implies that with the lack of knowledge and experience to reform the national systems, policymakers seek for international practices and support for the system change. Critical phases of the policy borrowing process are implementation, internalization and absorption of external features of the policy in the national and institutional contexts, as the outcomes of policy introduction significantly depend on how the actors support or resist the policy change. In the policy change process, some of the key factors are the speed of implementation, knowledge and experience of policymakers and other key actors, available resources, political support and sustainability.

Observe the revisions and implementation of the QA system, we can see that each times, implementation of the system was rushed up, and did not allow the key actors to appropriately prepare themselves or to provide sufficient capacity building activities that could significantly improve the internalization degree of the reforms. For example, development of the initial QA system (institutional accreditation) in 2005 only took one year and launched the process (institutional accreditation of HEIs) from the following year; revision of the institutional accreditation and introduction of the institutional authorization and program accreditation only took 1.5 years and it was launched almost immediately, right after it was approved; the latest revision of the QA system with most ambitious plans to move to the outcome-based and development- oriented quality evaluation system considering the ESG, officially lasted for three years, however the active process of the system revision only lasted for 1.5 years. Considering the multiplicity of the actors that participate in the system, it is extremely challenging to involve, support and build their capacity to ensure consistent implementation of the reform and achievement of the desired outcomes. In addition to this, the first years of implementation of the revised QA mechanisms is associated with extremely high workload and immense amount of resources required from the NCEQE and HEIs, which is also an additional risk for establishing the coherent practices that can be followed afterwards. For example, in 2006 55 HEIs went through the institutional accreditation process (NCEA, 2006). In 2011, 33 institutional authorizations and during 2011-2012 up to 1300 program accreditations were conducted (NCEQE, 2014). In case of the implementation of the most recent QA system, the evaluations were divided by years and the numbers were relatively balanced (27 HEIs and 250 educational programmes were evaluated in 2018); however, considering the increased scope of the standards and the evaluation procedure, the workload was still very intensive. These processes required time, human and financial resources from both QA agency and the HEIs, in terms of preparation and revision of institutional processes, resources, documents and capacity building of the process participants, which were very limited in all three cases of policy change.

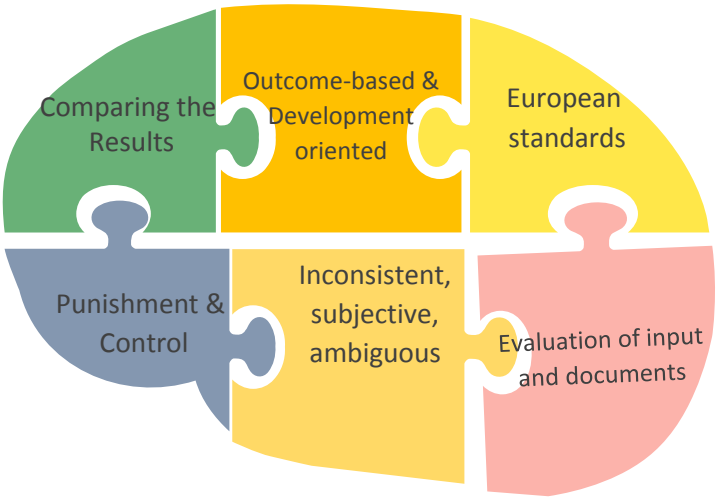
The rushed-up policy implementations also have political implications. For example, in 2005 the initial QA system was introduced by the revolutionary government, with the ambition to eradicate corruption and westernize the governmental structures. Policy makers saw such circumstances as the window of opportunity to make radical changes. Since then we have seen very frequent changes of the Ministers of Education, even when the governing party remains the same. Changes of the Ministers were associated with the changes of the Directors of the QA agency. In several cases the Deputy Ministers were appointed as the directors of the QA agency, which created additional risks of independence and stability of the QA agency. The changes of the leadership results in the inconsistent application of external QA mechanisms, distortion of the system, biased evaluations and decision-making.

Moreover, inconsistent messages from different political actors about the goals and expectations towards the QA reforms, unexpected attempt of legal changes and political pressure on the QA processes have been challenging the system throughout the years. Considering this, it is an additional challenge for the policy leaders to find the window of opportunity for the policy change and to sustain its development and implementation. Because of the lack of consensus and vision regarding the development of higher education system at the national level, policy leaders have used the international commitments (Bologna Process, Association Agreement commitments) as a leverage to develop the system and protect it from different political interventions. However, the unstable political context and frequent changes of the leadership make the policy change and implementation more fragmented and constrains sustainable development of the system.

Thus, the independence of the QA agency from the political influence remains one of the key issues that needs to be solved in order to increase the transparency, impartiality and coherence of the QA system[7].

What is Our Knowledge and Understanding about the QA System?

The above-mentioned factors such as accelerated tempo of processes, limited resources, lack of knowledge and experience and complicated political context resulted in misinterpretations and malfunction of the QA mechanisms, caused resistance from various actors and production some of the unintended practices and consequences. On one hand, throughout the years, the policy participants gained meaningful knowledge and experience in the QA field, but also acquired and established malfunctioning practices and a misunderstanding of the system. The latter has been challenging for every subsequent reform of the QA system implementation.



[7] Independence of the QA agency is the only area of the ESG (3.3) that was evaluated as partially compliant by the ENQA review team (2019). https://enqa.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/External-Review-Report-NCEQE-Final.pdf

We should not forget about the wild higher education landscape in 2004, when the system suffered from corruption and up to 300 HEIs were operating in the country, most of them with questionable reputation. Thus, the first initial introduction of the QA system had a role of a "gatekeeper" for the system. During the 2006-2010, even the initial introduction of institutional accreditation with basic quality standards reduced the number of HEIs from 300 to 64 (NCEQE, 2018). The standards of the institutional accreditation focused on assessing the input and resources of the HEI, such as number of teaching staff with scientific degree, size and condition of the teaching facility, number of computers and textbooks per number of students. The introduction of the institutional accreditation resulted in the drastic reduction of the number of HEIs, this process was perceived as a rigid mechanism of control rather than means to education quality enhancement. After 5 years from implementation of the institutional accreditation with quantitative standards, the revised QA system introduced separate procedures for institutional and program evaluations, and the standards allowed more qualitative evaluation; however, their implementation in a consistent manner was challenging. The main critics of the system underscored that the standards and procedures still focused on evaluating the inputs and the system became oriented on meeting the formal requirements spelled out in the QA standards. The QA standards, to their end, were general and prone to inconsistent interpretation, especially because of the fact that the experts and decision-makers only had very little experience in working with the qualitative standards, if at all.

At the institutional level, HEIs were mostly driven to produce the documents to meet the formal requirements of the QA standards. Thus, the standards were not internalized in the institutional and academic processes and the QA system was not seen as an inward-looking improvement mechanism for the HEIs.

The most recent revision of the QA system clearly stated that it aimed to make a shift from input to **outcome-based and development-oriented QA mechanisms and approaches** that could **support improvement of performance of the HEI**s, and, at the same time, to **make the system compliable with the ESG.** The NCEQE made an extensive effort to communicate these purposes with the stakeholders, however, this process was still challenging and influenced by previous practices and skepticism from various actors.

Did the system become outcome-based?

First of all, the institutional and program evaluations using the new standards and procedures revealed the status quo, where the majority of HEIs could not measure outcomes. Instead, they could only, again, revise the internal regulations and develop new documents for the external evaluations. However, the positive factor was that participation of the institutional actors in this process was significantly increased compared to previous practices, which is a step forward to the development of the quality culture.

The problem with demonstrating the outcomes was twofold. First, the institutions have not been collecting and analyzing the data throughout the years, and, second, they did not have sufficient knowledge and capacity to develop benchmarks, collect and analyze the data and use them for decision making. Both of these issues still remain, as majority of the institutions have not been following the internal documents and processes, including the strategic plans that they developed for the external evaluations, and their capacity has not been improved in this area. As the HEIs could not provide the outcomes, the experts still had to rely on the documents, resources and future plans of the institutions. It was assumed that the outcomes should have been evaluated during the follow-up evaluations, however, this is not the case so far, as the HEIs it will be difficult for the HEIs to present the results during the follow up evaluations too. As after two years of the implementation of the revised QA system stakeholders see that the evaluation is still based on "papers" and resources, it creates frustration towards the system.

What does it mean to implement "European Standards"?

While the policymakers emphasized the implementation of the European Standards and Guidelines in the national QA system as a major goal of the reform, the expectations towards this reform diverted from the context and was interpreted as receiving the conditions and quality of higher education that we have seen in western European countries. It was also expected that the evaluation process would have been much stricter and resulted in reduction of many HEIs. However, the European Standards and Guidelines defines the principles and guidelines of how the quality assurance system should function in the HEIs, how the independent QA agency should evaluate the HEIs, and what are the organizational arrangements that the QA agency has in place to ensure transparent and trustworthy implementation of external QA mechanisms. Thus, ESG gives a general guideline on how the QA system should function at institutional and national levels to assume that the higher education degrees awarded in the country are quality assured and recognized by the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) member countries. As for the extent to which the implementation of those principles supports the enhancement of the educational quality, it highly depends on the availability and allocation of financial resources, capacity of human resources and leadership, and the organizational arrangements of an individual HEI. Moreover, one of the major features of the revised QA mechanisms is its flexible evaluation system (four-level compliance scheme) that aims to allow institutions develop their performance over time.

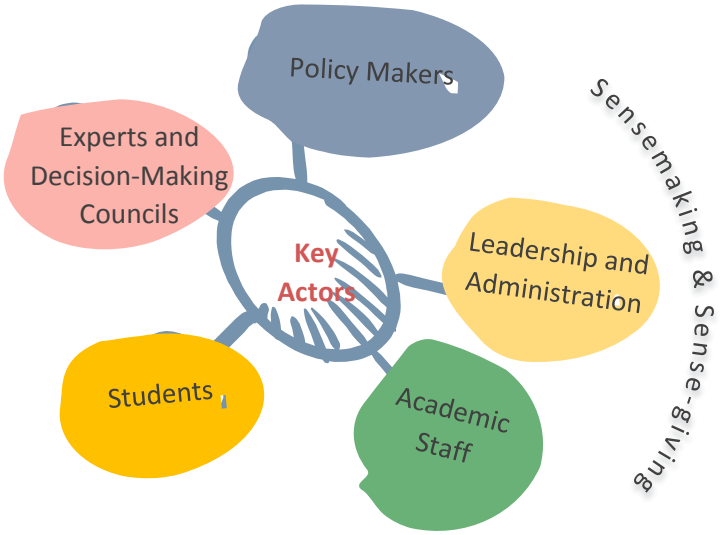
Should we compare the external quality evaluation results of different HEIs?

At the end of the first year of implementation of the revised authorization mechanism, the major discussion and criticism of the system was related to comparing the compliance levels of different HEIs in different standards, which at a glance, provided an illogical picture. For example, large research-intensive universities being evaluated with lower compliance levels compared to small teaching universities according to the standard on research activities and questioning the validity of the evaluation system. The pressure on the evaluation results increased as the universities started to implicitly or explicitly competing with one another. The major reason behind this "illogical" outcomes is the major principle of the quality assurance defined in the ESG – **Fitness to the Purpose**. This implies that each institution is evaluated against the QA standards based on their mission and declared scope of educational and research activities. This principle respects and encourages diversity of higher educational offerings. Thus, using the evaluation results for comparing the HEIs with one another is not relevant. Instead, HEIs that were viewing the QA system as a means for self-reflection and improvement took advantage from this process to leverage various institutional changes and improved teaching, learning and research experience of students and staff.

It should be emphasized that it was not only HEIs or wider public that had difficulty to comprehend the Fitness-to-Purpose principle of the QA, but it was also a difficult task for the experts and the decision-making council members, which was reflected in the evaluation and decision-making processes.

Understanding and making sense of the policy changes by the key actors, clarifying the challenges and communicating accurately the expectations have a critical importance for its successful implementation.

Enhancement of Educational Quality and the Role of Key Actors



While talking about the enhancement of quality of higher education, we should recognize that the QA system is just one of the mechanisms that intends to establish practice of continuous evaluation and improvement of resources, processes and outcomes. The standards of accreditation and authorization give more detailed context and guidelines of what the major arrangements and resources are that the HEIs should have in place to foster implementation and continuous improvement of teaching, learning and research activities. Thus, the evaluation system is important but not a sufficient factor for quality improvement. For the implementation and internalization of the requirements defined in the QA standards, especially, when they are built on the imported policies, it is critical that all actors have a good understanding and competences to navigate in the system and translate them into practice.

This issue can be well described by the 'Organized Sensemaking Theory (Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005), that takes a retrospective look at how people in a social context of other actors engage and make sense of the ongoing and changing circumstances. In this process, leaders play a critical role in giving meaning to the new reality, influencing the sensemaking process and changing people's behavior.

The role of sensemaking chain in the policy change

Although, the revision of the QA system was a participatory process and stakeholders were informed and involved in the major discussions of the policy change, it was still driven policymakers. However, to make the policy change impactful, policymakers should make the best possible effort to establish an efficient chain of "sensemaking", more actively engage the stakeholders and the HEI leaderships in the policy development process, communicate clear messages and expectations with them. On the other of the HEIs, who should manage to involve all the stakeholders in the policy change and internalization process within the institutions. As the improvement of academic activities are the major focus of the higher education QA reform, the particular attention should be paid to how the academic staff participate, make sense and translate the changes into improvement of teaching and research. In this process it is also essential that the roles of the key actors are clearly defined and each of them are equipped with the necessary competences to fulfill their roles.

The major role of implementing the QA mechanisms at the institutional level) is given to the administrative and support staff of the QA units at the HEIs (by the Law on Higher Education (2005) and historically too). This arrangement, instead of fostering the internalization of the QA process within the institution, limits

the participation of wider academic community and diminishes sense of ownership of quality enhancement. For example, introduction of the program accreditation and the national qualifications framework in 2010-2011 required to fundamentally redesign educational programs. Because of the lack experience in programme development, lack of understanding of the new requirements and extremely tight timeframe to adjust educational programmes, the process at the institutional level was mainly carried out by the QA staff. In this process, they formally adjust the programmes to the new requirements with very limited or no participation of the academic staff and even the program heads. Thus, the academic staff with limited or no prior experience of using the teaching and assessment methodologies indicated on the papers, could not understand and follow the substantial sections of the programs or the syllabi of their courses; did not consider the formulations of the learning outcomes spelled out in the programmes, as meaningful. This created a gap between what was written in the programmes and what was implemented in practice. Although in recent years, HEIs are trying to provide training on those issues for academic staff, this damaging practice still persists and takes even more effort to change the already established practices and mindset.

Thus, the QA mechanisms can only support enhancement of the educational quality, if the key stakeholders within the institution have a good understanding of the policy change and capacity to internalize it into regular practice. For the internalization of the QA system it is essential that this function is delegated and distributed to all units and the key actors have the full ownership on implementation and improvement of teaching, research or administrative activities.

It should be emphasized that the HEI where the leaderships were actively involved in the policy implementation and engaged broader academic community in the processes reported significantly higher satisfaction towards the new QA policy and saw the self-evaluation process against the new QA standards as a **learning experience** and an impulse for improvement. At the same time, the institutions that enjoyed the process and found it useful are more likely to proceed with the implementation of newly developed processes and mechanisms and show the outcomes for the following evaluations.

Do the regulations (still) support quality enhancement?

In the process of internalization of the Bologna-inspired higher education policies, it is particularly important to pay attention to how they are understood, translated and incorporated in the national and institutional regulations. The Bologna process policy documents give general framework and principles about the system, while it is up to the countries to adjust them to the national systems. Usually, because of the lack of knowledge about the Bologna mechanisms, they are translated and implemented in a very rigid form (e.g. QA standards, National Qualifications Framework, European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System, etc). We see the similar cases at the institutions too, when they develop the internal regulations, arguing that they are required by the QA agency, but are actually the product of misinterpretation of the QA regulations. Moreover, in some cases, the international guidelines or national regulations change over time, but the outdated norms remain in the institutional documents and imped certain processes. The outdated and inconsistent regulations are also problematic for the legal acts (e.g. Law on higher education). Thus, it is critical that at all levels of the policy implementation the actors review the regulations with the fresh eye and be proactive to initiate the changes in the regulations that no longer serve its purpose and create redundant bureaucracy or obstacles. Bottom-up initiatives and active participation of HEIs in shaping the system is essential. The coalition platforms established by the HEIs independently from the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sport (MoESCS) can be a powerful

mechanism for advocating the policy change and shaping the policy agenda if they are led and organized efficiently.

Role of students in quality enhancement

Students are at the heart of the higher education policies in EHEA, which put the major emphasis on student centeredness, students' preparation for sustainable employment, for active citizenship and for supporting their personal growth (Council of Europe, 2007). However, many of the countries including Georgia, still struggle to perpetuate the concept of student centeredness in the teaching, learning and research. Despite the established student self-governances or various student initiative groups, their participation and actual influence on decision-making and improvement of educational quality is very limited. As the student participation is still undermined, it is essential that the higher education system encourages and supports student engagement and consideration of students' interests in the decision-making process at the national and institutional level. It is critical that the student groups and unions participating in the policy-making process prioritize and represent interests of all students to have access to the quality of higher education and remain free from the influence of certain political parties.

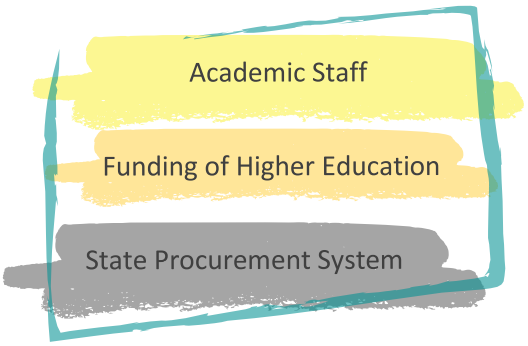
Besides, one of the efficient mechanisms to regularly monitor the educational quality and consider the students' interests is the introduction of the regular national student surveys. This tool can provide the QA agency, other policy-making bodies and the general public with meaningful information about the performance of HEIs and give a signal on certain problems that need to be addressed by relevant institutions.

Role of the QA experts and the decision-making councils

The peer review experts and the decision-making council members play a key role in establishing the coherent practice of quality evaluation and trust towards the system. Thus, their understanding and sense-making about the QA policy change and implementation is critical. Consistency of the evaluation results defined by the experts and the decisions made by the accreditation and authorization councils is a problematic issue for the revised system. From the previous evaluations we could observe that the defined compliance levels by experts or the council members frequently do not follow the definitions of each compliance level. For example, institutions that could not provide the evidences and outcomes in certain areas are evaluated as fully compliant. Moreover, in number of cases, the councils change the compliance levels defined by experts, but in majority of cases the argumentation for the changes were biased and the reference was not made on instructions defined by regulations. To address the issue of the inconsistent evaluation results, on one hand, experts and council members should continually review the practices and agree on the principles to follow in future. On the other hand, in this process it is also essential that both experts and decision-making council members strictly follow the code of ethics, especially to be impartial in the evaluation and decision-making process, free from personal interests or political pressures, and in such cases declare about the conflict of interest.

System Level Factors Impacting the Implementation of QA Mechanisms and Quality of Education

While the leadership and administration of the HEIs play an important role in internalization and sensemaking of the new policies, they are also responsible for efficient allocation and management of the available resources. In this process, they highly depend (especially the public HEIs) on the external factors that limit or support the capacity of their decisions.



Academic Staff

Academic staff are undoubtably the key actors of the QA policy who contribute to the enhancement of academic quality in teaching and research. However, the regulations related to the academic staff and their working conditions are quite a challenging factor for the higher education system. It is well-known that, mostly, because of the socio-economic factors, low salaries and short-term contracts of the academic staff, their effort in teaching and research is segregated in number of HEIs. In many cases, academic staff do not have sufficient time and support to carry out research activities and develop professionally.

This issue requires significant system level changes, including revision of law on higher education, labour code and reconsideration of financial budgeting. The regulations related to selection and promotion procedures, and permanent contracts of the academic staff should be modified in a way that supports renewal and engagement of the most competent and younger peers in the academic profession based on the transparent and demanding criteria. At the same time reconsidering the financial planning to improve the working conditions of the academic staff is essential. Additionally, provision of the programs or development of the academic excellence centers that support updating the research and teaching skills (as needed) for academic staff can significantly improve the academic and research capacity of the country.

Regarding scarcity of academic staff in relation to the 64 authorized HEIs in the country, the introduction of the affiliation mechanism in the QA standards attempted to monitor the workload of the academic staff and avoid their falsified indication by HEIs. However, this mechanism is not sufficient to address this issue. First of all, the database itself is not regularly updated by the HEIs and the NCEQE cannot regularly monitor the workload, as the system lacks the features to automatically signal the problematic cases. Thus, updating the system with advanced features is needed. Secondly, additional regulation that specifies quantitative requirements of academic staff that should be involved in the educational programs or the maximum number of institutions where one person can hold academic or teaching position should be considered.

Funding of Higher Education

Implementation of the QA standards and development of the educational quality heavily depends on the available financial resources and their efficient and purposeful allocation. The existing funding model and the allocation of the state budget on higher education (0.4% of the GDP in 2019) constrains the development of the higher education system. The major funding source for the HEIs is the tuition fee (state grants and the households), and the maximum tuition fee that the public HEIs can define is the 2250

₾[8] regardless of the actual costs of implementation of educational programmes in different fields. Thus, the budget of the HEIs heavily depend on the number student enrollment that threatens the quality of teaching and learning.

One of the most prominent solutions that the HEIs apply for addressing the scarcity of financial resources is internationalization of the student body. However, in the recent years, we have seen disproportionate growth of the international students towards the resources (e.g. academic staff with English language competences, international student support services) that the HEIs can provide to ensure the quality of implementation of the educational programmes.

With the existing funding mechanisms, it is challenging for the HEIs to implement and develop educational quality and environment as the financial capacity to invest in the development of facilities, labs, information technologies, research activities, to provide sufficient amount of expendable supplies and materials used in the teaching process, to improve the remuneration policies and provision of intensive capacity building activities for academic and administrative staff is very limited.

One of the acute issues that has remained problematic over years is a very low participation of students with special educational needs in higher education. HEIs argue that provision of necessary arrangements requires substantial financial resources, which cannot be solved without a systemic support from the government.

Revision of the funding model is a critical issue for the development and recovery of the entire higher education system. The HEIs should be able to define the tuition fees based on the estimation of the program implementation costs. While this can increase the tuition fee of certain educational programmes, it is essential that the system provides diversified mechanisms for student financial aid (state grants (merit and need based), institutional scholarships, private sector scholarships, preferential and contingency student loans). Moreover, state should provide the funding for the priority fields and areas of higher education and incorporate performance-based components in funding model.

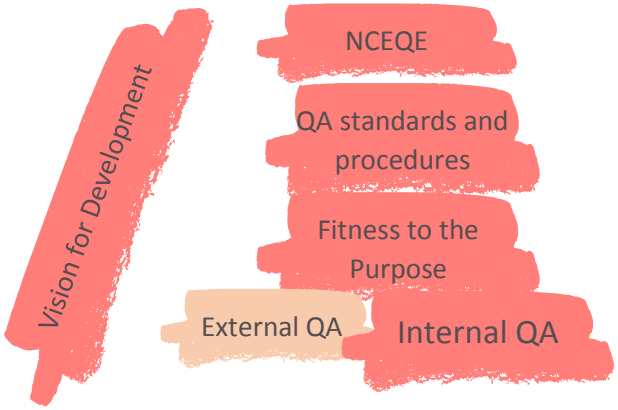
For the diversification of the funding sources, collaboration with private sector is essential; however, to encourage engagement of the private sector in this process, it is essential to provide various incentives for them, such as opportunity for preferential taxation.

State Procurement System

The existing state procurement regulations requiring from the public HEIs to carry out the procurements through the state tender (for the items of the same category with the cost over 5000 ₾) creates additional obstacle for HEIs to be more flexible in providing necessary supplies and services, and at the same time to ensure their quality. Although transparency of the procurement procedures is essential, provision of more flexibility in the procurement process is critical not to impede implementation of HEIs academic and research activities. The possible solution to this problem can be making an exception from the tender procurement procedure for the type of items and services (high performance computers used for academic and research purposes, publishing, international accreditation, etc.) that are directly related to the implementation of the academic and scientific processes. Another option could be making an exemption from the tender if the procurement is made from the HEI's own income. However, to ensure the transparency of the procurement procedures, the HEIs should still be accountable to upload the procurement documents in the state procurement system.

[8] Regardless of the economic and technological developments, this fixed amount of the tuition fee remains the same over 10 years, which is a result of the scarcity of state budget allocated for higher education.

Proposals and Recommendations for Re-visioning Development of the QA system



The NCEQE and other actors of the QA system have gained significant knowledge and experience in the improvement and implementation of the QA policies in higher education. In this regard, it will be helpful and more organic for the system if the major driving force and reference point for further development of the system shifts from the international commitments and international practices to the critical analysis of what has worked and what has failed in this system. Also, transferring the focus of the policy change from internationalization to internalization can better promote enhancement of the higher education quality at Georgian HEIs.

As the quality is not a fixed concept and QA system is built on the fitness to the purpose principle, it is natural that the system itself should be regularly reviewed and adjusted to the new reality. At the same time, for the sustainability of the system development it is essential that the key actors (including the political actors) agree on the vision and purpose of the policy change and reach the consensus on what needs to be done to reach the intended outcomes.

The revision of the system should evaluate, rethink and reconsider the aspects of the QA standards or the evaluation procedures that no longer serve the new vision and filter the system from the sediments that create obstacles for the quality enhancement.

Optimization of the external QA mechanisms and advancing the role of internal quality assurance can better promote the improvement of the internal processes at the HEIs and the quality of teaching and learning.

In addition to this, the actors of policy implementation should comprehensively review related national or institutional regulations and be proactive to initiate the changes in the regulations that no longer serve its purpose and create redundant bureaucracy or obstacles.

The coalition platforms established by the HEIs independently from the MoESCS can be a powerful mechanism for advocating the policy change and shaping the policy agenda if they are led and organized efficiently.

Understanding and making sense of the policy changes by the key actors, clarifying the challenges and communicating accurately the expectations have a critical importance for its successful implementation. Thus, to make the policy change impactful, policymakers should make the best possible effort to establish an efficient chain of “sensemaking”, more actively engage the stakeholders and the HEI leaderships in the policy development process, communicate clear messages and expectations with them.

To its end, for the internalization of the QA system, it is essential that the key actors at the HEIs have a good understanding of the policy change and capacity to translate it into practice, the internal quality assurance function is delegated and distributed to all units and the key actors have the full ownership on implementation and improvement of teaching, research or administrative activities.

To actually transform the system to the outcome-based and development-oriented evaluation it is essential that the institutions track their own data and progress, analyze and use if for further improvement.

Additional guidance should be provided for experts and the council members regarding the outcome-based evaluation and definitions of the compliance level to promote coherent practice of evaluation and decision making. At the same time, it is essential that the experts and decision-making council members strictly follow the code of ethics, especially to be impartial in the evaluation and decision-making process, free from personal interests or political pressures, and in such cases declare about the conflict of interest.

The QA agency should become fully independent from the state or the political influences. Changing its legal form from the legal entity of the public law with the nonentrepreneurial non-commercial legal entity should be considered. The appointment and selection of the director of the agency and the members of the decision-making councils should be managed by the QA agency itself. The mandate of selection and appointment of the director of the agency and the members of the decision-making councils under the QA agency itself. These mandates can be transferred from the MoESCS and the Prime Minister to the collegial body inside the NCEQE – the coordinating council[9]. However, it is essential that the selection of the members of the coordinating council is also based on the clear and transparent criteria and ensures representation of all key stakeholders.

The system should encourage and support student engagement and consideration of students' interests in the decision-making process at the national and institutional level. It is critical that the student groups and unions participating in the policy-making process prioritize and represent interests of all students to have access to the quality of higher education and remain free from the influence of certain political parties.

Establishment of the national student survey this can provide the QA agency, other policy-making bodies and the general public with meaningful information about the performance of HEIs and give a signal on certain problems that need to be addressed by relevant institutions.

System level changes aiming at renewal and engagement of the most competent and younger peers in the academic profession improve the working conditions of the academic staff and provision of professional development programmes support updating the research and teaching skills (as needed) for academic staff is critical improve the academic and research capacity of the country.

To track the data on academic staff affiliation, updating the system with advanced features is needed. Additional regulation that specifies quantitative requirements of academic staff that should be involved in the educational programs or the maximum number of institutions where one person can hold academic or teaching position should be considered.

Higher education funding model should allow institutions to define the tuition fees based on the estimation of the program implementation costs. The system should provide diversified mechanisms for student financial aid (state grants (merit and need based), institutional scholarships, private sector scholarships, preferential and contingency student loans). Moreover, state should provide the funding for the priority fields and areas of higher education and incorporate performance-based components in funding model.

[9] Appointment of the decision-making councils by the prime minister has been justified as a mean of higher legitimacy and independence of the decision-making process, however over the years we have seen that the combination of selection and appointment of the council members by the MoESCS and prime minister, respectively, implies lack of transparency and objectivity of those processes and negatively impacts reputation of the QA system.

For the diversification of the funding sources, engagement of the private sector should be encouraged by provide various incentives for them, such as opportunity for preferential taxation.

The state procurement regulations should allow exemptions from the tender procurement procedure for HEIs for the type of items and services that are directly related to the implementation of the academic and scientific processes. Another option could be making an exemption from the tender if the procurement is made from the HEI's own income. However, to ensure the transparency of the procurement procedures, the HEIs should still be accountable to upload the procurement documents in the state procurement system.

As mentioned above, the policy development should reflect the new realities, challenges and opportunities in the system. In response to the global pandemic of the Covid-19, we have seen the importance and usefulness of developing the distance learning opportunities in the country. Lack of trust towards quality of the distance learning has been a major argument against the development and recognition of the distance learning programs in the country. However, temporary experience of implementation of the remote mode of teaching process and international practices prove that the provision of the quality distance learning opportunities is possible and is necessary. Thus, policymakers should develop the legal base that allows implementation and recognition of the distance learning, not just under the emergency condition of the global pandemic but in general.

In general, and especially for policy planning in higher education QA, defining the key indicators, tracking, systematizing and analyzing the data using the central information management system is critical for monitoring the policy implementation and planning further changes.

I hope that this policy brief will help broader audience and especially the key actors to make sense of the higher education quality assurance system and the related policy changes.

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