

The Role of Internationalization for Quality Assurance in Higher Education Systems: The Case of Georgia

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Introduction by the Special Editor

The quality of higher education and compliance with quality assurance mechanisms given in the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ESG) of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) have been a hot topic of discussion for many years and pose substantial challenges for a number of the Bologna participant states. This is especially true for the South Caucasus countries that joined the Bologna Process at the Bergen Ministerial Conference in 2005. Despite the numerous reforms that aimed to advance the quality of higher education, such as the introduction of internal and external quality assurance mechanisms and the establishment of national quality assurance offices, there still are certain areas that need particular attention and improvements.

This issue of the Caucasus Analytical Digest addresses this topic and features three papers: two papers discuss the Georgian higher education system, and the third paper focuses on the Armenian experience. The case of Azerbaijan is not discussed in this issue, since a separate issue in 2019 will be dedicated to higher education in Azerbaijan.

In this issue, the first article by Mariam Amashukeli discusses the internationalization of higher education and argues that it can serve as both a mechanism of quality assurance and a strong instrument for boosting the quality of education in Georgia. The second article by Diana Lezhava reviews the practices of external quality assurance in Georgia and argues that the autonomy of the national quality assurance agency and independence of the university licensing processes (institutional authorization and programme accreditation) from the state is crucial for improving the overall performance of universities. The third article by Edith Soghomonyan and Gohar Hovhannisyanyan tackles the underrepresentation of student bodies in the quality assurance system in Armenia and argues that students' lack of motivation and awareness prevents them from full participation in the process of quality assurance at higher education institutions.

Diana Lezhava, Center for Social Sciences

The Role of Internationalization for Quality Assurance in Higher Education Systems: The Case of Georgia

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Abstract

Internationalization and quality assurance in higher education systems are strongly interrelated dimensions. Overall, internationalization of higher education has a strong positive undercurrent, as it is expected to serve teaching, learning and research quality enhancement, technological innovation, economic development and social well-being. Thus, internationalization should not be understood as an ultimate objective in itself but as a means to enhance higher education quality at large. Considering that the Georgian higher education system still encounters significant challenges in the provision of high-quality academic services (even after 13 years since joining the Bologna process), the present paper reflects on the internationalization policies and practices in Georgian higher education.

Introduction

Internationalization of higher education (IHE) envisages integrating international, intercultural and global dimensions in national higher education policy (Knight 2008). Over the years, its main focus was on increas-

ing the physical international mobility between universities. However, since the Mobility Strategy 2020 (EHEA 2012) was amended in 2012, fostering "comprehensive internationalization" (Hudzik 2011) became one of the main targets of the European Higher Education

Area (EHEA). According to this concept, internationalization is defined as a shared and equally recognized value for the administration of higher education institutions (HEIs), as well as for students and faculties. This value should be integrated into teaching, research and all services provided at universities. IHE is an “institutional imperative” (ibid. p. 7) and a “response” to globalization that is extremely necessary for the higher education system to meet the challenges of globalized economy and communications having direct impact on the daily lives of individuals (Hudzik 2011). Today, international higher education represents a very wide range of forms, directions and approaches. International recruitment of students, training of graduates for employment on the global market, franchising of universities and academic programmes, export of products of national education, attraction of international talent and online learning have become important components of IHE over the last ten years (de Wit et al 2015).

There are two broad categories of IHE discussed at the international scale: internationalization abroad and internationalization at home. The main components of internationalization abroad are international credit/staff/degree mobility and transnational education (university branches/overseas campuses, franchise of academic programmes, virtual/e-mobility of programmes), whereas internationalization at home is more focused on incorporating global perspective into national education goals, content, teaching methods and assessment systems. Thus, internationalization of the national curriculum makes international education available for all students instead of only those benefitting from physical mobility (de Wit et al 2015, pp. 41–58).

In the context of recent developments worldwide, IHE is discussed in strongly positive correlation with increasing quality of academic programmes and research, contributing to economic growth and enhancing the prestige of HEIs (Martin & Parikh 2017, p. 61). According to the 4th Global Survey on Internationalization of Higher Education, the improved quality of teaching and learning is the top ranked benefit, especially across higher education institutions in Europe and the Middle East (Egron-Polak & Hudson 2014, p. 9). For the drivers of internationalization, the management and international office of HEIs are seen as the most important internal factors for internationalization, whereas the national/regional policies are ranked as the top external drivers by the European HEIs (ibid., p. 9).

Overview of IHE in Georgia

In retrospect, on a large scale, IHE in Georgia started in 2005 when the state joined the Bologna Process at the Bergen Summit and later became a member of EHEA.

Internationalization of higher education gained a new political-economic perspective after signing the EU-Georgia Association Agreement in 2014 as it envisages improvement of higher education quality and its compatibility with the EU higher education modernization agenda. The importance of IHE is also reflected in the Law of Georgia on Higher Education, Socio-Economic Development Strategy 2020 and the Education and Science Strategic Development Document 2017–2021. The above-mentioned documents clearly identify the important role of education in the success of Georgia’s European integration process, the establishment of democratic values and the accumulation of competitive human capital/workforce.

I would like to specifically emphasize the strategic document 2017–2021 and its following action plan, which consider and discuss internationalization of Georgian HEIs in line with enhancing the overall educational quality (Strategy of Education and Science of Georgia 2017–2021, p. 36). It will not be an exaggeration to say that IHE is officially regulated at the national level for the first time by this strategic document. The important role of renewed national authorization and programme accreditation standards for higher education institutions should also be mentioned, as they are currently the actual (external) enforcement mechanisms for IHE in Georgia (this point will be discussed more thoroughly below). In turn, both standards are updated in accordance with the guidelines for the external quality assurance in EHEA in frames of the Quality Assurance Reform for Georgian Higher Education launched in 2015. The reform envisaged a number of legal amendments related to the national authorization and accreditation standards as well as procedures issued by the Georgian Ministry of Education and Science.

The new wave of national authorization and accreditation for HEIs began in the spring of 2018. Currently, 30 universities and 29 teaching universities and colleges in total (both public and private), operating in Georgia, are obliged to participate in the above-mentioned procedures. These evaluations are mandatory for all HEIs to be recognized by the state and gain eligibility for implementing educational activities (National Center for Educational Quality Enhancement).

It is important to mention that the new authorization document envisages elaboration of internationalization policy, mechanisms and assessment of their effectiveness as one of the mandatory criteria/indicators for the evaluation of the organizational structure and management of HEIs. This particular sub-standard addresses the international mobility of students and staff (inbound, outbound), plans for attracting international students/staff, joint degree programmes, etc. (Authorization Standards

for Higher Education Institutions, p. 2). Internationalization of research is another sub-standard for evaluating Georgian HEIs. Implementing joint research projects and PhD programmes, practising institutional cooperation with EU-based universities and international research organizations, etc., are defined as the assessment criteria for the above-mentioned sub-standard (ibid, p. 13). Therefore, the rather detailed authorization standards made the Georgian HEIs somewhat “obliged” to meet the requirements through developing internal policies for internationalization and reflect on its importance for enhancing the education overall quality.

The internationalization component of national accreditation standards is mainly related to internationalization in the home category. For instance, it evaluates the courses of academic programmes based on syllabi. According to the evaluation criteria, teaching literature/readings listed in syllabi should be in compliance with the modern scientific discussions and research updates in the particular field(s). Thus, the overall curriculum of the academic programme should meet these requirements (Accreditation Standards for Higher Education Programs, pp. 4–5). Additionally, several sub-standards envisage the evaluation of teaching practice of the academic/invited staff by their [Georgian or foreign] peers (if necessary), aiming to enhance the teaching quality (ibid, p. 18) and, if applicable, even the assessment of the internationalization strategies for the academic programmes (ibid, p. 1). However, these two aims can be articulated as more supportive (or encouraging) evaluation criteria rather than mandatory requirements that the Georgian HEIs should meet for programme accreditation.

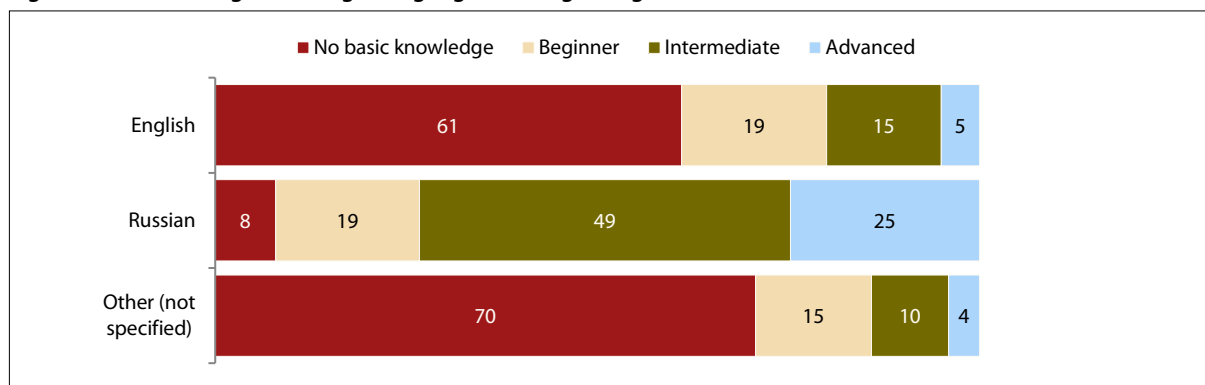
In view of the above considerations, we can assume that the new authorization-accreditation standards as external quality assurance mechanisms made internationalization an integral part and “institutional imperative” (Hudzik, 2011). This development should be acknowledged as an important step forward with respect to the internationalization of the Georgian higher education system. The country’s progress is reflected in the Bologna Process Implementation Report 2018, as well. In 2015, Georgia was positioned with the countries not having national internationalization strategies and with zero percentage of higher education institutions having their internal internationalization policies (The European Higher Education Area in 2015: Bologna Process Implementation Report, pp. 211–216). Today, Georgia is ranked among the countries with national strategies for internationalization of higher education and with a 1–25% estimated percentage of higher education institutions that have adopted internationalization policies (The European Higher Education Area in 2018: Bolo-

gna Process Implementation Report, pp. 242–244). This percentage is expected to be much higher now as the reference year for the data collection for the Bologna Process report 2018 is the first half of 2017 (ibid., pp. 19–20), whereas the national authorization requiring the Georgian HEIs to have the internationalization policies began only in spring 2018.

Having greater opportunities for students/academic staff mobility is one of the key achievements of Georgia with respect to internationalization. This achievement was made possible by the introduction of the ECTS system and three-tier higher education in the Georgian national education system. International mobility is mostly implemented with the financial support of framework programmes such as Erasmus+, DAAD, and the International Education Center (IEC) as well as through bilateral partnerships between Georgian and foreign universities (Lezhava & Amashukeli, 2016, p. 160). For instance, more than 500 applicants received financial support from the IEC in 2014–2017 (Annual report 2017), which provides state scholarships for young professionals to earn their academic degrees internationally. In addition, according to the National Statistics office of Georgia, the overall number of outbound students reached 582 in 2017–2018 (Statistics for Higher Education 2018).

However, as discussed in the study of Lezhava and Amashukeli (2016, pp. 142–163), there are a number of challenges that Georgian universities face in their way to internationalization. One of the main obstacles is insufficient knowledge of English among the academic staff (especially older generations) and students. This is a hindering factor for developing modern academic programmes, updating existing study courses or developing solid English language academic programmes to attract international students and academic staff from European countries/universities (ibid., pp. 142–143). If we look at the latest Georgian household survey results, it is obvious that the majority of the population feels more comfortable with the Russian language: in total, 74% of the respondents indicate intermediate and advanced knowledge of Russian, whereas only 20% of them indicate intermediate and advanced knowledge of the English language (See Figure 1 overleaf). Within the 18–35 yea age category, the percentage of the population with intermediate and advanced knowledge of English is the highest (42%) compared to their older (36+ years) counterparts (Caucasus Barometer 2017).

Considering that the National Strategy for Education and Science 2017–2021 and its following action plan 2017–2018 envisage the introduction of supportive programmes for the professional development of academic staff and for attracting new generation of aca-

Figure 1: Knowledge of Foreign Languages [among Georgians] (%)

N=2379; source: Caucasus Barometer 2017 Georgia (CRRC)

demics at the Georgian HEIs (Education and Science Strategic Development Document 2017–2021, p. 65), hopefully, the problem of English proficiency will be addressed as well.

Conclusion

After this brief review of the current situation of IHE in Georgia, we would like to add that strengthening the focus on the policy and practice of internationalization at home (IaH) (by both the state and the HEIs) would be extremely useful for increasing the overall quality of higher education services at the national level. However, international mobility has played a significant role here in the early 2000s. IaH emerged as a response to the leading focus on mobility, benefiting only a small number of students. Thus, it is important to ensure that the international dimension is present at the domestic level and equally available for all students (de Wit, et al., 2015, pp. 49–52).

As the term [IaH] itself is quite complex, it is not always clear and understandable how university management and/or faculty members should develop and implement internationalized curricula at HEIs (Green and Whitsed 2015, cited in de Wit et al. 2015, p. 50). As

already mentioned, the main idea of IaH is “the incorporation of international, intercultural and/or global dimensions into the content of the curriculum as well as the learning outcomes, assessment tasks, teaching methods and support services of a program of study” (Leask 2015, p. 9, cited in de Wit et al. 2015, pp. 50). To foster the IaH dimension at large, there are various “tools” available for HEIs, such as “comparative international literature, guest lectures by speakers from local cultural groups or international companies, guest lecturers of international partner universities, international case studies and practice or, increasingly, digital learning and on-line collaboration. Indeed, technology-based solutions can ensure equal access to internationalization opportunities for all students” (Beelen and Jones 2015, cited in de Wit et al. 2015, pp. 50–51). Therefore, as a starting point, it would be highly beneficial for the overall Georgian higher education system to put more focus on the IaH dimension in Education and Science Strategic Development Document 2017–2021 and its following action plans and to make the evaluation criteria of the IaH component bolder in the national authorization/accreditation standards.

About the Author

Mariam Amashukeli is a PhD student of Sociology at the Tbilisi State University. Since 2012, Ms Amashukeli has been an affiliated researcher at the Center for Social Sciences (CSS). Her research interest is mostly focused on higher education studies (tertiary education and labour market, modern human capital development, knowledge economy, knowledge-based society). During the last six years, she has participated in more than 12 research projects funded by international and local donor organizations and has authored/co-authored up to 10 publications.

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