

## WORKING PAPERS

# TRANSFORMATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM OF GEORGIA: ACHIEVEMENTS AND CHALLENGES

Nana Akhalaia

*Gori State Teaching University*  
53, Chavchavadze str., 1400, Gori, Georgia  
akhalaia.nana@gmail.com

&

Rusudan Kutateladze

*Georgian Technical University*  
77, Kostava str., 0175, Tbilisi, Georgia  
r.kutateladze@gtu.ge

### Abstract

In recent years education and science has achieved a significant progress in Georgia. The country has implemented a number of reforms aiming at transforming the post-Soviet education system and creating a new system that would be in line with rapidly developing world demands. It was a very important historic, economic or socio-political event for Georgia to withdraw from the Soviet Union's total governance though the country was facing big challenges.

Georgia, as a member of the Bologna Process since 2005, constantly implements innovations in the education system, thus deserves more trust in the higher education sphere of Europe.

In spite of serious reforms, many challenges remain on the quality education services and equal access of those services.

The Georgian system of education quality assurance is dynamically developing in line with good international practice.

Internationalization of education is an unconditional priority. It promotes educational quality development, international mobility and international recognition and builds confidence. The internationalization process also facilitates: Approach of the Georgian education system to European standards and Realization of Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration. It should be noted that the process of

internationalization also ensures effective implementation of the obligations taken under the EU-Georgia Association Agreement.

**Key words:** *Higher education system, Bologna process, Quality education, Quality assurance systems*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Education is one of the fundamental rights of a human being and a vital condition for a sustainable development of the country [Hubersky 2017: 78-84]. Consequently, quality assurance, affordable education and science system is one of the main priorities of the Government of Georgia and is declared as the cornerstone of the country's development. A higher education sphere is regulated by the laws of Georgia on "Higher Education" and "Education Quality Development" and other legislative acts based on: the Action Plan of the Government of Georgia, Association Agenda with the European Union, Bologna Process and European Higher Education Area Frameworks [*Law of Georgia on Higher Education Tbilisi 2010 : №47, 05.08.*] The primary goals of higher education in Georgia are as follows: (a) To promote the development of the Georgian and world cultural values, orientation towards the ideals of democracy and humanism essential for the existence and development of a civil society; (b) To satisfy the requirements of one's personal interests and capabilities in obtaining proper higher education, in raising the level of one's skill and retraining; (c) To realize personal potential, develop the creative skills, train the competent persons capable of satisfying modern requirements, provide for competitiveness of graduates on domestic and international labor markets, and offer to the interested person (persons) high quality education that meets the requirements of the student community and the public; (d) To train and retrain a new research personnel in order to ensure the sustainability of the country's development and higher education system itself; to create, maintain and develop favourable conditions for research; (e) To encourage the mobility of students and academic personnel of higher education institutions.

The higher education system of Georgia has undergone a significant transformation over the past decade. A number of steps have been taken to integrate the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and the European Research Area (ERA); for educational quality development and internationalization of the Georgian higher education system several systems were put into operation, such as: the three-stage system of higher education, the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), Internal and External Quality Assurance Systems; the National Qualification Framework was created for mobility of students and academic personnel.

In recent years education and science has achieved a significant progress in Georgia. The country has implemented a number of reforms aimed at transforming the post-Soviet education system and creating a new system that would be in line with rapidly developing world demands.

In the light of the ongoing globalization process in the modern world new international economic and cultural relations have been formed; Naturally, education cannot be isolated from these processes.

Globalization and technological changes have created new opportunities in the field of education and employment. Digital transformation has changed the labour market and created a need to develop new skills. Consequently, the education system has become one of the most important challenges of modernity, which involves equipping of young people with the competence, knowledge and skills [*Unified Strategy of Education and Science 2017-2021*: 32-35].

## **1. GEORGIAN HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM IN THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT**

The problem of education started in early 90-es when Georgia became independent and had to overcome difficult times problems from which it is still trying to get rid of.

The education system of the Soviet Union was a classical model of education transferred from Germany and Israel. It was based entirely on a classical pedagogy. The only drawback was the Communist ideology. Furthermore, it was unacceptable for the new born country to carry out human upbringing with the communist ideology. Since 1989 (April 9), Georgia has already begun to think about a new system of education in order to determine country's future development. Since 1991, the Soviet Union could not interfere with our country. The hardest economic process started. The withdrawal from the Soviet Union led to the elimination of existing economic ties. The production was constructed in a way that it could no longer exist without Russian donation. The system was destroyed and this was the biggest blow to school and pre-school education. Practically, the country lacked energy and this caused a great crisis in the educational process. School education collapsed. Children could not study. Even though the Georgian society had been still thinking about the independent Georgian concept of education. The process had started. From 1995 onwards it slowly began to move from the Soviet space to the international space. That time the country declared that it chose the European path. The idea of university was created by Humboldt: the first issue of it concerns the autonomy of the university, the second – the interconnection of teaching and science, the third issue says that the university is established in the interests of society that dictates the system of values. However, this idea has recently changed. The function of the university is determined by the consumer market. Priority is given to the subjects of employment, and therefore, the traditional model of the university has been changed. Instead of the term "university idea" appeared the term "University Mission". Each university announces its mission and the student makes a choice according to his /her own interests. At this stage, the research in universities is determined by the labor market. A new rule of funding has also been established in Georgia. (Chkuaseli 2014).

The Soviet education system had one very serious drawbacks, it was built on the party and class struggle idea.

Thus, it was actually an important historic, economic or socio-political event to withdraw from the Soviet Union's total governance, accordingly, the country withstood big challenges.

Georgia, as a country, has already chosen the form of development and made decision to create an independent state. After a centralized government, like the Soviet Union, it was difficult to move on to democratic governance. The first step towards development was the course of the country to continue to move forward. It was naturally hard to make reforms, especially in the case of Georgia. Internal disturbances, wars, revolutions or protests have deteriorated the country's progress. Education is an autonomous system capable of effective functioning of society, as well as its subsequent development. Education is an integral and necessary part of human existence. It cannot be considered in the area of the state policy, as well as it is impossible to comply it with the level of modern socio-economic development. Quality of education is directly proportionate to the quality of labour resources, therefore, it has a great influence on the economic situation of the country and the society as a whole.

The population of Georgia was accustomed to the Soviet-era of thinking within the closed boundaries. The sharp change of the way of thinking became possible through systematic and large-scale measures, from which the benefits should be clear and visible.

On June 19, 1999, Ministers of Education and Science of 29 countries signed the Declaration (Bologna Declaration) in the oldest University City of Bologna, which laid the basis for the creation of a single European educational space. The Bologna Process aims to develop certain means and instruments for connecting national education systems. Currently, Bologna process involves 49 European countries. Georgia joined the process in 2005 at the Bergen summit. The introduction of the Bologna process was the best way out of the chaos that took place in the educational sphere after the post-Soviet period [ <http://eqe.gov.ge/>]

In the higher education system of Georgia, significant and quite fundamental changes were made at that time.

First of all, it is worth noting that Georgia moved to a three-stage teaching. This process has formed European education standard. It should also be said that this process has simplified Georgia's perception by other countries because the implementation of European system of credit was identical and facilitated the students' mobility and it simplified internationalization processes in Europe.

In addition, the quality assurance standards were developed and conformed to the European level, such as, recognition of the Georgian Diplomas, which in turn contributed to the integration of Georgian professionals to European framework and implemented various programs for students and teachers mobility in the world leading universities [Tatulishvili: 21-27].

The Government of Georgia turns great attention to internationalization of education and improving the quality of education and research in Georgia. Efforts for establishing successful education system are needed to continue the internationalization of education, research and knowledge empowerment and international mobility for academic staff and students in order to meet the international standard level and create local and international high-quality educational programs tailored for labor market needs.

In the process of maintaining and upgrading of higher education, it is important to strengthen European cooperation, the most important part of which is to deepen cooperation with the European Network for Higher Education Quality Assurance

(ENQA). The full status of ENQA membership will be a step forward to integrate into the Universal Higher Education Area that will significantly enhance the awareness of Georgia's educational sphere and increase its trust.

## **2. ACHIEVEMENTS AND CHALLENGES OF THE HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM OF GEORGIA**

The education system could not have values different from the political values of the country. In this case, we will get an unfavorable labor force of the state whose visibility, value or outlook differs from the country's needs. Taking into consideration the circumstances that globalization has become underway in the modern world forming international economic and cultural ties, it is evident that education cannot be left out of the process. Bologna process also involves the education system in the process of globalization.

Changes in Georgia and its globalization process started in 1999. Even though the process has passed at a slow pace, the first steps that were made during this period are still appreciated. The government faced the problem of the lack of the staff in connection with European education. Furthermore the most optimal solution of the problem was joining to the Bologna process. Georgia had little time to achieve its goal, though at the Berger Summit in May 2005, Georgia joined the number of Bologna member states with major priorities (according to the Louvain Communiqué).

- Social dimension: equitable access and completion the student body within higher education should reflect the diversity of Europe's populations. We therefore emphasize the social characteristics of higher education and aim to provide equal opportunities to quality education.
- Lifelong learning (LLL) The development of national qualifications frameworks is an important step towards the implementation of lifelong learning.
- Employability with labour markets increasingly relying on higher skill levels and transversal competences, higher education should equip students with the advanced knowledge, skills and competences they need throughout their professional lives.
- Student-centred learning and the teaching mission of higher education Student-centred learning requires empowering individual learners, new approaches to teaching and learning, effective support and guidance structures and a curriculum focused more clearly on the learner in all three cycles. Curricular reform will thus be an ongoing process leading to high quality, flexible and more individually tailored education paths.
- Education, research and innovation
- International openness - Mobility
- Data collection
- Multidimensional transparency tools
- Funding

The Budapest-Vienna Declaration assesses the Bologna process as follows: "Bologna process and its outcome in the European Higher Education Area, is an unprecedented example of regional and international cooperation in higher

education. It has significantly increased interest in other parts of the world making European Higher Education more profitable to the world."

First of all, education system moved to the three-stage teaching. This process has significantly simplified understanding of the education system of Georgia by other countries, as the credit system introduced is identical to European credit system.

Georgia's modern education system looks like this:

After signing the Bologna Treaty, there were fundamental and significant changes in the higher education system of Georgia:

1. Quality assurance standards have been developed in line with its European level, which is a step forward;
2. The recognition of the Georgian diploma occurred, which in turn contributed to the integration of Georgian professionals into Europe;
3. There are various programs implemented within the framework of which students and teachers' mobility are carried out in leading universities of the world. Mobility is important because learning is available for everybody and social and economic problems do not prevent students from getting quality education.

Georgian system of education quality assurance is dynamically developing in line with good international practice.

Internationalization of education is an unconditional priority. It promotes educational quality development, international mobility, international recognition and builds confidence. The internationalization process also facilitates: Approach of the Georgian education system to European standards and Realization of Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration.

It should be noted that the process of internationalization also ensures effective implementation of the obligations taken under the EU-Georgia Association Agreement.

Higher education in Georgia consists of three stages: bachelor program, master program and doctorate program. An educational program in the institution of higher education during one academic year includes averagely 60 credits. Educational program of the first stage of teaching (bachelor) consists of no less than 240 credits.

In Georgia, three types of higher education institutions are active: University - institution of higher education which carries out higher educational programs of all three stages and scientific researches. Teaching university - institution of higher education which carries out higher educational program/programs (except for doctorate programs). A teaching university necessarily carries out educational programs of second stage - master program/programs. College - institution of higher education which carries out only the first stage educational program of higher academic education.

Obtaining of the status of an institution of higher education and implementation of respective educational activity is possible only in case of authorization of higher education institution defined by the rules of authorization provision. Authorization is a procedure of obtaining of a status of higher education institution purpose of which is to ensure compliance with standards necessary for implementation of respective activity required for issuing of education confirming document recognized by the state. Authorization is carried out by the National Center for Educational Quality Enhancement, according to the rules defined by the authorization

provision. The state recognizes only diplomas issued by accredited or equalized with them educational institutions [<http://www.mes.gov.ge/uploads/sistem-of-education-en.jpg>].

On June 19, 1999 29 European Ministers of Education signed a declaration in the oldest university town of Bologna. By signing the document the ministers expressed their willingness to participate in the creation of the European Higher Education Area.

The Bologna declaration was preceded by such documents as: Magna Chartum Universitatum (1998); Lisbon Convention (1997); Sorbona Declaration (1998). Presently 46 countries participate in the Bologna Process. Georgia joined Bologna Process in 2005 at Bergen Summit.

Main documents of Bologna Process: Bologna Declaration (1999); Prague Communique (2001); Berlin Communique (2003); Bergen Communique (2005); London Communique (2007); Louven Communique (2009); Budapest-Vienna Declaration (2010); Documents of Bologna process: Lisbon Convention (1997); Sorbonne Declaration (1997); Qualifications Framework for Higher Education – Dublin Descriptors (2005); European Standards and Guidelines in Quality Assurance (2005). [Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia]

Prior to 1991 only the state-established higher education institutions were operating in Georgia. Since 1991 private higher education institutions have been also offered an opportunity to conduct educational activities. However, in order for them to function as educational institutions it was mandatory to obtain a license providing the right to implement educational activities. Such license was a precondition for the issuance of the recognized educational documents. The licensing procedure monitored the compatibility of educational institutions with the state-established standards, including programme standards. The educational documents issued in compliance with the Georgian legislation before the beginning of 2005-2006 academic year by licensed higher education institutions or the HEIs regarded to be licensed, pursuant to the law, are recognized by the state, notwithstanding the accreditation status of these institutions. On December 21, 2004 the Law of Georgia on Higher Education was introduced allowing only the institutionally accredited HEIs to issue the state-recognized Diplomas. The educational license was a precondition for obtaining institutional accreditation. The licensing became compulsory also for those HEIs that had been established by the state. Thus, the state provided institutions with the authority (license) to conduct higher education activities; nevertheless, the state recognized the educational documents issued by these institutions only in case if the HEIs concerned were granted institutional accreditation. The institutional accreditation was mandatory for state higher education institutions, while for private higher education institutions it was a voluntary procedure. A licensed private HEI not intending to issue state-recognized documents was able to avoid the institutional accreditation procedure. Accredited and licensed HEIs operated, and both state-recognized and non-recognized educational documents were available in the same regime.

The Law of Georgia on Higher Education has introduced the notion of programme accreditation which involved state recognition and funding. However, the law

postponed programme accreditation first to the beginning of 2010-2011 academic year, and then further to the beginning of 2013-2014 academic year. In fact, the programme accreditation envisaged by the first version of the Law of Georgia on Higher Education has not been implemented in Georgia.

The state-recognition of educational documents was based not only on the status of the institution concerned but also on the enrolment of individuals in HEIs in compliance with the regulation established by legislation. In 2004 the Law of Georgia on Higher Education introduced the Unified National Examinations as a mandatory measure for obtaining a student status.

Due to the reforms implemented in 2010 the licensing procedure was abolished and institutional accreditation and programme accreditation were substituted by authorization and accreditation, respectively.

The authorization of educational institutions has been determined as a procedure of acquisition of the status of a higher education institution, which aims at ensuring the compliance with standards necessary for carrying out of relevant activities for the issuance of state-recognized educational documents. Therefore, only the authorised institutions are entitled to conduct the state-recognized educational activities.

Accreditation has been defined as a procedure aimed at determining the compatibility of an educational programme of a higher education institution with accreditation standards aiming at the establishment of regular self-evaluation for the improvement of educational quality and promotion of the development of quality assurance mechanisms linked to state funding. Accreditation is voluntary; however, it is only mandatory for regulated programmes (Medicine, Law and Education) as well as the Third Cycle (Doctoral) educational programmes. Accreditation started in Georgia in 2011.

Today, there are 75 authorized higher education institutions operating in Georgia, where up to 140,000 students are studying and about 13,000 academic, research and administrative personnel are employed. 2446 persons are employed in 42 scientific-research institutes integrated with universities and 461 persons at the LEPL Scientific Institute. The separate chapters of the Association Agreement between Georgia and the European Union signed on June 27, 2014 were defined by Georgia's cooperation with the European Union in the field of science and education. Particularly, the Chapter 12 of the Agreement provides cooperation in research, technology development and demonstration, and chapter 16 provides education, training and youth cooperation issues.

Georgia is actively involved with ERASMUS + and holds the 8th place between the 131 partner countries in terms of successful projects. As a result, more than 1500 Georgian students have been financed in the leading European universities in 2015. During 2017 active cooperation was ongoing with the involvement of higher education institutions, academic and administrative personnel and students within the framework of ERASMUS + program [*Unified Strategy of Education and Science 2017-2021: 62-65*].

Cooperation with the leading universities of Georgia involves implementation of Bachelor's, Master's and Doctorate programs.

Georgia, as a member of the Bologna Process since 2005, constantly undergoes innovations in the education system, thus, it deserves more confidence in European



higher education space. On November 22, 2013, the National Centre for Educational Quality Enhancement was awarded with the status of affiliated organization of the European Association for Higher Education Quality Assurance (ENQA). ENQA unites 90 European (and non-European) Quality Assurance Agencies or Public Structure. ENQA member organizations share information, experience and the best examples of higher education institutions' quality assurance issues. The goal of the Association is to strengthen European cooperation in higher education. It is the main driving force for quality assurance in Europe. The Association makes a significant contribution in maintaining and upgrading the higher education according to European standards and distributes the Bologna process signatories across the country. The status of the ENQA affiliated organization is a significant step forward to integrate into the Universal Higher Education Area of Europe. With this status Europe is increasing the awareness of the Center and its confidence index. In order to ensure the competitiveness of the graduates in the local and international labor market, it is necessary to renovate and upgrade educational programs. The latest changes in quality assurance have been elaborated and new authorization standards and procedures approved in accordance with European standards and guidelines; international experts, students, the staff and employers are involved in the evaluation process of Quality improvement of their higher institutions. [Darchia 2013: 12-16]

## **CONCLUSION**

The European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) is an umbrella organisation which represents quality assurance organisations from the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) member states. ENQA promotes European co-operation in the field of quality assurance in higher education and disseminates information and expertise among its members and towards stakeholders in order to develop and share good practice and to foster the European dimension of quality assurance. Over the next four years, ENQA will continue to represent its members and affiliates internationally, support them nationally and provide them with comprehensive services and networking opportunities.

In May 2017 Georgia adopted revised standards and procedures for institutional evaluations of higher education institutions. The National Centre for Educational Quality Enhancement (NCEQE) initially began preparation for the revision of the quality assurance system in 2014. The process was carried out with wide participation from higher education institutions (HEIS), national and international experts, and other stakeholders. The updated standards and procedures essentially shift the system to one which is more development oriented and focuses on student-centred learning and teaching, while supporting the development of a quality culture at HEIs and considering the national context.

For the implementation of the renewed standards and procedures, NCEQE is carrying out pilot institutional evaluations against the new standards, three of which will take place by the end of 2017. In 2018 new standards will be established nationwide. [<http://www.enqa.eu/index.php/nceqe-revises-qa-standards-and-procedures/>]

Based on the mission of the educational institutions the authorisation procedure shall establish the compatibility of an educational institution with the following standards, for higher education institutions:

- Mission and strategic development of the higher education institutions;
- Organizational structure and management of the higher education institution;
- Educational Programmes;
- Staff of the higher education institutions;
- Students and their support services;
- Research, development and/or other creative work;
- Material, information and financial resources.

Authorization Standards for Higher Education Institutions is the goal of higher education institutions (HEI); authorization standards are to promote educational quality development at HEIs and to ensure a student centred learning environment. Standards of authorization for HEIs comply with Georgia's higher education goals and European Higher Education Area (EHEA) requirements. The standards aim to fully assess the institution, including its resources, regulations, carried out, current and planned activities, results achieved and feasibility to achieve intended goals (relevant planned activities, mechanisms for their implementation, and allocated resources).

Although the measures taken in the higher education system of Georgia are aimed at obtaining international experience for students, academic and administrative personnel, they are not sufficient to make significant impact on the system level. Consequently, additional resources are needed for internationalization of higher education, attracting foreign students and establishing the country as a regional educational centre. In spite of depth reforms, many challenges remain on the quality of education services and equal access. Among those challenges are: Education Union of the Labour Market, Development of science and research. Education and science have a strategic importance for the sustainable economic development and well-being of the country.

The Georgian system of education quality assurance is dynamically developing in line with good international practice.

The internationalization of education is an unconditional priority. It promotes educational quality development, international mobility, and international recognition and builds confidence [Modrzejewski 2011: 309-311]. The internationalization process also facilitates: Approach of the Georgian education system to European standards and Realization of Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration.

It should be noted that the process of internationalization also ensures effective implementation of the obligations taken under the EU-Georgia Association Agreement.

## REFERENCES

Chkuaseli K., (2014), The way Georgian education system from the Soviet Union period to the present day, Tbilisi.

Darchia I., (2013), Strategic Development of Higher Education and Science in Georgia. Analysis of higher education policy according to five strategic directions. Quality Assurance, Tbilisi.

Government of Georgia, (2017), Unified Strategy of Education and Science 2017-2021, Tbilisi.

Hubersky, L. V., (2017), The Fundamental Nature of Humanitarian Values in Educational Process. *European Journal of Transformation Studies*, vol. 5, no. 1.

Modrzejewski, A., (2011), Universalism of Science, In: *New Trends in Education: Research and Development*, Tbilisi.

Tatulishvili S., (2017), Study on the impact of curricula transformation on the development of students' European vision, Telavi.