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Improving Access and Quality of Inclusive Higher Education
One Student at a Time

EQUITY, ACCESS TO AND DEMOCRATIZATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION

REPORT OF CURRENT POLICIES AND PRACTICES IN GEORGIA

Learning Optimization and Academic Inclusion via Equitativa Distance Teaching and Learning (LoveDistance)

INTRODUCTION

There are three types of higher educational institutions in Georgia: universities – that carry out studies on all three levels – Bachelor, Master and Phd; Teaching universities that offer only BA and MA programs and colleges – with only BA studies[1]. Currently, in total there are almost 60 HEIs in Georgia, of which 1 80% is private and only 20% is state. As for the geographical coverage the majority of the universities are located in the capital – Tbilisi and only few are in big regional cities – Batumi, Kutaisi, Telavi, Zugdidi, Gori and Akhaltsikhe. The tuition fees at state universities is fixed (2250 Georgian lari appr. 650 EUR per year) but it varies at private universities. After graduating from secondary schools, students need to pass the national exams (run by the ministry of Education) in order to get into universities. Although, there is a possibility for students to get state scholarships for their studies, but the number of the scholarships are always limited. Academic year, normally, lasts thirty weeks and its students can get 60 ECTS credits in a year. The BA studies lasts for years (with 240 ECTS credits), MA programs are run two years (120 credits) and PhD programs are 3–5 years with 180 ECTS credits.

In order to get authorization from the Ministry of Education each university has to go through the authorization and program accreditation processes which is run by the National Center of Quality Enhancement. The group of experts (the chair is always a foreigner expert) visits the university and checks its capacity against the authorisation standards. In 2017, new standards were introduced and the majority of the universities have already gained the new authorization from the center.

METHODS

This report is summarising the data and statistics received from the National Bureau of Statistics of Georgia; Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia; National Center for Quality Enhancement, also from GE partner HEIs from Georgia – ISU; BSU; TESAU.

AFFORDABILITY

What are the different, major forms of higher education financing (e.g. higher education as a public investment—public financing versus higher education as a private) in the country? What are the implications of these different policies and economic models? Can students apply for public scholarships? Are there housing facilities available for students?

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[1] http://www.mes.gov.ge/content.php?id=131&lang=eng

The Constitution of Georgia and the Law on Higher Education equally give access to higher education to all Georgian citizens. Access is available after satisfying the set of conditions by the state (meaning the positive results of secondary education and the Unified National Examinations).

There is a rule for distribution of state education scholarships in Georgia, according to which funding is allocated for accredited BA, Certified medic/ dentist/veterinarian educational programs the maximum amount of which is 2250 GEL. Students enrolled as a result of the Unified National Examinations can use the grant in the conditions of the competition. There is also a MA scholarship, the amount of which is 1 http://www.mes.gov.ge/content.php?id=131&lang=eng also set at a maximum of 2250 GEL, and its acquisition is conditioned by the Unified MA Exam Competition. In Georgia, it is also possible to obtain a social scholarship, which can be obtained by a representative of a socially vulnerable family, an internally displaced person (from Abkhazia and Samachablo), a person living at a border of a conflict region, a person living in a high mountainous region and a person from a family without the breadwinner. The students to be funded by the above-mentioned criteria are also selected through a competition by the Ministry of Education, Science, Sports and Culture.

Any Georgian citizen can also obtain tuition funding with the help of the private sector. Azerbaijanians, Armenians, Ossetians and Abkhazians can obtain funding on behalf of a representative of an ethnic minority as citizens of Georgia with a special quota of ethnic minorities.

Some private companies also provide scholarships to students coming from ethnic minority groups, namely the Azerbaijanian gas corporation SOCAR is providing these scholarships to students coming from Azerbaijan ethnic groups.

There are also priority education programs in Georgia: A) Agrarian sciences; B) Education; C) Engineering; D) Science / natural sciences; E) Social sciences; F) Humanities; G) Interdisciplinary fields or specialties that are fully funded by the state.

Annual quotas are allocated by the state for the programs of the mentioned directions, according to which the enrolled students are financed from the budget, however, no specifics are considered here. (If, as a result of the national exams, a citizen of Georgia, a member of an ethnic or religious minority, falls into this quota, then he / she will receive equal funding).

According to the funding system in Georgia, it is impossible to obtain state funding for employed students (under the title of employed) or for a student living away from the city. It is also impossible to obtain funding for religious minorities on religious grounds.

Some HEIs do own the students' dormitories that are used for students either coming from different cities, or for those who are coming from socially vulnerable families. From our partners, only Batumi State University has several dormitory buildings in different parts of the city, some of them were just renewed. Ilia State University and Telavi State University don't have this possibility to offer dormitory rooms to their students.

ACCESSIBILITY

To what extent can citizens access higher education? Do all citizens have the opportunity to access higher education or is higher education only accessible to certain segments of society and, if so, who decides who has access and who does not? Is there a national method for application? Are there specific/regional enrolments for people with specific characteristics?

Georgian citizen who has the secondary school certificate has the right to become a student of Georgian educational institution after he/she overcomes the barrier stated by the Center of Unified National Exams according to the rule defined by the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sport of Georgia. This is the national approach to the issue.

National Examinations Center is a legal entity of public law which ensures execution of Unified National and Joint Master Exams, is authorized to carry out national estimations and international researches, carrying out other authorities defined by the Georgian legislation.

There is a different approach to ethnic minority students. Access to quality education and knowledge of the state language is an important condition for the involvement of ethnic minorities in all spheres of public life. Thus, state policy is aimed at increasing access to education, improving the knowledge of the state language. Specific steps have been taken in this direction. Since 2010, representatives of ethnic minorities have been able to receive higher education in Georgia in a simplified manner. It is possible to get into the higher education Institution with only one exam, passing the general aptitude test in Azerbaijanian or Armenian language. After enrollment, the student studies Georgian language program for one year, which helps to deepen the knowledge of the language, so that in the next four years he /she will be able to study at the undergraduate level. Therefore, the program is often called as "1 + 4 program"; Every year, 100 Armenian and 100 Azerbaijanian-language students are funded under the program.

In addition to Azerbaijanian and Armenian language tests, Ossetian and Abkhazian language tests are also required by law. So far, only two entrants have passed the Abkhazian language test with this program. Since 2010, the number of ethnic minority students in Georgian universities has increased significantly, which is clearly due to this program.

Statistics: Number of enrolled non-Georgian language students by years:	
2010	247 students
2011	430 students
2012	589 students
2013	890 students
2014	673 students
2015	741 students
2016	960 students
2017	1047 students
2018	1231 students
2019	1335 students

All three GE partner HEIs do have this program and thousands of students each year start their studies for Georgian Language. The program aims not only to increase the number of those students in higher education, but also enhancing the links between ethnic/religious minority groups.

After the new authorization and accreditation standards were introduced in Georgia, it's a mandatory for each HEI to have physically adapted infrastructure otherwise they won't be authorized, that said, all of GE partners do have at least one building that is accessible for people with special needs.

PARTICIPATION

To what extent are citizens participating in higher education? Equal opportunity of access does not automatically equate to equitable participation. What is the national and local data on enrollment evolution? How about the evolution in terms of percentages of the population with Bachelor, Master of PhD level?

Approximately the following number of applicants are registered for the Unified National Examinations for higher education in Georgian universities every year:

For BA level– up to 40,000;

For MA level – more than 12 000;

For PhD level – about 1000.

Only a small number of these applicants appear from the representatives of various minorities. According to one of the quantitative studies, where the number of respondents was 1314 and all of them were the representatives of all ethnic minorities of Georgia, is found that: Only 24% of respondents have incomplete secondary education (2.2% were without primary education, 5.5% were with primary education and 16.4% were with incomplete secondary education). 41% of the respondents received full secondary education, 11.2% received special / professional education, 4.3% received incomplete higher education, and only 18.6% received full higher education (BA, MA, specialist diploma or scientific degree). It is noteworthy that women (27.2%) have a larger share of respondents who have incomplete secondary education than men (20.6%). But higher education has received almost equal numbers of women and men. In terms of ethnic minority groups, the problem of secondary education is particularly seen in urban small ethnic groups, followed by Ossetian and Azerbaijanian communities: 36.2% of group of smallest ethnic minorities living in urban-type settlements has received the incomplete secondary education, 30.9% of Ossetians, 23.4% of Azerbaijanians, 11.5% of the Armenians and 7.9% of Kists are in the same situation. But 27.7% of ethnic Kist respondents, 19.7% of Azerbaijanis, 19.5% of urban minority ethnic groups, 15.9% of Armenians and 8.6% of Ossetians have a higher education degree (have a BA, MA or specialist diploma).

QUALITY

To what extent does the quality of teaching and learning exist in the country? Is quality assurance accomplished via peer-based accreditation agencies or government agencies or other models?

All programs at Georgian HEIs are accredited by the National Center for Quality Enhancement, this is a governmental organisation run by the Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia. This is more seen as the

external quality assurance mechanism and it is a mandatory for the new program with the validity of seven years. But internally each university has the centralised quality enhancement office, as well as the same office on the level of faculty/school. These offices are seen as an internal quality mechanism, they are responsible for preparing the study programs and working on the mechanism and tools to guarantee that learning outcomes of the programs are achieved.

ICT

Are there specific regulations on the use of ICT in Higher education? How about in your university?

According to the university autorisation standards (sub-standard 7.3)[2] each university has to have a well developed ICT infrastructure. Namely, the universities are obliged to have study information systems and learning management systems that support both faculty members and administrative staff to smoothly deliver the teaching and learning process. All the GE partners are using institutional G-Suite services, as well as three of them there is a practice of usage of Moodle as a key learning management system and locally they do have developed study information systems that are used for course enrolment and various administrative reasons.

The importance of ICT is recognized in all high educational institutions of Georgia. There is a special regulation according to which all BA programs contain one obligatory course of IT at TeSaU. This is offered to students in the very first year of their studies. The Covid-19 pandemic situation with its challenges has shown that about 90% of TeSaU students are able to use ICT. There are ethnic minority students among them. The problem of using ICT was vivid with socially vulnerable students as they have a major problem with the access to the technology. To face the challenge caused by the pandemic situation, TeSaU administration did the small survey to find out what ICT was used by the students in the online lecture process. It appeared that 61,6 % of the students used smartphone, 23,2% used laptop, 11,9 % used personal computer, 0,3 % used Tablet, 0,8 % used telephone, 0,6 % used Android, 0,6 % used IPhone, 0,3 % used IOS,),3 % had possibility to use both laptop and smartphone, 0,3 % used netbook, 0,3 % used "Books" (small netbooks used for the 1 st year school children in Georgia, granted by the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sport. It seems that these students have shared equipment with their 1 st year of siblings).

ICT infrastructure at Ilia State University is diversified among several platforms. The majority of faculty members are using the study information system "ARGUS", which is created locally, while a significant number is using Moodle, for uploading course materials, creating assignments and quizzes. There is a small number of professors who are using Google Classroom as a major platform for delivering classes. In 2018, A center for Teacher's Professional development was established at ISU under the Erasmus Plus CBHE project "PRINTEL", the aim of the center is to enhance the ICT competences among the university faculty members. Five to seven training course modules were developed and all of them were related to increasing the usage of technology

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[2] https://eqe.ge/eng/static/449

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into the teaching process, with an eye to enhance the quality of teaching and learning. ISU was using Moodle not for fully online courses, but for blended/hybrid courses, some programs had mandatory courses using this practise.

As digital technology has become an integral part of modern, everyday life, developing ICT and skills related to its use is one of the major challenges for BSU. In order to develop student's ICT skills in a purposeful and qualitative way, the educational course Information Technologies; with a volume of 5 ECTS is envisaged as a compulsory university course in all educational programs of the undergraduate level.

In addition, various educational programs provide ICT teaching courses based on the specifics of the field (for example, Teacher Preparation Educational Programs include the course ICT Usage in the Learning Process). In order to implement the teaching-learning process smoothly, the university, both with its own efforts and with the support of various projects, gradually managed to provide BSU with modern technical equipment, computer classes, a well-organized Internet system, etc.

The university Internet is provided with optical fiber channels. All computers are connected to the Internet. Information technology infrastructure is administered in accordance with the rules established by the University. Computer equipment placed in the auditorium is available in class, corridors, and libraries at any time. The above-mentioned computer technology is connected to the Internet. Wireless Internet connection is constantly connected, is free, requires no password and is available for the university community.

During the current pandemic conditions, the university faced up to new challenges. In order to carry out the learning process continuously and support students, the university mainly uses the Student Portal and the Moodle platform, along with the university e-mails. Out of about 6,000 students with active university status, 78% is continuously involved in distance learning. The university plans to integrate distance learning elements into the auditorium work in the future.

CONCLUSIONS

As it can be seen there is a centralized national exam, and all the students have to go within it otherwise they won't be able to start their studies. This exam is only done once and if for some reason a student is unable to take it, he/she has to wait one year. Universities are not able to conduct the exams internally and they are tied to the government. But a situation is slightly modified on MA and PhD level. The MA aplicants are also having one national exam (again once in a year) additional each university adds exams locally, sometimes it is an exam in foregin language, or field related issues, or simply interview, but universities are making selections according to their priorities. On PhD level, there is no centralised national exam and each university can get according to their inter institutional regulations.

As for the financial support, only 10-20 percent of the students are able to get the full scholarship from the government and this is seen as a major challenge. Usually, parents are the ones who are paying tuition fees, but the number of the students working at the same time of their studies is increasing year by year. The

majority are employed in the service sector with 20-25 hours a week and sometimes it really has an impact on their learning outcomes.

Not having the sufficient level of Georgian language can be seen as one of the biggest challenges in ethnic minority groups. Although they are having the possibility to study it at secondary schools and later at the first year of their studies in university, still this is seen as a significant barrier.

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