



QUALITY ASSURANCE OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS

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External Quality Assurance: State Leverage over Higher Education Institutions or Means for Increasing the Quality of Education?

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Abstract

Joining the Bologna Process in 2005 was the first attempt by the Georgian government to transform its higher education system from a Soviet-style system into a European one. A number of reforms have been implemented since then, including the introduction of an external quality assurance process conducted by the state agency under the aegis of the Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia. The state licensing system, envisaging institutional authorization for higher education institutions and accreditation for academic programmes, has also undergone numerous changes over years, including the recent adoption of new standards. This process has been accompanied by serious criticism, starting from being used as a means of state leverage and a political tool and ending with its ineffectiveness due to being administered only superficially. The present paper reflects on the challenges accompanying this process and discusses how the mechanism of external quality assurance can serve as an instrument for raising the quality of education.

Introduction

Following the Rose Revolution of 2003, the newly formed revolutionary government, trying to fundamentally transform a post-Soviet, heavily corrupt Georgia into a state with a clear European vision and aspirations, introduced active reforms at all levels of education. In the case of higher education, this process started in 2004 by adopting a new Law on Higher Education and joining the ongoing Bologna Process, which was initiated in European countries in 1999. The Bologna process envisaged the creation of the European Higher Education Area for facilitating student mobility, creating an easily recognizable and comparable degree system, establishing specific quality assurance mechanisms for providing high quality education among the Bologna participant countries, and supporting the so-called European dimension in higher education (Bologna Declaration, 1999). Thus, it seemed an obvious choice for Georgia that would enable the country to challenge its Soviet legacy in the higher education system (Glonti & Chitashvili 2006).

Therefore, considering the Bologna requirements, the Georgian higher education system started to rebuild itself and align with the European model of university education. Among other things, this undertaking envisaged the creation of a quality assurance system within and outside universities, in particular, the introduction of a national quality assurance agency, establishment of quality assurance units within higher education institutions, and introduction of external quality assurance mechanisms in the form of institutional authorization and programme accreditation—a state licensing system for higher education institutions. The last item met with serious criticism from the academic community,

part of which accused the state agencies of deploying external quality assurance mechanisms as a state leverage over universities, while the second part blamed the state for using this mechanism only formally without substantial investigation that hindered the improvement of the quality of higher education in Georgia (Lezhava & Amashukeli 2016).

The present paper intends to reflect on the existing challenges and problems related to external quality assurance mechanisms and discuss their potential to be used as a political leverage or to increase the quality of education.

External Quality Assurance Mechanisms

Quality assurance of higher education is regulated by the Law of Georgia on Higher Education, which defines the internal and external quality assurance procedures based on the Bologna Process and its normative documents (Prague Communiqué 2001; Berlin Communiqué 2003). In particular, the Law demands the introduction of quality assurance units/departments at higher education institutions and considers such units to be one of the major managerial bodies of the university (Law of Georgia on Higher Education, Art 15.2). The Law also regulates internal and external quality assurance mechanisms. While universities are given the freedom to define which mechanisms they will use for internal monitoring, the Law establishes the external ones, i.e., state authorization and accreditation (Ibid, Art 25.2, Art 2B¹, Art 2T). The Law also regulates that the National Center for Educational Quality Enhancement (NCEQE), which operates under the aegis of the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sport of Georgia and is responsible for external quality assurance (Ibid, Art 56.4).

Authorization, as defined by the Law and NCEQE, is “an institutional evaluation, which determines compliance of an institution with the authorization standards” (Eqe.ge, n.d). The authorization procedure is performed by a panel of independent experts, and based on their assessment, the decision of granting or denying authorization is made by a special committee. While the NCEQE itself is a legally independent entity, it still operates under the aegis of the Ministry of Education, namely, its head is appointed by the Minister him/herself, which deprives NCEQE of real autonomy (Lezhava & Amashukeli 2016). The members and the Chair of the Authorization Council are not appointed by the Director of the NCEQE or the Minister of Education directly (the latter only nominates the candidates) but by the Prime Minister (Eqe.ge, n.d). At first glance, this method would seem to guarantee greater autonomy for the Council, as it does not directly depend on the Ministry of Education or the Center. However, the fact that there are no clear criteria or procedures for selecting the candidates for membership (Eqe.ge, n.d) suggests that the Minister of Education has absolute freedom of choice that in the end may influence the outcome, i.e., Authorization Council decisions.

Accreditation is performed in a similar manner: academic programmes are assessed by field experts, and the decision is made by the Accreditation Council, the members and Chair of which are appointed by the Prime Minister (Eqe.ge, n.d.).

Both the accreditation and authorization processes that officially started in 2010 (before that only institutional accreditation was performed) had numerous problems and were thus heavily criticized. One of the major problems associated with accreditation was its links to state funding. In particular, according to the Law on Higher Education, state funding, which is granted to students based on the Unified National Exams,¹ can

1 According to the current procedures, which were initiated after the Rose Revolution, university admission is highly centralized under the state. In particular, the National Assessment and Examination Center (NAEC), operating under the aegis of the Ministry of Education, conducts unified national exams on an annual basis, and based on their scores, applicants are admitted to various universities. In other words, universities do not have any leverage or authority over admission decisions at the undergraduate level. Every September, the NAEC gives universities a list of new students who met or exceeded the admission threshold and have chosen a particular university. A similar scheme is implemented at the master's level; however, in this case, universities have the right to administer internal exams and make admission decisions based on those results. In the case of PhD programmes, the state does not interfere, and the whole process is organized by universities. This centralized system was introduced to abolish the corrupt practices of admission that largely dominated in the pre-revolutionary period and establish a merit-based process.

be approved for accredited academic programmes only (Law of Georgia on Higher Education, Art 63.3). This provision was basically initiated to force Georgian universities, which clearly lacked experience in using external assessments for quality assurance, to undergo the accreditation process. Since students' state scholarships represent the only source of state funding for higher education institutions (Chakhaia 2013), this provision worked and still continues to work as a perfect motivator not to lose students, i.e., not to lose their source of income. According to various studies, this linkage between accreditation and state funding resulted in a high number of accredited academic programmes [1679] (Eqe.ge, n.d) and a low-quality accreditation process (Darchia 2013; Lezhava & Amashukeli 2016). In addition, theoretically, this linkage gives the state the opportunity to reduce the amount of funding allotted to universities by depriving accreditation to academic programmes, i.e., less accredited programmes, and thereby granting less state money to the universities.

The low quality of the accreditation process was also connected with the scarcity of human resources; due to the small size of the Georgian academic community, certain academic programmes were evaluated by non-field experts. In addition, due to the specificity of Georgian culture with strong bonding capital (CRRC 2011), the accreditation process was accused of being nepotistic when academic programmes were assessed by their staff's friends/acquaintances without critical evaluation (Lezhava & Amashukeli 2016)

The state authorization process had similar problems. In this case, the lack of proper authorization standards targeting the institutional development of universities was a prevailing problem. In addition, rather vague assessment criteria and indicators made the whole authorization process rigid and not oriented to the development of university performance (Darchia 2013). Again, in this case, the process was considered to be rather formal.

In general, as mentioned above, both accreditation and authorization were met with a hostile attitude by the academic community in the universities. NCEQE was even referred to as a “punitive organization” that is used by the state in its own interests to control the universities due to lack of autonomy of the Center. In addition, the process was accused of placing a greater emphasis on the formal parameters, such as the formal distribution of credits and the description of material resources, and in general, verifying the technical-material base rather than substantively assessing the programmes for quality (Lezhava & Amashukeli 2016). Thus, the Georgian academic community distrusted the whole process. It should be mentioned that distrust towards the state

licensing system is not solely characteristic of Georgia but is rather a global phenomenon deeply rooted in the “historical lack of formal organizational and institutional arrangements” (Stensaker & Maassen 2015). This distrust is especially relevant in post-communist states, which are characterized by a vastly increasing number of newly formed universities in the post-Soviet era (Scott 2002 as cited in Geven & Maricut 2015). For instance, by the 2000–01 academic year, there were more than 171 higher education institutions in Georgia, and among them, only 26 were public; the rest were private. This number reached 198 by 2004–05 and gradually decreased to 75² by the beginning of the 2017–18 academic year (Geostat.ge, n.d.). According to various studies, the post-Soviet states are marked by a strategic approach to external quality assurance procedures, i.e., first, formally meet the standard criteria (Lezhava & Amashukeli 2016) and later, ignore self-evaluation and “do whatever you want” (Geven & Maricut 2015).

Current State of Affairs

Considering the abovementioned criticism, the NCEQE updated the standards for both accreditation and authorization in 2017 and introduced an internationalization dimension into the evaluation process, i.e., expert panels are always chaired by an international expert, reducing the possibility of nepotistic evaluation. Since the second wave of authorization/accreditation has started only recently and is still in progress (2017–2018), it is too early to make a preliminary evaluation of its performance. However, it is still possible to assess the attitude of the Georgian academic community towards these changes. First, it should be mentioned that newly developed standards, especially in the case of authorization, elicit fear among academics and university administrators, some of whom accuse the state of being too willing to drastically decrease the number of universities (Fortuna.ge 2018). In fact, this fear was proven to be valid by government officials when both the Minister of Education and the Prime Minister emphasized multiple times that due to the new cycle of authorization, the number of universities would be reduced (Imedinews.ge, 30.12.2017; bm.ge, 21.12.2017). Meanwhile, it became obvious that the majority of universities would not be able to meet the standards, which were adopted based on the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) to meet the European standard of educational quality,

thus resulting in the closure of a large number of active educational institutions in Georgia. This has occurred since the beginning of 2018, when the Authorization Council deprived 7 institutions of their status as higher education institutions, one of which closed because it was unable to meet the standard even before the authorization visit started (Decrees of Authorization Council, Decree No. 1, 15.02.2018; Decree No. 3, 15.02.2018; Decree No. 5, 22.02.2018; Decree No. 43, 28.06.2018; Decree No. 44, 28.06.2018; Decree No. 47, 17.08.2018; Decree 48, 17.08.2018). Therefore, the total number of higher education institutions further decreased from 75 to 68 by September 2018, of which 60 are authorized by the NCEQE, and 8 are authorized by the Orthodox Church of Georgia (Eqe.ge, n.d.).

On the other hand, the true problem lies not in the standards *per se* but the formal character of the Bologna reforms implemented by the Georgian higher education system (Lezhava & Amashukeli 2016). In particular, the universities transformed their performance on a more normative level rather than in practice. This rather formal implementation of the Bologna principles resulted in an inability to meet high standards of teaching or research and thus made universities vulnerable to strict state licensing processes. In addition, the dependence of the NCEQE on the state creates fruitful ground for the state to exercise its political leverage over higher education institutions, i.e., manipulate the accreditation and authorization processes.

Conclusion

Considering the abovementioned, it is obvious that the Georgian higher education system is underperforming in terms of quality of teaching, learning and research, which is evidenced by a number of studies (Kapanadze et al 2014; Amashukeli et al 2017; Lezhava & Amashukeli 2016; Performance Audit Report 2016; Performance Audit Report 2016b). Therefore, strict quality assurance rules may decrease the number of higher education institutions to a more reasonable figure and consolidate the scattered human resources in the universities to facilitate high-quality teaching and research. On the other hand, there is also a possibility that strict rules introduced by the state may result in hostility, distrust and resistance from the academic community, as well as the use of political leverage by the state. Therefore, to increase the quality of education and grant credibility to the state licensing system, in addition to the absolute need for the high performance of the accreditation and authorization processes, it is of the utmost importance to support universities to meet these standards. If the state prioritizes education and recognizes its inevitable effect on the development of the country

2 This figure comprises the total number of higher education institutions, including private and public institutions, authorized by the NCEQE. Orthodox Divinity Higher Educational Institutions do not fall under state authorization and are authorized by the Orthodox Church of Georgia.

at large (Strategy of Socio-Economic Development of Georgia 2020), then it should also support the development of higher education institutions. To improve the quality of education, not only should rules become stricter, but the NCEQE should be granted real auto-

nomy to eliminate any potential influence by the state. Moreover, resources should be provided for universities to initiate internal reforms that would enable them to raise the quality of teaching and research and thus be able to meet state expectations.

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