

Education and Development Programme

Bologna Process: Europeanization of Georgia's Higher Education System

Diana Lezhava

Center for Social Sciences

(Working Paper)

The paper was prepared within the project of “The European Integration: Armenian and Georgian Perspectives” implemented by Political Science Association of Armenia and Center for Social Sciences with the financial support of Friedrich Ebert Foundation

When dealing with the Europeanization of higher education, first of all, we should define the meaning of Europeanization and particularly its impact on higher education. According to one of the well-known definitions of Europeanization, it is the process of dissemination and translation of the EU policies, rules and norms into the domestic policy-making agenda (Radaelli, 2003). Concerning the Europeanization of higher education, Duclaud-Williams's explains it as a process when the national governments try to address their domestic educational problems considering the experience of their European partners (Duclaud-Williams, 2004).

Just as in case of other spheres, Europeanization of higher education in Georgia is a process that is closely linked to the country's attempt to break through its Soviet past and legacy. Europeanization of the Georgian higher education system started in 2005, two years after the Rose Revolution (2003), when the newly formed government was reforming every sphere to show its clearly set Western aspiration. Thus, in 2005 Georgia joined the Bologna process at Bergen Summit, together with other South Caucasian states (Bergen Communiqué, 2005), and took responsibility to modify its educational system in order to harmonize it with the European Higher Education Area (Bologna Declaration, 1999). With this action, Georgia agreed on the following aspects:

Introduction of easily recognizable, two-cycle degree system: this provision envisaged introducing the two-cycle system in higher education: Bachelor's (3-4 years) and Master's (1-2 years) degrees (Bologna Declaration, 1999). Later on the third cycle, PhD studies (3-4 years) was also added to this system (London Communiqué, 2007). The similar systems established in the majority of the European states participating in the Bologna process were meant to support easier mobility of students and staff, both academic and administrative. In addition, this provision also envisaged the introduction of structured national qualification frameworks that would be in correspondence with the European qualification framework and would enhance not only the mobility within the academic sphere, but also the employment possibilities for students at both, local and international (European) levels (Bergen Communiqué, 2005).

Structurally, Georgia's performance in this respect can be regarded as positive: currently, all Georgian universities, both public and private, operate with the abovementioned system the structure of which is defined by the state Law on Higher Education. In fact, Georgian higher education started transferring to the two-cycle system in 1994 (EPPM, 2008). However, there are certain problems connected with the quality of performance by the Georgian universities, especially on the third cycle of higher education – doctoral studies. Recent research conducted in Georgia shows that there are severe problems affecting the quality of doctoral studies, such as lack of human resources reflected in the disproportionate distribution of students and professors, formality of relationship between PhD students and their academic supervisors, lack of assessment criteria, inflexibility and obscurity of the regulations, lack of PhD funding, lack of subject-related courses, etc. (Gurchiani, et. al, 2014).

Introduction of European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) that would provide a solid instrument for ensuring quality of education and transparency of the process, as well as enhance the student mobility. With this, students would be allowed to get certain credits in another (foreign)

university that would be recognized by their home universities and counted in the total amount of credits required for awarding degree (Bologna Declaration, 1999). But first and foremost, ECTS plays a crucial role in structuring the programme curriculum itself, as the portion of each course is assigned and recognized in advance and the workload of the course is predetermined in accordance to the number of credits the course has. Therefore, the curriculum is more structured, and as Duclaud-Williams put it, is “a counterweight to an anarchical situation in which each professor was free to add new elements to his courses regardless of the impact which this might have on student workload and completion rates.” (Duclaud-Williams, 2004).

Georgian higher education institutions fulfilled this obligation and introduced ECTS as the only method of students formal assessment starting from 2006 (EPPM, 2008); however, again, it is debatable whether or not this is done formally or substantively. Despite the fact that the accreditation process looks into the distribution of credits and student workload, the recent ongoing study on the assessment of Bologna process in Georgia conducted by the Center for Social Sciences, shows some preliminary evidence, that ECTS and the student workload may not be always aligned, and ECTS structure might be used for fulfilling formal obligations towards accreditation process only.

Mobility: in fact, the students and staff mobility was one of the first provisions (together with the abovementioned aspects) that were agreed upon not only by the Bologna Declaration, but also by the Sorbonne Declaration of 1998 that was signed by the Ministers of Higher Education of four European States: United Kingdom, France, Germany and Italy. Sorbonne Declaration created the grounds for the whole process of the modernization of European higher education by creating the European Higher Education Area – EHEA (Sorbonne Declaration, 1998). Mobility was considered one of the most important aspects for the exchange of the scholarly thought, supporting an intellectual inquiry across the European boundaries.

An interesting aspect of this provision was the idea that enhancing the student mobility would also require certain funding. Therefore, at the Bucharest Ministerial Conference of 2012, the Bologna member states agreed to address the European Union to introduce specific regulations on using national grants and scholarships for funding the student mobility periods in partner foreign universities (Bucharest Ministerial Conference, 2012).

Nevertheless, it should be underlined here that the whole Bologna Process is more a set of voluntary reforms that the member states agree to accomplish, rather than a binding obligatory rules. Therefore, the decisions such as the abovementioned interstate portability of scholarships and grants should be agreed upon by the member states individually. Considering the fact that might be hard for some states to allocate money from central budgets to provide funding for student mobility, the EU provides extra funding for this purpose through various programmes, such as Erasmus Mundus and Erasmus +. EU funding itself is divided into so-called “degree mobility” (applying to foreign university for getting degree) and “credit mobility” (applying to foreign university for getting certain amount of credits) funds.

Georgia has a steady grow in terms of student mobility (see appendix 1), largely based on the abovementioned EU funding; however, the interstate portability of the national scholarships is limited.

Starting from 2005, Georgia introduced a centralized entry exam model for all applicants of higher education institutions, meaning that the admission process on undergraduate level is strictly regulated by the state. This system is tightly linked to the allocation of the national scholarships (NAEC, 2011). Therefore, the state also regulates the movement of its money. Currently, Georgian higher education system permits students to “take” their state scholarships with them if they participate in the so-called “outbound mobility” within the country, i.e. in case student decides to move from one Georgian university to another with the aim to get a degree in the second university. But the students cannot use their national grants for studying in the foreign university. A separate scholarship system under the Prime Minister of Georgia provides funding for degree-seeking applicants; however, this system is limited to graduate students only (Center for International Education). Credit mobility is not funded by the state at all.

Quality Assurance is one of the most essential provisions of the Bologna process that covered several important measures: (a) introducing the programme accreditation and institutional authorization systems, (b) obliging universities to be responsible for the quality assurance of their study processes by introducing the quality assurance offices as core administrative units of the universities, and (c) introducing the internal and external quality assurance mechanisms by the universities (Prague Communiqué, 2001; Berlin Communiqué, 2003).

Formally, Georgia fulfilled its obligations in this respect. There is a National Center for Educational Quality Enhancement responsible for national accreditation and authorization processes. All the Georgian universities have quality assurance units complied of several specialists mainly responsible for meeting the accreditation standards set by the National Center; however, they also have additional functions such as evaluation of academic personnel, monitoring students’ academic performance, students’ mobility and recognition of credits, etc (Javakhishvili, et. al 2010). As for the last quality assurance instrument, which implies that universities should monitor the quality of teaching and learning using either their own resources through students and professors (internal mechanisms), or their peers from other universities (external mechanisms), this one is left as an optional (not mandatory) tool that can be used by the universities.

However, according to various studies conducted in Georgia, there is a three-fold problem resulting from the current accreditation and authorization systems: a) the National Center is strictly dependent on the Government of Georgia and cannot acting independently¹, is not part of any international consortia or association working on accreditation, such as, for instance, European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education; b) the programmes do not have international accreditation, i.e. are accredited domestically, and not by the international independent accreditation agency (Darchia, 2013), which hinders the recognition of the degree on an international level; and c) the accreditation and authorization processes do not include any foreign experts, and have a high risk of nepotism. Nevertheless, it should be pointed out that international accreditation is a long-term project of the Ministry of Education that was already piloted in 2015, when one of the academic programmes of Tbilisi

¹ In recent years, this dependency even increased when the Deputy Minister of Education and Science was also appointed as the head of the National Center for Educational Quality Enhancement.

State University was awarded an international accreditation by the Foundation for International Business Administration Accreditation - FIBAA (Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia, 2015).

Despite the fact that the Bologna Process is mainly concentrated on higher education, it also aims at the component of the **Lifelong Learning**. It was also underlined to be one of the important aspects of Bologna process, increasing the possibility for people to study in an unlimited time period, through formal and informal education (Darchia, 2013). This means not only the education for adults, who would like to master new skills and competences required by the contemporary labour market (such as computer literacy, languages, presentation skills, etc.), but also the possibility to get formal education, i.e. continue the terminated studies after several years or accumulate credits through short-term courses, which would be afterwards incorporated and counted in the degree programme, in case they wish to get one.

The scholarly literature or studies on the performance of the Georgian universities in respect to implementing the lifelong learning component is very scarce, thus it is a bit hard to provide the accurate, state-of-the-art data on this matter. According to the study conducted in 2009, lifelong learning was regarded as one of the weakest dimensions of Bologna process that was largely neglected by the Georgian universities: only very small number of universities applied for the accreditation of the vocational programmes, and the majority of the Georgian universities offered certificate courses only in languages and ICT, while other spheres were largely ignored (Darchia, 2009).

Bologna documents also admit the necessity to enhance the student **Employability** through providing related guidance services, establishing career development centers at the universities, involving employers in the study process, providing internships and increasing the focus on the development of various transferable skills (Leuven Communiqué, 2009).

It should be admitted here that Georgian universities partially fulfilled the abovementioned obligations concerning supporting student employability. For instance, career development center operate in the majority of the Georgian universities, development of transferable skills is formally assessed by the accreditation process, etc. However, the recent studies show that, just as it was mentioned in case of other aspects, employment dimension of the Bologna process is only partially or formally fulfilled in Georgia. The results of the recent study on the compatibility of academic programmes with the labour market requirements show, that (a) the university graduates largely lack the skills necessary on the current labour market; (b) internship opportunities are not always provided and are rarely effective as lack certain monitoring elements; (c) career development centers lack visibility and their capacity is underused by both, students and employers (Lezhava & Amashukeli, 2015).

Social Dimension, was one of the last aspects of Bologna Process envisaging the equal access to education for all, enhancing the learning opportunities for socially unprotected, people with disabilities, minorities, etc. by providing them with funding or consultative services (Berlin Communiqué, 2003). Of course, equality of access to education for both male and female applicants was also envisioned here.

As mentioned above, Bologna Declaration was merely a voluntary document and not a legally binding one. Thus, each country responded to these requirements individually, in a time-stretched manner, with

Georgia being no exception. Georgia modernized its HE system step by step introducing certain laws and regulations, corresponding to its obligations taken under the Bologna process, such as introducing three-cycle degree programmes with its stages strictly regulated by the Law on Higher Education of Georgia; establishing the quality assurance units at the universities; establishing the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), etc. Other aspects, such as lifelong learning, mobility, social dimension, employment opportunities, etc., are to be implemented by the universities themselves and cannot be regulated by the state. Thus, these aspects remain largely unmonitored by the state and are totally under the responsibility of the universities. Herewith, it should be also underlined, that even those aspects that are under the state responsibility, lack strong quality monitoring mechanisms (e.g. flaw in authorization and accreditation processes, etc.).

Based on the abovementioned, one can conclude, that the state, as well as the universities try to formally fulfill various obligations towards Bologna process, however, substantively, there are number of core, fundamental problems (such as quality of teaching and learning, promoting student employability, etc.) that remain unresolved. This can be explained by the fact that the Europeanization of the higher education was a pragmatic decision of the Georgian government, and not a bottom-up process that originated at the grass-root level by the necessity to modernize higher education.

Georgian higher education system was collapsing in the post-Soviet era, and the newly formed post-revolutionary government saw Bologna Process as a way out. However, this was not only the Georgian case. Huisman, et al. argue that the four Ministers (UK, Germany, France and Italy) initiating Sorbonne Declaration of 1998, saw this initiative as a means of addressing their domestic problems connected with the higher education (Huisman, et al, 2012). And this pattern continues to work nowadays as well, since the majority of the governments trying to implement painful reforms domestically can always refer to the Bologna process as an imperative justification of the process (Duclaud-Williams, 2004). However, we cannot say that this approach is either wrong or unjustified, especially in the country like post-Soviet Georgia, where, as mentioned above, the higher education system was on the edge of catastrophe before signing the Bologna declaration.

Besides, universities are not always willing to undergo painful reforms that change their status quo and aim at long-term perspectives, they would rather have an immediate effect. For instance, one of such painful but rather important steps is the accreditation process of academic programmes. Universities saw accreditation as a punitive mechanism imposed upon them by the state. This problem was further aggravated by the fact that the state decided to link the state scholarships with the accreditation in order to force the universities to have their programmes accredited. This had both positive and negative outcomes:

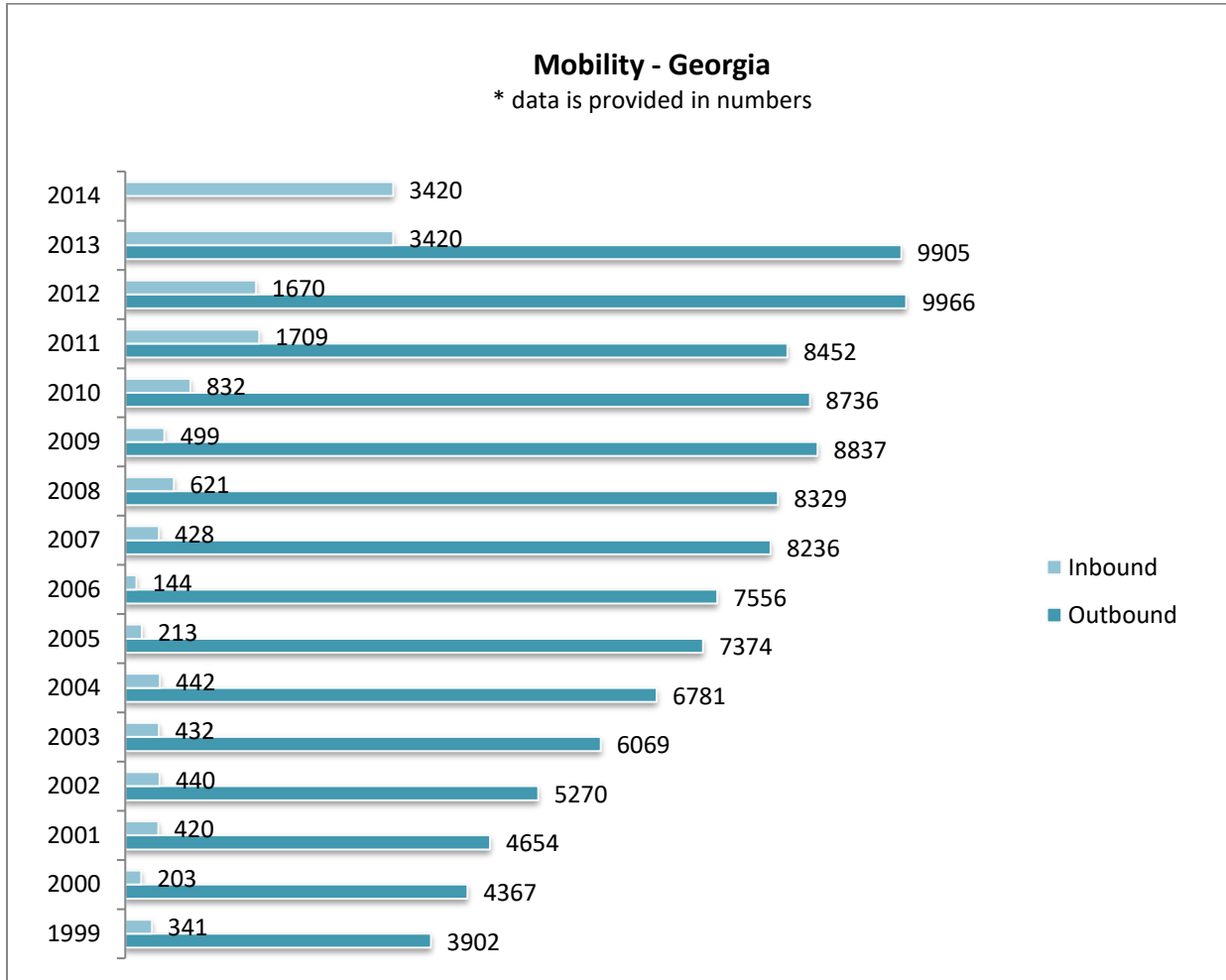
- **positive:** All the degree programmes at Georgian universities, both public and private, have had their programmes accredited, thus making them more structured.
- **negative:** Accreditation became a very formal procedure that was based on meeting the regulations only formally, while the programmes, their aims and outcomes, and the means of achieving these outcomes, were not substantively verified.

The similar example can be reviewed concerning the employability of students as well. Universities do recognize that supporting student employability is their responsibility, however, their activities addressing this issue, are rather fragmented and not quite effective. While the state does not interfere in such issues at all, as this is regarded as the part of university autonomy.

As a conclusion, it can be said that the Europeanization of higher education in Georgia was the only means of addressing severe domestic problems that were inherited by the post-revolutionary government. First, it was a long-wished reform of the system itself that everybody agreed that needed changes. Second, it was an attraction for the population of the post-Soviet country that looked at Europe as a proper, much better way of constructing and managing different spheres, and particularly that of education. Lastly, Europeanization of higher education was part of the government's Western aspiration, hence the process of Georgia's Europeanization itself. However, it is a long-term project that in addition to formal compliance with the European standards and Bologna requirements, also needs a substantive reforming to enhance the quality of teaching and learning.

Appendix 1

Student inbound and outbound mobility in 1999-2014, Georgia.



Source: UNESCO UIS 2016

References:

- Darchia, I. (2013). Quality Assurance. *Strategic Development of Higher Education and Science in Georgia Policy Analysis of Higher Education according to Five Strategic Directions*. The International Institute for Education Policy, Planning and Management.
- Duclaud-Williams, R. (2004). *Europeanisation and Higher Education*, ESRC/UACES Series of Seminars on EBPP.
- Gurchiani, K., Bregvadze, T., & Janashia, S. (2014). PhD Quality Enhancement in Georgia. Ilia State university.
- Higher Education Reform Outcomes (Descriptive report in accordance to Bologna process indicators). (2008). The International Institute for Education Policy, Planning and Management.
- Huisman, J., Adelman, C., Hsieh, C.C., Shams, F., and Wilkins, S. (2012). Europe's Bologna process and its impact on global higher education. In D.K. Deardorff, H. de Wit, J.D. Heyl, and T. Adams (eds.), *The SAGE Handbook of International Higher Education*, pp. 81-100. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- Javakhishvili, N., Chabukiani, N., Javakhishvili, M., Gogsadze, S., & Makaradze, M. (2010). *The Best and the Worst Practices of Quality Enhancement – Case of Georgia*. Tbilisi State University.
- Joint declaration on harmonisation of the architecture of the European higher education system. (1998). Sorbonne.
- Law of Georgia on Higher Education, Article VII. Levels of higher education.
- Mobility for Better Learning. (2012). *Mobility strategy 2020 for the European Higher Education Area (EHEA)*. EHEA Ministerial Conference, Bucharest.
- Radaelli, C.M., 2003. *The Europeanisation of Public Policy*. In: Fatherstone, K., Radaelli, C.M. (Eds.), *The Politics of Europeanisation*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Realising the European Higher Education Area. (2003). *Communiqué of the Conference of Ministers responsible for Higher Education*, Berlin.
- The Bologna Declaration. (1999). *Joint declaration of the European Ministers of Education*
- The European Higher Education Area - Achieving the Goals. (2005). *Communiqué of the Conference of European Ministers Responsible for Higher Education*, Bergen.
- Towards the European Higher Education Area. (2001). *Communiqué of the meeting of European Ministers in charge of Higher Education*, Prague.
- Towards the European Higher Education Area: responding to challenges in a globalised world. (2007). EHEA Ministerial Conference, London.
- UNESCO Institute for Statistics. Retrieved from <http://www.uis.unesco.org/Pages/default.aspx>
- Website of the Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia. Retrieved from <http://www.mes.gov.ge/content.php?id=5848&lang=geo>