

ASSESSING THE DEVELOPMENT AND HARMONISATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM IN GEORGIA FOLLOWING THE BOLOGNA PROCESS

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Abstract. The development and harmonization of Higher Education system in Georgian remains a challenging process. Georgia became a part of the Bologna process in May 2005 and this significantly changed the country's higher education system, bringing it closer to European standards. Despite the positive changes, there is a number of reforms that have been under argument among researchers.

The research analyses the Bologna process in general and its implication in the Georgian higher education system, rethinking the main goals and approaches of the Bologna process and evaluating its significance. The paper particularly addresses the quality assurance standards in general and its execution in Georgia, the internationalization of higher educational institutions of Georgia, and students' mobilities inside and outside of the country within an Erasmus Mundus and Erasmus+ framework. The results of the study show that the Bologna process has positively impacted higher education system in Georgia, it has become more transparent and closer to international standards; however, there is still room for improvements, especially in the scope of internationalization and process of attracting international students.

Key words: higher education in Georgia. government and education, Bologna Process.

JEL code: I28; I23; H52

Introduction

Since 2000, the education system of Georgia, including the higher education sector, has undergone a number of reforms. Among them were a number of radical steps that have positively changed the Higher Education Sector in Georgia. The main goal of this was modification of the education system of the post-Soviet period and reorganization of it according to modern standards, the so-called Europeanization. The initial task of the reforms was the creation of an internationally recognized higher education system under conditions of growing competition. The aforementioned reforms were preceded by legal foundations known as the Bologna process.

Bologna process, which was initiated in 1999 by 29 Western liberal democracies, has succeeded and brought significant changes not only in European countries, but has impacted educational systems worldwide (Marquand, 2018). According to previous research (Scott, 2018) the Bologna Process has been a key instrument for many eastern and central European countries for reconnecting these countries to the European educational system after many decades of totalitarian rule. Also, other post-Soviet countries of Central Asia with varying degrees of success have tried to approach unified Western European standards. However, there have been a lot of challenges for these countries, of which the most significant, according to Heyneman and Skinner (2014), have been corruption, private higher education, mobility of students and qualifications via ECTS, and integration into the European community.

Georgia joined the Bologna process in 2005, at the Bergen summit. According to Glonti and Chitashvili (2006), for the country this important step became the initial stage of fundamental reforms of the educational system, and on the other hand, it was a manifestation of the Western course chosen by the post-revolutionary government. Involvement in the Bologna process was a solution for the newly elected government to get out of the chaos created in the educational space in the post-Soviet period, which

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included not only the financial crisis and corruption in higher educational institutions, but also the lack of strategic planning and management of education, innovative teaching and research methods, updated curricula and research-based teaching.

This study aims to assess the main goals and approaches of the Bologna process and evaluate its significance in Georgia. To reach the aim, two research tasks were selected: (1) to review the scientific literature and regulations regarding development of Bologna process; (2) to analyse implementation of Bologna process in Georgia. Various research methods were used within the scope of the study, such as induction, deduction, analytical comparison, statistical analysis and evaluation, and qualitative approach to national and international reports, scientific literature regarding Bologna process and its implementation in Georgia. Additionally, statistical data from the National Statics office of Georgia was analysed. In the context of the theoretical literature review, the analysis of secondary sources was carried out. The events before the Bologna Process were summarized, as well as the normative documents of the Bologna Process were processed, namely: the Sorbonne (1998) and Bologna (1999) declarations, the summary communiques of the meetings of the ministers of the European countries responsible for higher education (Prague, Berlin, Bergen, London, Leuven, Bucharest, Budapest -Vienna and Yerevan). In the research, the authors have described the importance of the mentioned documents in the aspect of planning and implementation of the main standards in higher education in Georgia.

Research results and discussion

Development of Bologna process

On 19 June 1999, in Bologna, one of the oldest university cities in Italy, the joint declaration of the European Ministers of Education, known as the "Bologna Declaration", was signed. The declaration was signed by representatives of 29 European countries (Austria, Belgium, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom), which laid the foundation for the creation of the European Higher Education Area. The Bologna Declaration was preceded by the adoption of such documents as: the Magna Carta Universitatum, (1988), The Lisbon Convention (Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications Related to Higher Education in the European Region, 1997) and the Sorbonne Declaration (Harmonization of the Architecture of the European Higher Education System, 1998).

The main idea of the Bologna process is to increase the compatibility of education systems of different countries and the international competitiveness of European higher education. The signatory countries of the Bologna Declaration (1999) agreed on the following directions:

- introducing an easily understandable and easily comparable, compatible academic quality system, including through the diploma supplement. The purpose of which is to promote the employment of European citizens and the international competitiveness of the European system of higher education;
- introduction of a system based on two main levels, pre-diploma and post-diploma levels. A prerequisite for admission to the second level of education is the successful completion of at least three years of the first level. The academic degree awarded at the end of the first level of higher education, as the appropriate level of qualification, must be acceptable for the European labour market. The second level must be completed by awarding a Master's or Doctorate degree;
- creation and implementation of the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) as a means of promoting student mobility. It should be possible for students to move between countries and recognise their academic qualifications after mobilities.

In the following years after the signing of the Bologna Declaration, the member countries of the Bologna process met every two to three years in the same format to summarize the results already achieved for the past period and to draw up future plans. During the period from 1997 to 2020, there were signed 15 legal regulations and agreements, starting from the Lisbon Convention (1997) till Rome Communiqué (2020), all of them analysed below. At the same time, the number of countries interested in the Bologna process adoption also increased.

One of the main legal foundations for the establishment of a unified European educational system was represented by *The Lisbon Convention (1997)*. With this document the participants of the convention recognized the right to higher education as a decisive factor in the expansion and development of human knowledge. It is recognized that higher education plays a vital role in promoting peace, understanding, tolerance and mutual trust between countries. The great diversity of education systems in the European region is a reflection of its cultural, social, political, philosophical, religious and economic diversity, which is a special achievement and deserves respect. In order to realize the aforementioned in reality, the participants support the full use of educational resources for each citizen of all member countries, stimulate them to continue their studies or complete a specific period of study in educational institutions of other countries.

In 1998, *Sorbonne Declaration (1998)* was signed – a joint declaration of the four higher education ministers of France, Germany, Italy and the United Kingdom. The document stated that the open European area of higher education contains rich positive perspectives, but on the other hand, the European area of higher education requires constant efforts to remove barriers and create teaching and learning structures that expand mobility and close cooperation. With this document countries agreed to strengthen the intellectual, cultural, social and technical dimensions of Europe, which is largely determined by the universities, whose role is crucial for such development (Sorbonne Declaration, 1998:1).

The Sorbonne Declaration announced the idea of lifelong learning, and also focused on the role and importance of internationalization of education. The conversation concerns the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) and the principles of its use. With the abovementioned declaration, the foundation was laid for the system of credits, since the recognition of received credits would make it possible to start or continue studying in various European universities and to obtain an academic degree at any time of life. Declaration also noted that the student should have the opportunity to start academic work at any time of his professional life and from any basis. The willingness and desire to create new international programs and mobility of students and teachers between universities was declared.

Bologna Declaration (1999) presents the basis of the modern educational system. The main goal of the Bologna process is to develop certain means and tools for connecting national educational systems. The declaration emphasizes that European higher education institutions accepted the challenge and played a key role in the creation of the European space of higher education and the revival of the fundamental principles of the 1988 Magna Charta Universitatum of Bologna. This is very important, since it is the independence and autonomy of universities that ensure the constant relevance of higher education and research to the changing needs, demands of society and the development of scientific knowledge. The course was taken in the right directions, but achieving a high level of compatibility and comparability of the higher education systems of different countries required continuous efforts.

In 2021, *Prague Communiqué* defined several new elements:

- **Introducing a system of easily understandable and comparable academic degrees.** Ministers urge universities and other higher education institutions to take full advantage of existing national

legislation and European mechanisms aimed at promoting academic and professional recognition of courses, degrees and other achievements, so that citizens can use their qualifications, competences and skills in the entire European area of higher education;

- **Introduction of the ECTS credit system** - for greater flexibility in the process of learning and awarding qualifications, it is necessary to adopt a single cornerstone of qualifications, which will be based on a credit system, such as the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) or another easily comparable system with transfer and accumulation functions. It was the first attempt to promote the compatibility of students' European higher education and their placement in the European labour market, together with publicly recognized quality assurance systems;
- **Promoting mobility** - Ministers confirmed that improving the mobility of students, teachers, academics and administrative staff (as set out in the Bologna Declaration) is an important achievement. Thus, they confirmed their determination to overcome all the obstacles that prevent the free movement of students, teachers, scientists and administrative staff and emphasized the social importance of mobility. They noted the mobility opportunities offered by EU programs and the progress made in this field;
- **Quality assurance** - the ministers emphasized the need for close cooperation, mutual trust and recognition of national quality assurance systems at the European level. Encourage universities and other higher education institutions to share best practices and establish mutually acceptable mechanisms for assessment and accreditation/certification.

Berlin Communiqué (2003) was an important meeting as 7 new countries were included in the process (Albania, Andorra, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Holy See, Russia, Serbia, Montenegro and Macedonia). Thus, the number of countries involved in the process increased to 40. It was decided to allow all member states of the European Cultural Convention to be involved in the Bologna process and to submit a plan for the implementation of the Bologna goals in the higher education system.

Bergen Communiqué (2005) was important for the countries of Eastern Europe. On 5 May 2005, new countries joined the Bologna process at the Bergen ministerial conference (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine). The number of participating countries has increased to 45.

With Dublin Descriptor (2005) a framework of qualifications for the European Higher Education Area was adopted. The document discusses the three-level education system, learning outcomes and qualifications for each level. Competencies have been defined for each level of education.

Kazakhstan joined the Bologna process in 2010, when *Budapest-Vienna Declaration* was signed. The Bologna process and its results, the European space of higher education, regional and international cooperation in higher education were named as an unprecedented example at the global level. Confidence and interest in it increased significantly in different parts of the world and made European higher education more accessible to the world.

The participating parties in *Yerevan Communiqué (2015)* noted that the voluntary convergence and coordination reform of the education system took place. It is based on strong public funding, shared views on quality assurance and recognition principles and processes, common tools and is implemented through a single quality structure. Thanks to the Bologna reform, the opportunities for mobility of students and graduates within the European Higher Education Area have been increased through the recognition of their qualifications and period of study. Graduates of educational programs are provided with the knowledge, skills and competences to continue their studies or join the European labour market. Educational institutions are becoming more and more active in the international context, and professors and teachers collaborate in joint pedagogical and research programs.

Paris Communiqué (2018) symbolically coincided with the 20th anniversary of the signing of the Sorbonne Declaration. Analysing the achieved results, it was emphasized: academic freedom and unity, institutional autonomy, participation of students and academic staff in the management of higher education, common progress - in the introduction and implementation of agreed reforms. The Paris Communiqué, for the first time during the Bologna process, recommended the implementation of short-cycle programs that would facilitate the rapid training of students for employment.

Finally, *Rome Communiqué (2020)* when Ministers' approach inclusive studies and training, innovative teaching and assessment methods and interconnected frameworks and tools to facilitate and enhance international cooperation. Hence main emphasis was made to higher educational institutions as key actors in meeting the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals by 2030.

Results of Bologna process in Georgia

Initial reforms of higher education in Georgia took place before the Bologna Declaration - after collapse of Soviet Union in 1994 when Georgia had switched to a two-tier system of higher education, when the German model of higher education existing in the Soviet period began to be replaced by the Anglo-Saxon educational model (Amashukeli M. et al., 2017). These changes were implemented for the first time with the introduction of undergraduate and graduate programs of the Faculty of Physics at Tbilisi State University. During the following years, this process gradually covered various higher educational institutions. In 2005, the reform of the third level, "postgraduate", was implemented, which was equalized to the doctoral level, therefore postgraduates received a doctorate degree (International Institute for Education Policy Planning and Management, 2008).

There are some visible results of the Bologna process in Georgia. The following dimensions have been developed over 20 years:

- unified quality system of compatible and comparable qualifications;
- European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS); quality assurance and its mechanisms;
- mobility programs of students and academic staff;
- close connection of higher education and research;
- the connection of higher education and the ability to adapt to the demands of the employment market;
- lifelong learning;
- social dimension, which implies equal access to higher education, both in gender and ethnic-cultural terms;
- inclusion of the European dimension (mobility and international cooperation) in higher education;
- inclusive and innovative approaches to learning and teaching process is recognized in the Ministry of education and science Georgia, but it is not financially supported by the state.

Despite the positive evaluation of Bologna Process in Georgia, e.g. that the Bologna process supports strengthening the graduate's employability (Lezhava, 2016; Tsiklashvili, Poladashvili, 2021), there are some criticisms that exist regarding the achieving goals stated in previous communiques. The authors further have assessed several aspects of higher education in Georgia, such as quality assurance, internationalization of higher educational institutions and mobility of students and academic staff.

Quality assurance: In Georgia LEPL National Center for Educational Quality Enhancement promotes the improvement of the quality of education within the scope of its competence, as well as develops recommendations, authorizes educational institutions and accredits their educational programs, provides confirmation of the validity of educational documents issued in Georgia, implements the recognition of

education received abroad, maintains the register of educational institutions and verifies the linguistic correctness of the strict registration document - the state document confirming education.

The process of institutional accreditation in Georgia was started by the Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia in 2004. The purpose of accreditation is to assess the compliance of educational programs with standards. Accreditation is mandatory for all levels of regulated educational programs.

The importance of accreditation is conditioned by the fact that in case of refusal of accreditation or cancellation of crediting, the University loses the right to receive a state grant for BA and a master's grant for the relevant educational program. Accordingly, higher educational institution stops implementing the regulated educational program, including at the doctoral level.

With this record, it can be concluded that through the National Center for Educational Quality Enhancement, the state controls the quality of education, monitors the fulfilment of all conditions by higher education institutions, and on the other hand avoids excessive budget spending to finance the education sector. However, the subject of criticism is the fact that the record may be used to artificially reduce educational programs. In addition, one of the negative outcomes of the accreditation was the fact that it has become a very formal procedure that was based on meeting the regulations only formally, while the study programmes, aims and the means of achieving outcomes, where not substantively verified (Lezhava, 2016).

Internationalization of higher educational institutions

In the context of raising the quality of education and increasing the competitiveness of higher education institutions, the internationalization strategy of higher education and its subsequent implementation are gaining increasing interest.

Internationalization of higher education institutions includes mobility of students and academic staff, joint educational and research programmes.

The development and implementation of the internationalization strategy in the long term is the basis for the success of the university in various directions.

Despite the importance of internationalization, the research conducted in Georgia until now has not given promising results. In particular, according to Alferidze (2014), 11% of Georgian public universities did not have a clear strategy for internationalization, only 4 universities out of 28 universities had a strategy published on their website. It is not drawn up according to the classical scheme of strategy development, and the internationalization part of strategies is largely wishful thinking rather than reasoned strategic directions.

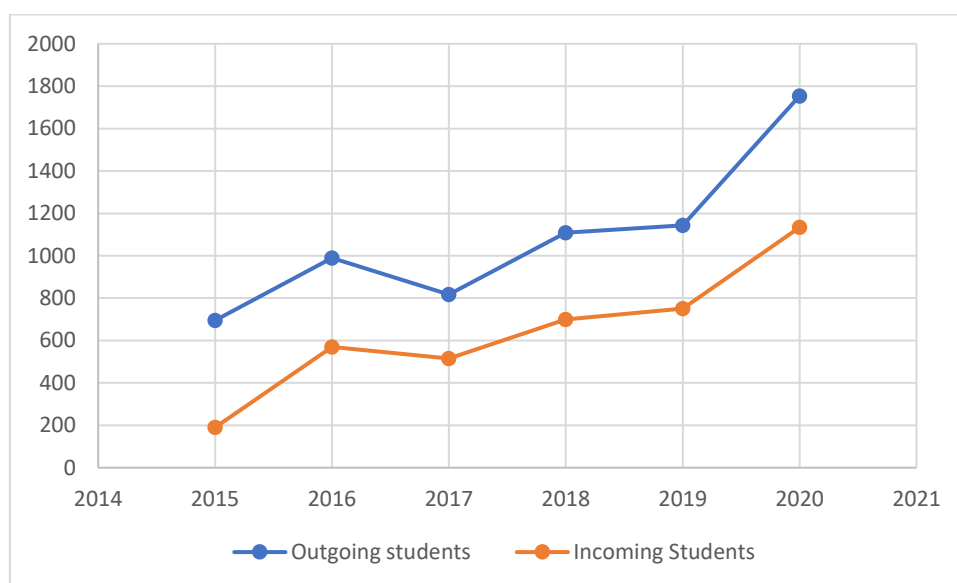
As part of this research, during 2017-2020, most universities changed or renewed their internationalization strategy. This was facilitated by raising the issue of internationalization in the higher education institutions authorization standards. Today, authorization already obliges higher education institutions to have:

- internationalization policy;
- international cooperation and internationalization mechanisms and analysis of their effectiveness assessment;
- mechanisms for attracting foreign students and staff.

The Bologna process resulted in several steps improved in higher education system of Georgia and initiated internationalization process. Considering the Soviet system for the country, it became a huge perspective for further improvements that would be granted from internationalization and globalization.

There are few key aspects that hinder of developing the process. Mainly it relates to financial issues; however, also lack of English-speaking academic staff negatively impacts internationalization (Kvantaliani, 2022). First, it has to be mentioned that the number of incoming students is rather small, compared to the number of students going abroad. At the same time studies have shown that the number of incoming international students is increasing each year, especially from African and Asian countries, e.g. India, Nigeria, Iraq and Azerbaijan (Kyantiliani, 2022).

Similar trend and remarkable imbalance are also notable among Erasmus+ participant students (Figure 1).



Source: authors' calculations based on National Erasmus+ office of Georgia, 2023

Fig. 1. Incoming and outgoing Erasmus+ students in Georgia

According to the above-mentioned statistics, Georgian higher education is not attractive for students during their Erasmus+ mobilities. Some problems and difficulties exist regarding the Visa issues entering Georgia for a long time, accommodation, awarding credits, finding compliance courses etc.

Mobility

Students' and academic staff mobilities were firstly recognized and approved under the Sorbonne and Bologna Declarations. International mobilities were accepted for the idea of exchanging skills and experience, thoughts and plans of improvement of academic sphere. Later, during the Bucharest Ministerial Conference (2012) partner countries addressed the European Union creating specific regulations and funding the international mobilities among partner countries and universities.

Approaches and goals of the Bologna process are usually based on voluntary reforms that are suggested to partner countries. However, legislation and administration are grounded on local government. In Georgia, Erasmus Mundus and Erasmus+ mobilities are increasing in all aspects for students and staff mobilities that are funded by European Union; however, financial support of Georgian universities for mobilities is rather limited. Credit mobilities are not funded by the state (Lezhava, 2016).

Conclusions

- 1) From the time of the Soviet Union transformation, the higher education system's adaptation to the modern standards was a reform that was highly assessed by national and international experts. Following the Bologna process, higher education system in Georgia has changed significantly - three

cycle system and the qualification framework provided by EHEA are recognized and implemented at all higher educational institutions in Georgia.

2) The corruption that was during the Soviet and Post-soviet era was eliminated and accreditation of universities and study programmes have become more transparent. Quality assurance standards are modernized and rationalized to European standards. However, there are some aspects that still need to be improved.

3) Credit transfer and mobility processes are simplified to European higher educational institutions. Still, challenges exist among Georgian higher educational institutions, mainly when students want to change the institute or academic programme.

4) Internationalization and flows of incoming foreign students are very significant areas for the development of higher education in Georgia. While current numbers of foreign students are not high, though there is a tendency of the number of foreign students to increase, especially from African and Eastern Asian countries.

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