

Abstract

European integration is a main concept for the development of the Georgian higher education system. Joining the Bologna Process (19.05.2005) made it “official”: we are obliged to introduce European standards in all aspects of higher education at all levels.

This paper attempts to answer following questions: what are the formal and informal criteria and indicators for the European integration and how well is Georgia doing in this field?

Key Words: Bologna Process; European Standards.

After years of isolation under the Soviet regime, Georgia is now given a unique historical chance of opening up its culture and demonstrating it to the rest of the world.

Political, economic and social integration into European structures has become one of the major tools of country’s development in the last decade. Being part of Europe imposes a high responsibility – we have to prove our readiness to reform the country corresponding to the European standards. This is true also for the education in general and particularly for the higher education.

Being a part of European Higher Education Area (EHEA) is considered for Georgia as a unique chance to become part of Europe not only in a sense of political purposes or cultural orientation, but also based on longstanding merit based demission as an education as major force for modern world.

In the Decree of Parliament of Georgia “The Main Directions of Higher Education Development in Georgia”, adopted on March 1, 2002, is a special statement:

“The higher education has become of international nature in an increasingly globalized world. Thus it is essential that the higher education system of Georgia become a part of the common European educational area through partnership relationships with international organizations and leading schools”.

The new Government of Georgia is fully aware that human capital formation is key to political and economic development and reform, and a premise for mutually beneficial integration both regionally and with Europe and the world at large. Government appreciates that the existing system of higher education falls short of offering Georgian society the promise of an articulate, vibrant democracy and sustainable economic growth. The necessity of higher education reform is clear in terms of content and in terms of policy. The politics of social change puts the emphasis on changing roles of universities in society – stronger links to societies needs, a shift from teacher centered to student centered universities, development of the institutional framework for lifelong learning, mobility, etc. creates the sufficient forces for searching the new decisions in developing the strategy on national education policy.

Joining the Bologna Process in May 2005 determined main aspects of the higher education reform in Georgia. But even before that principles of “The Law of Georgia on Higher Education” (adopted in December 2004) and parliamentary Decree on “The Main Directions of Higher Education Development in Georgia (2002), were developed and stated according to the already well known standards of the EHEA.

The Bologna process is fascinating challenge for Georgia to fulfill several first range tasks at once: to become part of Europe politically, to reform the education in a framework that is consensus of majority of countries in Europe, to be prepared politically and socially for EU integration, to be integrated in world labor market and setting the common European standards of quality assurance and by that to be opened to educational market.

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Bologna could be regarded for Georgia as an additional bridge to the desired EU membership. Close relations between Bologna and EU have been explained in the report of Pavel Zgaga (2003):

“Although the Bologna process was initiated as mainly an intergovernmental process, there is an evident and growing convergence with EU processes aimed at strengthening European cooperation in higher education. ... the Process was no longer merely a voluntary action for the EU Member States, or for the candidate Member States either. Therefore, in the light of EU enlargement, the growing convergence between the Bologna process and educational policy making on the EU level will soon become more and more visible. However, since its establishment the “Bologna Club” has been wider than EU, and even after the forthcoming EU enlargement in 2004 it will remain wider. This can only give additional dynamism to the Process”.

Although turning the Bologna Process into the EU sectoral project in higher education is considered as a highly controversial step (Tomusk, 2004), clear political advantages for Georgia are undoubted: Bologna, as a new European higher education brand + EU could be used as a trump in the fight against the soviet legacy in the country’s education system. Good advantage must be made of this opportunity. But at the same time we should be aware that ... *joining the Bologna Club... demands hard work at the national level to improve and connect the “local infrastructure” to agreed “common roads”: readable and comparable degrees, quality assurance, promotion of mobility, etc., etc* (Zgaga, 2003). Realization of the basic concepts and principles of the Bologna Declaration on the levels of universities, government, and the society as a whole is not an easy task.

Establishing modern standards in the higher education system can alleviate the problems facing the country. Higher education institutions must train professionals to develop a strong sense of citizenship and affiliation to the country, at the same time acknowledging their freedoms, rights, and privileges.

Of course it makes sense for Georgia to create a new higher education system that best suits its needs. But whatever the final shape of the reformed system, its underlying procedures must be internationally compatible. An urgent objective of the Georgian state is establishing a modern education system and its integration into the European one.

Political aspects of the Bologna Process have played crucial role in this decision. Besides a chance to reform the system, joining the Bologna Process is considered as a corroboration of the Georgian state always included into the European part of the Eurasian continent, in other words, recognition of our traditional "Europeanness".

Basic principles, which all come from the Bologna Declaration and/or from the Prague, Berlin and Bergen Communiqués and must be implemented till 2010, are elaborated below:

- ! Adoption of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees, essentially based on two main cycles;
- ! Establishment of a system of credits;
- ! International mobility of students and staff;
- ! Promotion of European cooperation in quality assurance;
- ! Promotion of the necessary European dimensions in higher education;
- ! Promotion of Lifelong learning
- ! Student participation in the governance of higher education;
- ! Public responsibility for higher education;
- ! Autonomous universities;
- ! Elaboration of an overarching framework of qualifications for the EHEA;
- ! Inclusion of the doctoral level as the third cycle in the Process;
- ! Promotion of closer links between the EHEA and the European Research Area (ERA);
- ! Reinforce the social dimension;
- ! Implementation of national frameworks of qualifications;
- ! Award and recognition of joint degrees;

- ! Creation of opportunities for flexible learning paths in higher education, including procedures for recognition of prior learning.

Where does Georgia stand in relation to these principles? How far are we off the Europe of the Bologna Declaration? Are above mentioned criteria suitable indicators to measure European integration and if yes, how well is Georgia doing in this field? What are the main challenges for Georgia in its transition to the Europe of Knowledge?

Below we will show data illustrating degree of introduction of each aspect of the Bologna process, such as number and percentage of institutions, fields of study/programs, and students that have been affected by the three-cycle structure, ECTS and the Diploma Supplement for the 2005/06 period (*data provided by the Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia for the Bologna Follow-up Group, 2007*).

The table presents the real number of institutions and programs/fields of study that have introduced the above-mentioned aspects of the Bologna Process, along with the number of students involved. These numbers are also presented as a percentage of those concerned and as a percentage of the total number of institutions, programs and students.

Those regarded as ‘concerned’ by the Bologna Process are all institutions, programs and students that are supposed to implement the Bologna Reforms in accordance with legislation or an official regulation, including institutions that are free to decide as they wish in this respect. Thus studies in medicine and related or other fields are excluded from the data provided below.

	Institutions	Fields of study/programs	Students
Adoption of the model based on three cycles	Public institutions: 10 offering ISCED ¹ studies (59 % of those concerned and 56 % of the total number). Government dependent or State recognized private institutions: 10 offering ISCED level 5A ² studies (50 % of those concerned and 40 % of the total number)	Public institutions: 1 040 ISCED level 5 programs (88 % of the total number). Government dependent or State recognized private institutions: 213 ISCED level 5 programs (83 % of the total number).	Public institutions: 54 210 <i>Bachelor</i> students and 3 705 <i>Master</i> students at ISCED level 5A (80% of the total number). Government dependent or State recognized private institutions: 4 429 <i>Bachelor</i> students and 506 <i>Master</i> students at ISCED level 5A (75 % of the total number).
Adoption of ECTS	All institutions (18 public and 25 government dependent or State recognized private).	All programs (1 185 in public institutions and 256 in government dependent or State recognized private institutions).	
Adoption of the Diploma Supplement	Public institutions: 17 offering ISCED level 5A studies (62 % of		Public institutions: 10 843 <i>Bachelor</i> students (51 % of those

¹ ISCED – International Standard Classification of Education (1997) www.uis.unesco.org/en/act/act_p/isced.html

² ISCED level 5A – Tertiary education, first stage (academic programs corresponding to the bachelor studies)

	<p>those concerned of the total)</p> <p>Government dependent or State recognized private institutions: 20 offering ISCED level 5A studies (80 % of those concerned and of the total number).</p>		<p>concerned).</p> <p>Government dependent or State recognized private institutions: 1 042 <i>Bachelor</i> students (71 % of those concerned).</p>
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Table 1.

In many countries that introduced the new three-cycle structure after the signature of the Bologna Declaration, it was established gradually so that the two systems exist alongside each other for some years, normally until students who began their studies under the previous structure have graduated. Georgia has identified a deadline by which the pre-reform structure will be replaced completely: gradual introduction of the new structure will continue until 2007/2008. Many Georgian universities have already introduced ECTS in advance of the legislative requirement for full implementation by 2009/2010. The purpose of the Diploma Supplement (DS) is to ensure that acquired knowledge and ability will be transparent and readily understood in the context of mobility. Georgia introduced it in 2005.

At the Bergen Conference, the European ministers of higher education adopted an overarching framework of qualifications for the EHEA. This includes reference to the three-cycle study structure and makes use of generic descriptors for each cycle (based on learning outcomes, competences and credits for the first and second cycles). The ministers agreed to prepare national frameworks compatible with the EHEA overarching framework by 2010 and to have begun this task by 2007.

A national qualifications framework (NQF) may be defined as a mechanism for describing formal qualifications and other learning outcomes at all levels of education; its components and format may vary from one country to the next. It is also intended that the framework should be an intelligible meaningful resource at international level. It was reported in February 2007 that around ten countries (most of them are EU member States) had adopted (but not necessarily implemented) a framework of this kind for higher education. Among the many countries that have not yet adopted national qualifications frameworks, the situation varies somewhat. In Georgia a special working group has been set up in 2006 to prepare a model of a NQF.

Considering quality assurance issues, Georgia has also reached certain level of competence and experience.

Quality assurance system became an issue of hot discussions because of its organic connection with an accreditation process, which in turn is of an immense importance for the HEIs: institutions that gain accreditation are entitled to receive students whose tuition expenses are subsidised by the state; they are also entitled to receive public research funding. Besides, the state acknowledges no other diploma but that issued by accredited educational institutions. Admission to the state funding and state recognition are attractive motives for HEIs to start to establish quality assurance structures. Thus, we have a clear top-down approach considering quality assurance implementation, the decision coming from the state; there was no time to wait for university professors and students initiatives, although some precursors already existed.

Meanwhile State Accreditation Service (now: National Center of Education Accreditation of Georgia) has been established in April 2006. The first round of institutional accreditation has reduced the number of HEIs to 117 (from 256), using mainly formal criteria, such as space, equipment, libraries, number of the teaching staff, etc. The second round of institutional accreditation has determined only 42 HEIs as eligible for student admission. Now, new standards for institutional and program accreditation are under development, aiming to focus on the qualitative and not only quantitative aspects of the education. European standards, developed by ENQA serve as an important reference point.

The European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education was set up in 2000 with the aim of promoting the establishment of national quality assurance systems in higher education and strengthening European cooperation in this field. In November 2004, the Network was transformed into the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA). Over 40 quality assurance agencies and associations of higher education have so far joined the association.

The aims of ENQA are to circulate information, experience, good practice and new developments in the field of quality assessment and assurance in higher education among interested parties, including public authorities, higher education institutions and quality assurance agencies.

Membership of ENQA is open to national quality assurance bodies in the signatory states of the Bologna Declaration. National Center of Education Accreditation of Georgia will apply for ENQA membership in 2007.

Quality assurance is especially important in the context of fundamental reform now in Georgia. No single institution, let alone individual, can hope to manage the major curricular and didactic changes that are needed to transform the country's higher education institutions into modern education providers. The institutionalisation of quality assurance systems creates the need for defining of mission statement for HEIs, their aims and objectives as well as how they intend to achieve them, forcing accountability to the society. The quality assurance units have to develop the set of key performance indicators for assessment and evaluation of organisational development and data based policy planning. The SWOT analysis of existing resources as the first step for evaluation of academic programmes in context of threshold and model standards could be considered as the precondition for planning the step-by-step development of quality assurance procedures and regulations on organisational/institutional level.

Following European standards for quality assurance, sharing experience of our colleagues, will help Georgia to become a "full member" of European Higher Education Area, which is one of the most ambitious plans of the country.

Considering all data presented, we could conclude, that according to formal criteria, Georgia is doing quite well in terms of implementation of all required aspects of the Bologna Process and presumably will complete the implementation stage by 2010.

But there are still some problems with implementation of Bologna standards, such as limited international mobility of staff and students, or, to put it more precisely, mostly unilateral mobility: the declared mobility of students and staff has ended in the "one-way" process, when Georgians go to different European universities, and only few foreign students come to Georgia.

To attract international students Georgian HEIs have to offer academic programs in English. *English is the Latin of 21st century.* In the current period, the use of English is central for communicating knowledge worldwide, for instruction even in countries where English is not the

language of higher education, and for cross-border degree arrangements and other programs. Countries that use “small languages” may be tempted to change the medium of instruction at their universities entirely to English. Some Georgian universities, as Tbilisi State Medical University and International Black Sea University already have considerable number of international students, but they mainly come from Turkey, Pakistan, and etc. Students and scholars from European countries (and North America) come to Georgia only in case of Georgian studies (Georgian language and literature). The prospective of flow of European students to Georgia in the nearest future is unreal.

Generally students from industrialized countries who study abroad typically do not earn a degree but rather spend a year or two in the country to broaden their horizons. Could Georgia be an attractive land for them? Of course, encouraging students and faculty to come to Georgia means also changing the existing infrastructure, improving teaching and learning and research facilities, which in turn is connected with additional financing.

A general goal for Georgia is to create a modern system of higher education, based on the European model. As already stated above, Bologna provides a unique chance for Georgia to earn profit from this process.

But only the formal introduction of Bologna demanded new structures can not lead to success: Georgia needs more content oriented approaches, especially considering limited resources, both financial and intellectual.

Being a small and still developing country (in terms of economics) Georgia has to use all the support available to improve quality of teaching and research in order to gain its place in the internationalized world. *Internationalization includes specific policies and programs undertaken by governments, academic systems and institutions, and even individual departments to cope with or exploit globalization (Altbach, 2004).* The powerful and rich countries and their universities have always dominated the production and distribution of knowledge, while weaker institutions and systems with fewer resources and lower academic standards have tended to follow in their wake. But we don't have to be afraid to lose our intellectual and cultural autonomy – Bologna is not a trap for the Georgian higher education system – just the opposite, it will provide the best suitable framework for reform. And only a reformed higher education system can ensure the long-term development of the country in establishing a democratic society, protecting values of national and global culture, and defeating poverty and social exclusion.

Georgia is a newly independent nation. The global influences and internal issues have become major driving forces for education reform. The importance of the Bologna Process for us cannot be overstated – we have set ourselves ambitious targets and know that it will need time and enormous efforts to be realized.

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