

Reform Development at Tbilisi State University

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Abstract

Georgia is in a process of building a new democratic state that includes a transitional stage of reforms in most of the spheres of public life. The reform of higher education is no exception. Two important events mark the higher education reform:

- The new Higher Education law was adopted by Georgia's Parliament in 2004. The components of the law are mainly driven by western European and USA achievements and experience in the field (www.mes.gov.ge).
- Georgia joined the Bologna process in May 2005 expressing its will to become a member of the European community and be able to exchange students as well as specialists within the united European space.

While discussing the aspects of higher education reform in Georgia it should be noted that as with any reform, it is an ongoing process and we should not be expecting immediate results. At the same time, constant monitoring of reform is of utmost importance (Pascarella 2006, Miller 2007), as the inevitable mistakes and misunderstandings can be corrected immediately as has been done in health-care field.

The student survey conducted by the quality assurance service in Tbilisi State University (TSU) served this very aim – gaining student feedback about an ongoing reform that would provide a potent tool for further improvements.

The reform in TSU has been extensive, and the amount of work realized quite impressive. While it would take a lot of space to describe in complete details, several key aspects will be discussed.

Key Words: Survey; Elective Courses.

The administrative changes

New positions are introduced, and some old ones eliminated. All of these changes reflect development towards a more open and democratic model of management, where decisions are made through a participatory process. The university is governed by its faculty and students through elected academic and representative councils that, in turn, elect the university rector and a chancellor. The new administration tries to make the teaching process more organized with required syllabi, curriculums and other relevant documents, which were not in place after the Soviet Union collapse.

Department structure changes

Departments have been merged into six larger faculties:

- ! Humanities
- ! Exact and Natural sciences
- ! Social and political sciences
- ! Law

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- ! Medicine
- ! Economics

Each of these faculties oversees departments. For example, Humanities includes philosophy, languages, and history, Exact and Natural Sciences includes mathematics, biology, chemistry and so on.

Student and faculty changes

Student-centered teaching is being gradually introduced by providing more freedom to students and giving them more responsibility for their own development. Major and minor specialties and elective courses are offered. The accent is shifted more towards self-study. 100 score grading system is introduced to provide more accurate evaluation of student knowledge and abilities.

These changes together with some nationwide innovations are summed up in the two tables below:

Table 1: Changes in Higher Education System from Students' Perspective

What has changed? Student perspective

OLD	NEW
Admission process – exams administered locally, by higher education institutions	Admission process – exams administered countrywide by an independent agency/ministry of education
Mobility within the country	Mobility on a larger scale - European credit transfer system (ECTS) ¹
Less specific - 5 score students assessment system	More specific - 100 score students assessment system
Specialty with a heavy load of specific courses	Major and minor
Only required classes	Required and optional classes
Number of classes(exams) per semester was higher	Number of classes (exams) per semester is lower
Study process less organized	Study process more organized

Table 2: Changes in Higher Education System from Faculty's Perspective

What has changed? Faculty perspective

¹ European credit transfer system (ECTS) means the credits given to students are accepted everywhere within the European space, so that a student can get a credit for a course taken in Georgia and transfer it to any university in France, for example, or any other country that joined the Bologna process. One credit means 25 hours of student work load, including class hours and self-study.

Admission process – 1/3 of students were very badly prepared	Admission process – students are better prepared
Faculty positions – docent, professor	Faculty positions – assistant, associate full professors
Teaching load was higher, while salary was lower	Teaching load is lower, while salary is higher
Form of exams was mainly oral and Number of days for exams was higher	Form of exams is mainly written and Number of days for exams is smaller
Less paperwork was required	More paperwork is required

The corruption level, teaching style and quality assurance have changed in the past two years. Students and teachers in the country were equally affected by the high corruption level in all spheres of higher education; its level has been reduced significantly (it is not realistic, of course, to expect it drop to zero in such a short period of time). The teacher-centered approach with mostly lecture type classes, less discussion and fewer accents on self-study moved from traditional towards a student-centered approach. Teachers are gradually implementing variety of teaching methods. Quality control service has been established. At the same time, simply introducing new teaching approach and styles, i. e. analyzing case studies, problem-based learning, team-work and many others, does not necessarily produce better results in terms of acquiring knowledge, as the learning behavior of the students should also be taken into account (Hilliard 1995). If students are not familiar and comfortable with these approaches, the effect will be significantly less (Houlden et al. 2001).

The aim of the survey was to find out if students understood changes introduced during the reform and what their attitude is towards these changes, how well the students are informed about new developments. The results were grouped into four blocks:

- ! learning facilities/infrastructure, and materials provided by the university
- ! information about matriculation process provided by the university
- ! students' attitude to the reform and the university
- ! students' knowledge of new regulations introduced after reform

(Note: we have not asked students about their professors' performance, but results provide us with some indirect information about teachers too).

In total, 1144 students were surveyed

- 565 freshmen – 49.6% AND
- 575 sophomores – 50.3%

As Spiel and colleagues point out, the phases of education in which students are, should be carefully considered (Speil, Schober, Reimann, 2006). These issues raise debates at Tbilisi State University quality assurance service representatives as well. Many would argue the first and second year students are not the best to judge problems of learning and teaching. We deliberately chose the first and second year college students as they are the best sample to serve our survey aims. The reforms at this stage were directed more towards college students, the year 2006-2007 was the first year to introduce major

changes and innovations, so only the freshmen should have been affected, although certain changes should have influenced sophomores as well. Therefore, the difference between these two groups should be relevant for the purposes of our study. However, we did not find any significant difference between the data of these two groups, which is not a very reassuring result, indicating the effect of reform is not there.

I block: learning facilities/infrastructure, and materials provided by the university

This issue is probably not as relevant to western universities as to the universities on former Soviet space, as lack of facilities has been a problem since Soviet Union collapse in many post-Soviet countries (Love, 2006).

There are several problems considering learning facilities and materials: lack of auditoria/classrooms, lack of textbooks, no heating, lack of appropriate equipment, etc. The main message of the survey was that poor facilities impact about 80% of students significantly. Improvement of university infrastructure should therefore be one of the main objectives, and these findings must be considered while structuring the university budget.

- Only 34% of students can afford textbooks, the rest are copying, lending, sharing with friends, etc. 26% of students spend about 40-50 GEL per semester for copying, the rest – less.
- 58% of students state that professors fail to attend lectures/seminars! This is true for all faculties (slightly better is the situation at the faculty of Exact and Natural Sciences).
- Only 26.8% of students think the second semester was better organized than the first one, and 50% don't see any difference.

II block: information about matriculation process provided by the university

60.3% of students claim that nobody was available for consultations while choosing courses. Only 18.4% of students have received all syllabi in advance; 81.6% received only the part or no syllabi at all. At the same time, only 25% of students think the syllabi can help them while planning learning activities. Probably the students don't really understand the purpose and function of syllabi.

III block: students' knowledge of new regulations introduced after reform

Half of students have no idea what a "credit" is (we doubt if all professors understand it either). 14.1% of students don't know why they should choose subjects. The situation is slightly better at the faculties of law and social and political sciences, and worse at the faculties of exact and natural sciences, humanities and economy and business.

The purpose of major/minor is not clear for 57.1% of students. 42.9% don't know anything about majors and minors. These are alarming results!!!

IV block: students' attitude to the reform and the university

Attitude to the assessment system is positive (63%). It was expected that more than one third of students would be unsatisfied by the new assessment system, since it demands more student involvement through the whole academic year and enhances competition among students, which is a painful process.

- 73% of students are satisfied with their major. The percentage of students, not satisfied with their minor is higher. The situation at the faculties of Social and Political and Exact and Natural sciences is relatively better and worse at the faculties of Economy and Business and Humanities.
- 73.9% of students are satisfied being students of TSU. But the majority of them like learning at the TSU because it is a prestigious university.

- 49.2% of students think that new assessment methods and reduced learning workload have a positive impact on the learning process. The largest number of students satisfied with those changes, are from faculty of arts and humanities.

In the last block positive answers outnumber negative ones. Here we have most optimistic views.

To sum up the survey results:

- ! Poor study conditions are a serious obstacle for 80% of students
- ! 25% of students do not know what major and minor mean
- ! 14% of students do not understand the idea of optional/elective classes
- ! 54% of students have difficulties in reading in other than Georgian language and therefore, have problems with textbooks
- ! 60% of students feel there is no one at the faculty to give them advise
- ! Only 50% of students understand well what credit is
- ! 30% of students do not see the point of having syllabus
- ! 64% of students think new assessment system is better than the old one
- ! 73% of students are happy with their major
- ! 86% of students are happy with their minor
- ! 55% of students did not get syllabi
- ! 58% of students say professors skip classes, 6% (out of the 58%) say they skip classes quite often!

Challenges:

The number of classes has been reduced, so an undergraduate student does not have to take more than 3-4 courses every semester, which is good, provided the classes demand the same workload as their western models do. Unfortunately, this is not the case. The number of hours an average undergraduate student spends studying in the US universities is practically the same as a normal working week for any employee: 40 working hours, 8 working hours a day. The new TSU curriculum is constructed based on the ECTS system, which means our students should have the same work load as their western peers do. But, as many professors do not yet understand the new system well, the workload for students they put in their syllabi is not calculated right. The students themselves do not give enough time to self-study.

Apparently, self-study is not a strong point of our students and has not been of much practice and tradition in Georgian universities. A traditional approach to learning as knowledge received from others and authoritative sources that was predominant in soviet era (Mikhailov, 2006), is being substituted by the social constructivist perspective (Resnick, 1989), where knowledge is created and learning means being active and involved: “learners are active constructors and organizers of their own learning” (McClellan and Soden, 2005). Therefore, self-regulation is required from students. That is, unfortunately, not yet understood by our students and by many of our professors, as well.

Departments are merged into larger faculties, so there are 6 faculties now, and students have a broader choice of majors and minors. However, the range of subject choice is not as broad as in the US universities. In the US, a freshman can become a major in any field starting from mathematics and ended by history, because a student enters a collage of Letters and Sciences. At TSU, a student enters a faculty of Humanities, thus can not make major in mathematics, or enters a faculty of Economics, meaning that he/she should become a major in economics, etc.

The idea of understanding education as business (in its western form) is slowly entering the university, like: career unit is created and it supports students in getting jobs and internships, web-site refers to potential business employers to take university students, but the holistic approach to education as a business still needs to be developed.

These rather negative results don't have to cause pessimism or strong criticism. We have to consider this as a signal, showing us problems and indicating possible "treatment" methods.

Recommendations:

There is no doubt that reform is needed and has to be pursued as soon as possible with intensity (). The reform is a painful process and we do need supporters; the more of them we have, the fewer obstacles would disturb the process. To encourage students and professors to support the reform, the university administration has to plan its activities very thoroughly.

Special programs for students, professors and administrators should be developed. They all have to know:

- ! What is a credit, how it is related to the students workload, mobility and subject choice;
- ! What is a student's workload and how it is calculated;
- ! What is a syllabus, what is its role in the teaching/learning process, how should it be developed, how should professors realistically plan teaching activities;
- ! What are the duties and responsibilities of professors and students? Specific instructions and contract forms should be developed;
- ! What is the main idea of the new assessment method?

Learning facilities/infrastructure and materials should be improved; this is true for all faculties, although with different focuses:

- ! Faculties of Law; Social and Political sciences – increase the number of auditoria/classrooms;
- ! Faculties of Medicine, Exact and Natural sciences – install a heating system;
- ! Faculties of Economy and Business; Exact and Natural Sciences – purchase classroom furniture and equipment.

Faculty administration should pay attention to proper and timely preparation of timetables for lectures/seminars. This is especially important for faculties of economy and business; law; social and political sciences.

A "textbook program" should be developed in order to ensure the availability of Georgian language core textbooks. Editing and re-publishing of already-approved textbooks should be supported.

The university must support professors in writing new textbooks by reducing their teaching workload, etc.

Assess how much students pay for copying learning materials and determine what is the most cost effective – copying or development and publishing of new learning materials). Of course, university libraries must be supplied with the proper volumes of new textbooks.

Professors should revise their syllabi and plan more carefully students' workload, amount of homework, etc.

Each faculty needs a special person responsible for student counselling and guidance.

Our responsibility is to introduce a tradition of periodic student surveys, and more important, track implementations of recommendations. As already mentioned above, these results must be considered not only while planning learning/teaching activities, but also while structuring budget and elaborating strategic plans of the university. (Miller 2007, Mok 2006).

This survey has shown that students, in general, support the process of reform. We will also try in the future to plan our activities in the way to increase cooperation between students, professors and administration and to avoid answers like:

- ! Professors never meet with students
- ! Professors never answer our questions
- ! Professors are rude
- ! Nobody has time for us

Most of the changes brought in by the reform require more responsibility and effort from students, faculty and administration. It is a hard work and all three groups have to be prepared for these increasing demands. As McClellan and Soden's study has shown, students self-regulatory skills improve as a result of pedagogical intervention: "Students reported they engaged in more self-regulation after the intervention than they did prior to it" (McClellan and Soden, 2005) thus proving that self-regulation and self-study skills can and should be acquired. This equally concerns students and faculty, as teachers should also be taught to acquire and use learning techniques to support students "in their development towards becoming self-directed learners" (Hartley, Woods, Pill, 2005).

We do hope that the results of the survey will help us to plan our future activities, correct mistakes and will be useful for those higher education institutions, who are just beginning or intend to reform the study process.

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