

Prospects of Entering the Global World for American Studies in Georgia

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Abstract

Contemporary society is changing, and so is the higher education system all over the world. High requirements towards contemporary specialists, standardization of these requirements in order to provide the students with high-quality knowledge and give them an opportunity to be mobile, are typical features of higher education system today.

Despite the reforms going on in the educational system of Georgia, after the collapse of the Soviet empire, secondary, and high school systems, in particular, have become loose. So the private tutoring in three/four subjects for the national exams has become necessary for Georgian high school students; not equally affordable for a number of Georgian families. Our elementary, secondary and high educational systems lack the continuity obligatory to provide high quality programs that help to bridge the transition from secondary to higher education. This is why I chose the issues of curriculum alignment, especially in the English language, between the secondary and higher education, which is of paramount importance not only for Georgian state and private, but also for former Soviet-republics and Turkish higher institutions, International Black Sea University (IBSU), among them.

Domestic and International issues increasingly mix together. It is difficult to separate the local from the global in today's shrinking world. The community requires that we become more than simply "global citizens" who are informed and involved in international affairs. We also need to become more adept at interacting with those who are different. Cross-cultural communication barriers must be overcome in the world of the 21st century.

Key Words: Cross Cultural Analysis; Interactive Method among International Students.

Contemporary society is changing; so is the higher education system all over the world. High requirements towards contemporary specialists, standardization of these requirements in order to provide the students with high-quality knowledge and give them an opportunity to be mobile, are typical features of higher education system today.

Globalization¹ and internationalization are now central issues for higher education worldwide. The elements of globalization in higher education are widespread and multifaceted. They include the flow of students across borders: it is estimated, that about 1.6 million students now study outside their home countries, with more than 547, 000 studying in the United States.² Globalization refers to trends in higher education that have cross-national implications. Those include mass higher education; a global marketplace for students, faculty and highly educated personnel; and the global reach for the new Internet-based technologies.³ A few countries dominate global scientific systems, the new technologies are owned by multinational academic institutions in the major Western industrialized nations, and the domination of English is advantageous for the countries that use English as the medium of instruction. All this means that the developing countries find themselves dependent on the major academic superpowers. With the collapse of the Soviet empire, the market economy and democracy have triumphed. These two central values of Western society have become the prerequisite of any nation seeking acceptance by the international community. The post Soviet republics are in flux, caused by the transitional period, and face the challenges of the two above-mentioned values.

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It is difficult to grasp the current situation in higher education without taking a broader view, for a range of economic, political and social factors. Hence, I'd like to give some information about the current situation of Georgia from these points of view. Georgia has several important internal resources: agriculture and agro-processing, small manufacturing, tourism, transit trade activities, mineral extraction and processing. Georgia has fertile soils, extensive sunlight and substantial water resources.⁴ the second major resource is Georgia's location at the crossroads of Europe, the Middle East, and Central Asia. When transport infrastructures are modernized, the natural transit function of Georgia may bring consistent revenues to the country, not just in fees to the state budget, but by its development effects in several regions. Tourism remains a key resource, deeply rooted in Georgia's traditions and in the hospitality of its populations with strong local identities. In Soviet times, Georgia hosted three million tourists per year.⁵

As ex-Soviet republic, we're facing the challenges of the transitional period, experiencing massive transformation. During this period of rapid change, we have come upon some undesirable developments not anticipated when we embarked on glorious road to economic and political progress. Rapid changes have dramatically altered our patterns of living. We would do well to point to the inevitability of such transformation that awaits countries just now embarking on "modernization". These are not issues which confront only our society. These are issues which have been, or soon will be confronted by many nations.⁶

Thanks to international agencies implementation of new approaches, reforms in secondary and higher education are being facilitated in Georgia. Reforms of entrance exams at higher institutions were carried out in the way of national exams, which turned out to be successful. Before 2005, we were witnessing corruption in the Georgian higher education system, when students were paying in cash or urged their examiners through clan connections for inflated grades. In such cases inequality of access to education for lower socioeconomic status and remote or poorly accessible areas of Georgia was the case. Just limited wealthy or "elite" segments had access to higher education. I personally, as the dean of Humanities at the International Black Sea University in Tbilisi, Georgia, can proudly say that transparent national exams worked in Georgia, judging by the admitted students at the American Studies Department in 2005; as a result of national exams, we got sixteen smart students with the highest grants from the Ministry of Education. Among them four students were from Batumi, Poti, Kutaisi, Samtredia-the cities, other than Tbilisi (capital of Georgia).

The reform concerning the financing of the students with high grades implies the following scheme: Out of 6 mln 500000 from the state budget 1, 5 (lari) is meant for 100% financing, 1, 5 mln-for 70%, 1, 5 mln-for 50%, the rest-for 30% financing. Full or partial financing is provided for 8000 university entrants. The maximum amount of grant is 1500 (lari). In case the tuition fee exceeds 1500, the entrant has to add the difference. Although the process of reforming higher education is a progressive step towards democracy, however, it's in a fledgling state as yet, I think and a cross cultural examination will be needed for its accomplishment to consider the issue of equal access to the high academic achievement for all Georgian students at the secondary and high school levels, ensuring access to higher education. Although the reforms of secondary and high education are underway, in terms of prolonging the period of studies up to 12 years (elementary, secondary, high school), changing textbooks of social sciences into interdisciplinary ones (History, Geography), staff training, etc. in this transitional period, the systems mentioned have become loose; students lack the necessary academic background. The families hire private tutors for their children in three or four subjects, which is not affordable for all Georgian families. So the economic status of students may remain a barrier to access. Private tutoring is required due to the fact that our elementary, secondary and high educational systems lack the continuity, obligatory to provide high quality programs that help to bridge the transition from secondary to higher education. To me, exploring the ways of establishing interrelation between elementary, secondary and high educational systems will promote this process, which is of paramount importance not only for Georgian state, but also private higher institutions-International Black Sea

University (IBSU)-among them. IBSU is the international university in Georgia, founded in 1995, by “Mars “, Ltd, and : Chaglar “ Ltd, Turkish Corporations in co-operation with the confirmation of the Council of Ministers of Georgia aiming to improve the current educational, economic, social and cultural relationship between Georgia and Turkey. The language of instruction is English at IBSU and it hosts students from twelve countries of the worlds, post-Soviet republics (Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Latvia, Kazakhstan), Turkey, Nigeria, Malawi, etc.

Internationalization⁷ is a major trend in higher education. It is also a worldwide phenomenon. My first contacts with prominent American Studies professors: Doris Friedensohn and Robert Gross⁸ were established at American Studies Association annual conference in November 2001, during which we struck up a conversation about internationalization of American Studies around the global world. At that time Georgia had yet to experience “Rose Revolution: and was still struggling with corruption, economic decline, and social malaise in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union. Notwithstanding these difficulties, we were clearly eager for fresh ideas about higher education, and began to envision the introduction of American Studies into Georgia as an agent of curricular change. After visiting the American Studies Programs at the universities in different six states of the U.S. as a member of the “American Studies Curriculum Design Program”, directed by the U.S. Department of state, I was encouraged to design the curriculum of the program.

In 2002 the first American Studies Program in Georgia was established at IBSU as a whole department. During the Soviet system, there were no American Studies Programs at higher institutions, except American Literature courses, taught on the academic margins, as part of English philology. That was the reason I was encouraged to introduce this challenging field in Georgia at the private International Black Sea University, and not at some other state University (I worked at two state universities at that time in 2002:1. “The Tbilisi State University for Foreign Languages”.

2. College of Humanities-within the Tbilisi Technical University”. The state universities had restricted, limited number of faculties and departments. I adopted the American model of multidisciplinary approach for the program, being new in Georgia due to the fact, that within the Soviet educational system, after taking a series of entrance exams, given by a specific department, a student had to follow “narrow “, restricted regime of courses. Another aim of introducing multidisciplinary approach was to prepare students for professional success in careers, like culture, government, business, etc. and through this diverse program, provide them with job opportunities, so important in Georgia today. Our department, though young has become quite popular. Last year, there were twelve applicants for one place. Moreover, the president of Georgia wants IBSU to become the model university in Georgia, allocating for it a site for building a model campus university for the first time in Georgia, with the help of our friends, Turkish investors.

This is a magnificent initiative, and this is already a new trend in higher education, and directly responds to the challenges of internationalization, that includes policies of a) recruitment of foreign students, b) collaboration with academic institutions, establishing exchange programs. Our department is trying to respond to these challenges. In the second semester of the 2007/2008 academic year the American sophomore student Lyra Brayshaw from the Texas University came to our department to study for one semester. She took five courses. The Texas University asked for the syllabi, which were highly approved by the American professors, so all her credits taken in Georgia will be accepted in the Texas University. Another successful M.A. student Alexis Spencer Notabartolo from California, Pitzer College is coming to our department to do the research on the formation of Georgian opinion towards international co-operative organizations, specifically NATO.

The American Studies Department had been reaching out to scholars of the United States and exploring the ways in which we engage both commonalities and differences among Americans in a multicultural society.

While at the Georgia Washington University as a Fulbright Scholar in 2004/2005, one of my project objectives was to establish a partnership with the U.S. higher institution for initiating an

exchange program between the Universities. For this purpose, as a result of the invitation of Robert Gross, Professor of History and American Studies, I delivered an occasional lecture, “The Republic of Georgia and the United States in a Changing World” at the University of Connecticut.

Head of the European Studies of UConn Professor John Davis, expressed interest to start collaboration between UConn and IBSU, which he visited in May 20, 2006, delivering lectures, and talking with authorities about the possibility of the linkage between IBSU and UConn. This is another new trend. Prof. Davis mentioned that UConn had very successful high school students exchange programs with Turkey, helping the Turkish students to raise their academic level. UConn is especially active in establishing transnational programs. UConn helps international students who require assistance developing proficiency in English language skills. More than 1, 200 students from 71 countries come to UConn’s main campus on Storrs to study English and experience the culture of the United States.

On our way to become a model American Studies Department, we have an obstacle to overcome, in terms of dealing with a proficiency gap between the students, that’s a typical obstacle for the International educational institutions. Sometimes there is unequal composition of American Studies Department groups, consisting of bright Georgian students, especially the ones selected as a result of objective national exams and foreign students with different general background and poor level of English.

In 2005/2006 we opened M.A. and Ph.D. programs in American Studies where interdisciplinary courses are introduced: 1) “American Civilization”, combining American History and American Culture and 2) “Gender Studies”. For these courses, as well as B.A. program course “American Culture and Multicultural Studies” the democratic -interactive method of education is introduced, aiming to develop a critical relation to existing knowledge through discussions on diversified topics among multicultural students. This method differs from the Soviet totalitarian model of education, preventing the application of interactive teaching methods. Unequal academic level of students in groups hinders the full involvement of the students in discussions, which hinders the progress to a high quality higher education demand of the 21st century. As an International Institution –IBSU is supposed to accept as many foreign students, as possible. On the other hand, Globalization has transformed educational needs. In this new world high quality education is vital for people to speak “common language”. So far as English is the language of instruction at IBSU, we have a demand for Advanced English level as well.

Situated at the crossroads of Europe, the Middle East, and Central Asia, Georgia has been “transnational” for centuries. As a tourist center, it is accustomed to hosting visitors from abroad, and as a multicultural society, lately it has struggled with ethnic separatism. The leading themes of American Studies today-multiculturalism and transnationalism-thus speak directly to its circumstances. Indeed, American Studies is immensely pertinent to the challenges faced by International Black Sea University, whose faculty seeks to educate a diverse population of students across differences of culture and academic preparation. With a clear – sighted analysis of the educational dilemmas, IBSU has much to contribute to the dialogue on “Higher Education in the Twenty – First Century”.

The point to be made is that while we have progressive trends in education, we are not without problems, neither are we without persons willing to engage their energies in seeking solutions. Moreover, in the recognition that many of these problems are not solely our own, we invite others to join us.

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