

HIGHER EDUCATION QUALITY ASSURANCE OF GEORGIA FROM ITS ASSOCIATION AGREEMENT WITH THE EUROPEAN UNION TO MEMBERSHIP CANDIDATE STATUS

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Abstract

On June 14, 2014 Georgia signed the Association Agreement with European Union. According to 361 Article of the Agreement, Georgia was obliged to conduct harmonization of National Legislation to European Union legislative acts referred to in Annex XXXII of the Agreement. The EU documents regarding qualifications and the higher education quality assurance are among them. Georgia has recently taken another step towards the European family. On December 14, 2023, Georgia granted the status of a candidate for EU membership that makes the country more responsible for fulfilling the obligations undertaken within the Association Agreement.

Higher education quality in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) is regulated according to the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG 2015), a fundamental purpose of which is to contribute to the common understanding of quality assurance for teaching and learning across borders and among all stakeholders. The standards set out agreed and accepted practice for quality assurance in higher education in the European Higher Education Area and should, therefore, be considered and adhered to by those concerned in all types of higher education provision. Its importance and usefulness is recognized and adopted by 48 European countries and proven by time.

However, in Georgia, it seems these regulations are considered insufficient for Higher Education Institutions, and along with programmatic accreditation, institutional authorization also applies. The latter is a remnant of the past, which has not yet renounced. The purpose of the proposed study was a detailed review and comparison of these two national regulations with ESG 2015. Study has revealed that some ESG 2015 standards not presented in Georgian regulations. A number of requirements are duplicated in the National institutional authorization and programmatic accreditation, which leads to putting an excessive burden on already financially weak higher education institutions, both in terms of effort and time loss and in terms of finances, since it requires the preparation of a large volume of documentation and the payment of double fees for authorization and accreditation. In addition, the National Center for Education Quality Enhancement of Georgia is a legal entity under the public law of the Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia that questions its independence. In the conclusion several recommendations are offered to solve these problems.

Keywords: Higher Education, ESG 2015, Institutional Authorization, Programmatic Accreditation

Introduction

On June 14, 2014 Georgia signed the Association Agreement with European Union. According to 361 Article of the Agreement, Georgia was obliged to conduct harmonization of National Legislation to European Union legislative acts referred to in Annex XXXII of the Agreement. The EU documents regarding qualifications and the higher education quality assurance are among them [1, pp. 121, 122]. Georgia has recently taken another step towards the European family. On December 14, 2023, Georgia granted the status of a candidate for EU membership, which now imposes more responsibility in fulfilling the obligations under this agreement.

Higher education quality in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) is regulated according to the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG 2015) [2].

The EHEA was created by the Bologna Process through harmonizing academic degree standards and quality assurance standards throughout Europe. Georgia joined the mentioned process in 2005 at the Bergen conference [3, p.1].

The ESG was adopted by the Ministers responsible for Higher Education of the European Higher Education Area at the Yerevan Ministerial Conference in

May 2015, following the revision of the ESG 2005, which helped shift the paradigm towards student-centered learning and teaching.

A fundamental purpose of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area, is to contribute to the common understanding of quality assurance for teaching and learning across borders and among all stakeholders. They have played and will continue to play a significant role in developing national and institutional quality assurance systems across the European Higher Education Area and cross-border cooperation. Engagement with quality assurance processes, allow European higher education systems to demonstrate quality and increase transparency, thus helping to build mutual trust and better recognition of their qualifications, programmes and other provision [2, p.6]. Their importance and usefulness is recognized and adopted by 48 European countries and proven by time.

In the presented analysis, we discussed the first part of ESG - the standards of internal quality assurance, which are of the utmost importance for Higher Education Institutions and according to which they are regulated by the state.

ESG 2015 identifies 10 main criteria for internal quality assurance [2, p.10]:

1. Policy for quality assurance;
2. Design and approval of programmes;
3. Student-centered learning, teaching and assessment;
4. Student admission, progression, recognition and certification;
5. Teaching staff;
6. Learning resources and student support;
7. Information management;
8. Public information;
9. On-going monitoring and periodic review of programmes;
10. Cyclical external quality assurance.

According to these criteria, standards are established and guiding principles defined, covering in detail all areas of higher education programme development and implementation, including quality assurance processes. In addition, the mentioned standards are written in detail with relevant guidelines.

Higher education in Georgia regulated in two ways: by the authorization of higher educational institutions and by accreditation of higher education programmes. Law of Georgia on Higher Education, 2004, is regulating the process of carrying out educational and research activities by higher education institutions and the principles and procedures of administering and financing higher education; it also defines procedures for the establishment, reorganization of the activities and the liquidation of higher education institutions, as well as principles of the authorization and accreditation of higher education institutions [4, Article 1].

Authorization – is a procedures for acquiring the status of a higher education institution, intended to ensure compliance with the standards necessary to implement appropriate activities for issuing a document certifying education recognized by the State (4, Article 2, b¹).

Accreditation – is a procedures for determining the compliance of educational programmes of higher education institutions with accreditation standards, which are intended to introduce a systematic self-evaluation system and facilitate the development of quality assurance mechanisms for the improvement of education quality, on the basis of which state financing is acquired, as well as for the implementation of particular programmes determined by this Law (4, Article 2, h).

Thus, according to current legislation the higher education institutions (HEIs) in Georgia must comply with the internal and external quality assurance mechanisms and undergo both Institutional Authorization and Programmatic Accreditation. In the case of failure to receive authorization, the HEI loses the status of a higher education institution and ceases its activity, and in the case of failure to receive accreditation of the programme - the right to admit students to this program [5].

As stated by National Center for Education Quality Enhancement of Georgia (NCEQE): In the process of implementing external mechanisms of quality assurance in HEIs, the Center takes into account the EU's Agenda of Higher Education Modernization and the recommendations of the Bologna process, including the

requirements of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area. The external quality assurance mechanisms, procedures and standards implemented in Georgia are in compliance with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area [6, p.1). Herewith, NCEQE is the only authorized by the government agency, which carries out authorization of educational institutions and accreditation of educational programs, as well as monitors implementation of authorization and accreditation standards, that is also determined by the above-mentioned Law of Georgia On Education Quality Improvement.

For better understanding of these regulations, we present their content in details.

Institutional Authorization

In 2016, after amendments to the Law of Georgia on Higher Education authorization standards extended. It was explained that - the purpose of the authorization standards of higher educational institutions is to promote the development of education quality in higher educational institutions and ensure a student-centered educational environment. That the authorization standards of HEI also correspond to the purposes of Georgian higher education and the requirements of the European Higher Education Area. The standards envisage a full assessment of the institution, which means evaluation of the resources, regulations, implemented, current and planned activities, achieved results and opportunities for the achievable results (relevant planned activities, mechanisms for their implementation and allocated resources).

These standards cover the following issues:

1. Mission and strategic development of HEI;
2. Organizational structure and management of HEI;
3. Educational programs;
4. HEI staff;
5. Students and their support measures;
6. Research, development and/or other creative activities;
7. Material, information and financial resources.

In addition, each standard detailed with corresponding sub-standards, including a description, assessment criteria and a list of indicators/evidence [7].

Programmatic Accreditation

Amended in 2020, accreditation standards include the following issues:

1. The purpose of the educational programme, the learning outcomes and the relevance of the programme to them;
2. Teaching methodology and organization, adequacy of evaluation of programme utilization;
3. Achievements of students, individual work with them;
4. Provision of teaching resources;
5. Possibilities for the development of teaching quality.

Each standard is also detailed here with relevant sub-standards, including a description, assessment criteria and a list of indicators/evidence [8].

The duration of the granted program accreditation was determined for 6 years, and for institutional authorization - 7 years.

Under the obligations taken by the Association Agreement with the European Union, the National Center for Educational Quality Enhancement started the process of education system analysis in 2014. As a result of this process the revised National Qualifications Framework and Learning Fields Classifier were approved [9].

One of the most tangible and visible results of the changes implemented by higher education institutions in the introducing quality assurance mechanisms is the reduction of the educational programs number. 27 authorized HEIs in 2018, canceled 253 educational programmes before the authorization process began. After implementing the new authorization mechanisms, the number of HEIs operating in Georgia also decreased. 12 HEI's deducted from the national university space.

The changes implemented at the system level were based on the quality assurance standards and guidelines of the European higher education area (ESG 2015). With systemic changes, the quality assurance system of Georgia came into compliance with European requirements. As a result of the changes made, the National Center for Education Quality Enhancement gained the recognition of the World Federation of Medical Education (WFME), joined the European Association for the Quality Assurance of Higher Education (ENQA), and at the same time, registered in the European Register of Independent Agencies for the Development of the Quality of Higher Education (EQAR). In this way, the country mainly fulfilled both the requirements of the European Higher Education Area and the Association Agreement of Georgia with the European Union.

However, despite the overall positive assessment, a detailed discussion and analysis of the issue reveals a number of issues in the existing national regulatory mechanisms, which impact negatively on the activities of higher education institutions and their proximity to the European area of higher education.

In order to highlight the problems, a detailed comparison of ESG 2015 standards and guidelines, in particular, the first part - Standards and guidelines for internal quality assurance, was made with the institutional authorization and programmatic accreditation standards in force in Georgia (see table 1).

It is clear from the presented table that:

1. From the part 1 of ESG 2015, Standards and Guidelines for Internal Quality Assurance, two from the ten standards (1.7 - Information Management and 1.8 - Public Information) are not presented separately in the Georgian authorization or accreditation standards. It seems these standards, or informed decision-making and transparency of activities, were considered less important.

2. The first standard 1.1 of ESG 2015 (Quality Assurance Policy) is present in the accreditation regulations but transferred to the 5th standard under the title Opportunities for the Development of Teaching Quality. The impression remains that the quality of education is at an appropriate level and refers to its further improvement.

3. The requirements of number of standards are divided and dispersed in different sub-standards for authorization and accreditation.

What is the most substantial - several standards are duplicated in national authorization and accreditation standards. In particular, Educational Programmes (3rd authorization standard) and The Purpose of the Educational Programme, Learning Outcomes and Programme Compliance with Them (1st accreditation standard); Students and Their Support Measures (Article 5 of authorization standards) and Achievements of Students, Individual Work with them (Article 3 of accreditation standards), etc.

Authorizing higher education institutions in Georgia made sense at the beginning of the century. Due to the lack of relevant regulations, many universities were opened in the country, most of which could not meet any conditions. At that time, more than 300 HEIs were operating, and in such a situation, their authorization was necessary.

Today situation has changed. There are 56 state and private and 7 Orthodox Divinity higher educational institutions operating in the country [10]. It seems the time has come to revise above regulations. The presence of these two regulations restrains HEIs, both in terms of time loss and the need to prepare a large number of documentation, including follow-up activities in some cases (1-year progress report, monitoring visit in 2 years, 3-year progress report, etc.), as well as in terms of financial costs.

Furthermore, ESG 2015 Standard 3.3 - Independence, requires the accreditation agencies to be independent and act autonomously. They should have both organizational and operational independence from third parties, such as higher education institutions, governments and other stakeholder organizations. This standard violated in Georgia. As stated above, the National Center for the Development of the Quality of Education (NCEQE) is a legal entity under the public law of the Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia, which was established according to the Law of Georgia On Education Quality Improvement and the only agency in the country that authorized by the government of the country to carry out institutional authorization and programmatic accreditation, as well as monitoring the implementation of authorization and accreditation standards. NCEQE is a legal entity under the governance of the Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia. Its director appointed and dismissed by the Minister, with the agreement of the Prime Minister, and its state control carried out by the Ministry according to the rules established by the legislation of Georgia. [11]. Members of the authorization council of higher education institution are appointed and dismissed by the Prime Minister, as recommended by the Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia. Even the members of the Appeals Council are appointed and dismissed by the Prime Minister of Georgia [12].

Concerning financial costs, the cost of programmatic accreditation vary from 8,356.00 GEL to 18,215.00 Georgian Lari (GEL) per programme depending on its level, type and need for business trip plus 200 GEL just for the application review [13], and from

29,948.00 GEL to 57,339.00 GEL for institutional authorization plus 500 GEL for application review. An authorization fee calculation method is complicated and depends on the type of HEI, its condition (existing or new), the number of students, the number of educational programmes, the number of staff, the number of addresses of location, its total space, etc. The workload of the expert panel - the number of person/days determined minimum 20 and maximum 42 [14].

Above fees are high, especially for institutional authorization, considering the cost of education in state universities 2,250.00 GEL per student per year (in private ones it varies and reaches 6,950.00 GEL).

The financial issues of higher education institutions exacerbating by general financial hardship of the population that affects the students' ability to pay tuition fees. In particular, the number of students with suspended status in the country is high. Unfortunately, neither the Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia nor the National Statistics Office provides any data on this issue. However, some independent sources provide data according to which for 13.02.2023, in the database of the Education Management Information System (EMIS) were recorded 178,450 undergraduate students, of which 68,491 students (33.5%) have their status suspended, and 28,590 of them, 11.8%, are due to financial debt [15]. According to another source, the status of 36,156 students suspended in 2022. This information also came from the same EMIS. According to it, student status of 15,013 out of 36,156 students or 42%, suspended due to financial debt [16].

Although the government is trying to solve this problem with some initiatives, combining these two regulations into one institutional accreditation, which will include all the requirements, would undoubtedly facilitate the work of both universities and the accreditation agency. Releasing universities from excessive pressure will leave them more time and funds to help students solve financial problems, strengthen the material-technical base and ensure appropriate quality of education.

Conclusion

Although ESG 2015 is not a mandatory document, and the national education systems have the right to introduce different rules for regulating the quality of higher education. However, it is difficult to understand what benefits provide the simultaneous demand for authorization and accreditation when a number of requirements duplicated, and that puts an excessive burden on already financially weak higher education institutions, both in terms of time and effort loss, and in terms of finances, since it requires the creation of numerous documents and the payment of double fees for authorization and accreditation.

Thus, the correct way out of the current situation, we suppose, is:

1. The National Center for Education Quality Enhancement must be transformed into an independent agency and operate autonomously with complete organizational and operational independence from third parties, such as higher education institutions, govern-

ment, and other stakeholders. That will make the accreditation process unbiased, reliable, and trustworthy in front of the universities and the public.

2. To combine current institutional authorization and programmatic accreditation in one regulation – Institutional Accreditation. That would free up time for higher education institutions to focus more on teaching quality, new teaching and learning methods, strengthening internationalization, etc. At the same time, the money saved from the fee payment would allow them to increase their spending on student support, new textbooks, equipment, and other significant HEIs expenses.

References:

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13. Fee for the education programme accreditation - <https://eqe.ge/en/faq/10/show>.

14. Annex No. 2 to Order of the Minister of Education and Science of Georgia No. 99/N of October 1, 2010, On the approval of Authorization of Educational Institutions provision and Fees - <https://eqe.ge/en/faq/35/show>.

15. BPN - <https://www.bpn.ge/article/106190-sa-kartveloshi-studentebis-335-s-statusi-shecherebuli-akvs-ramden-procents-sheucherda-pinansuri-davalianebis-gamo/>

16. IPN - <https://www.interpressnews.ge/ka/article/740763-2022-cels-statusi-36156-students-sheucherda/>

Table 1
Comparison of ESG 2015 with National Institutional Authorization and Programmatic Accreditation Requirements of Georgia

GEORGIA				
№	ESG Criteria	E H E A		Programmatic Accreditation Requirements
		ESG Standards	ESG Guidelines	
1.1	Policy for quality assurance	Institutions should have a policy for quality assurance that is made public and forms part of their strategic management. Internal stakeholders should develop and implement this policy through appropriate structures and processes, while involving external stakeholders.	Policies and processes are the main pillars of a coherent institutional quality assurance system that forms a cycle for continuous improvement and contributes to the accountability of the institution. It supports the development of quality culture in which all internal stakeholders assume responsibility for quality and engage in quality assurance at all levels of the institution. In order to facilitate this, the policy has a formal status and is publicly available.	5. Teaching Quality Enhancement Opportunities In order to enhance teaching quality, programme utilizes internal and external quality assurance services and also periodically conducts programme monitoring and programme review. Relevant data is collected, analyzed and utilized for informed decision making and programme development on a regular basis.
1.2	Design and approval of programmes	Institutions should have processes for the design and approval of their programmes. The programmes should be designed so that they meet the objectives set for them, including the intended learning outcomes. The qualification resulting from a programme should be clearly specified and communicated, and refer to the correct level of the national qualifications framework for higher education and, consequently, to the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area.	Study programmes are at the core of the higher education institutions' teaching mission. They provide students with both academic knowledge and skills including those that are transferable, which may influence their personal development and may be applied in their future careers.	1. Educational Programme Objectives, Learning Outcomes and their Compliance with the Programme A programme has clearly established objectives and learning outcomes, which are logically connected to each other. Programme objectives are consistent with the mission, objectives and strategic plan of the institution. Programme learning outcomes are assessed on a regular basis to improve the programme. The content and consistent structure of the programme ensure the achievement of the set goals and expected learning outcomes.
1.3	Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment	Institutions should ensure that the programmes are delivered in a way that encourages students to take an active role in creating the learning process, and that the assessment of students reflects this approach.	Student-centred learning and teaching plays an important role in stimulating students' motivation, self-reflection and engagement in the learning process. This means careful consideration of the design and delivery of study programmes and the assessment of outcomes.	3. Student Achievements and Individual Work with Them The programme ensures the creation of a student-centered environment by providing students with relevant services; promotes maximum student awareness, implements a variety of activities and facilitates student engagement in local and / or international projects; proper quality of scientific guidance and supervision is provided for master's and doctoral students.
			5. Students and their support services HEI ensures the development of student-centred environment, offers appropriate services, including career support mechanisms; it also ensures maximum awareness of students, implements diverse activities and promotes student involvement in these activities. HEI utilizes student survey results to improve student support services. (5.2) Student support services	

1.4	Student admission, progression, recognition and certification	Institutions should consistently apply pre-defined and published regulations covering all phases of the student "life cycle", e.g. student admission, progression, recognition and certification.	Providing conditions and support that are necessary for students to make progress in their academic career is in the best interest of the individual students, programmes, institutions and systems. It is vital to have fit-for-purpose admission, recognition and completion procedures, particularly when students are mobile within and across higher education systems.	5. Students and their support services (5.1) The Rule for obtaining and changing student status, the recognition of education, and student rights	2. Methodology and Organization of Teaching, Adequacy of Evaluation of Programme Mastering Prerequisites for admission to the programme, teaching-learning methods and student assessment consider the specificity of the field of study of the programme, level requirements, student needs and ensure the engagement achievement of the objectives and expected learning outcomes of the programme.
1.5	Teaching staff	Institutions should assure themselves of the competence of their teachers. They should apply fair and transparent processes for the recruitment and development of the staff.	The teacher's role is essential in creating a high quality student experience and enabling the acquisition of knowledge, competences and skills. The diversifying student population and stronger focus on learning outcomes require student-centred learning and teaching and the role of the teacher is, therefore, also changing (cf. Standard 1.3).	4. Staff of the HEI HEI ensures that the staff employed in the institution (academic, scientific, invited, administrative, support) are highly qualified, so that they are able to effectively manage educational, scientific, research, creative, performing activities and administrative processes and achieve the goals defined by the strategic plan of the institution. On its hand, the institution constantly provides its staff with professional development opportunities and improved work conditions.	4. Providing Teaching Resources Human, material, information and financial resources of educational programme/educational programmes grouped in a cluster ensure the sustainable, stable, effective and efficient functioning of the programme and the achievement of the defined objectives. 4.1. Human Resources 4.3. Professional Development of Academic, Scientific and Invited Staff
1.6	Learning resources and student support	Institutions should have appropriate funding for learning and teaching activities and ensure that adequate and readily accessible learning resources and student support are provided.	For a good higher education experience, institutions provide a range of resources to assist student learning. These vary from physical resources such as libraries, study facilities and IT infrastructure to human support in the form of tutors, counsellors and other advisers. The role of support services is of particular importance in facilitating the mobility of students within and across higher education systems.	5. Students and their support services 7. Material, information and financial resources Material, information and financial resources of HEI ensure sustainable, stable, effective and efficient functioning of the institution, and the achievement of goals defined through strategic development plan.	4. Providing Teaching Resources 4.4. Material Resources 4.5. Programme/ Faculty/School Budget and Programme Financial Sustainability

1.7	Information management	Institutions should ensure that they collect, analyse and use relevant information for the effective management of their programmes and other activities	Reliable data is crucial for informed decision-making and for knowing what is working well and what needs attention. Effective processes to collect and analyse information about study programmes and other activities feed into the internal quality assurance system.	Missing	Missing
1.8	Public information	Institutions should publish information about their activities, including programmes, which is clear, accurate, objective, up-to date and readily accessible. Institutions should monitor and periodically review their programmes to ensure that they achieve the objectives set for them and respond to the needs of students and society. These reviews should lead to continuous improvement of the programme. Any action planned or taken as a result should be communicated to all those concerned	Information on institutions' activities is useful for prospective and current students as well as for graduates, other stakeholders and the public	Missing	Missing
1.9	On-going monitoring and periodic review of programmes		Regular monitoring, review and revision of study programmes aim to ensure that the provision remains appropriate and to create a supportive and effective learning environment for students.	5. Teaching Opportunities 5.3. Programme Monitoring and Periodic Review	Quality Enhancement - ' -
1.10	Cyclical external quality assurance	Institutions should undergo external quality assurance in line with the ESG on a cyclical basis.	External quality assurance in its various forms can verify the effectiveness of institutions' internal quality assurance, act as a catalyst for improvement and offer the institution new perspectives. It will also provide information to assure the institution and the public of the quality of the institution's activities.	5. Teaching Opportunities 5.2. External Quality Evaluation	Quality Enhancement - ' -