

HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM IN THE CONTEXT OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS (ON THE EXAMPLE OF GEORGIA)

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ABSTRACT

Aim. The purpose of the article is to study, analyse and present the readiness of Georgia in the modern period to meet international problems – it is the main goal of sustainable development, including higher education. The government of Georgia, since ancient times correctly understood the role of education for future prosperity, currently the government is doing its best to meet the international challenges in the fourth goal of sustainable development - education, including higher education.

Methods. The paper is presented based on official documents, scientific research papers, analysis, and the historical-comparative method.

Results. The article presents important challenges for the integration of the Georgian state into the European space at the present stage, which is enshrined in the Constitution (Parliament of Georgia, 2018) and several important documents. In this context, promoting access to education is an important international agreement for the country to overcome modern global challenges - one of the most important goals of sustainable development - an important precondition for strengthening the socio-political and cultural development of society.

Conclusion. The paper is based on the study/processing of international and local official materials, as well as expert research has the opportunity to assess the readiness of the higher education system to follow the goals of sustainable development. The country's relevant structures are actively creating all the conditions for the convergence/engagement of the Georgian educational space under modern international standards which has been demonstrated in practice by the capabilities of higher education institutions.

Keywords: Georgia, education, sustainable development, goals, relations

INTRODUCTION

In a modern diverse and democratic society, global peace, international prosperity, poverty alleviation, improved health and education systems, promotion of equality, environmental protection, and accountability at all levels

are the greatest global challenges that are being considered and addressed. In Georgia, education has historically received a great deal of attention in the development of statehood, and now Georgia, like many democratic countries is engaged in several international treaties that set high standards of education that are considered an essential precondition for the country's economy and even social development (Government of Georgia, 2017).

Sustainable Development Goals adopted at the 70th session of the UN General Assembly (2015) – Resolution: Transforming our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development developed with the involvement of UN Member States, creating a comprehensive and ambitious development program (United Nations General Assembly, 2015). Here, education as a force for sustainable development and peace is important because only by having certain knowledge people can achieve all the goals set for 2030, naturally the emphasis on access to scholarships in developing countries is noteworthy to make education accessible through a variety of programs.

Goal number four out of the seventeen set for sustainable development in education is to ensure inclusive and equal quality education and to promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. Here we have to admit that it is not easy to achieve, therefore it is important to have a well-designed education policy in line with the goal. At the same time, by expanding the participation of higher education in cooperation, universities have acquired the greater potential to contribute to the development of society, and it must be said that it is the research conducted in universities (in various areas) that will improve the future (Chankseliani & McCowan, 2020).

Sustainable development is aimed at improving the quality of environmental, social, and economic life. In particular, education is still integrated with the key areas of sustainable development in many global frameworks and conventions, and the study of education as a significant challenge to sustainable development as a precondition for the better socio-political and cultural development of society and is one of the important guarantees of natural growth. Study and discussion of the presented issue, the role and involvement of higher education in Georgia, the main directions of sustainable development, its compatibility with the Western space, in the rapidly changing modern world, based on documents and secondary sources, shows the international arena, in a competitive environment.

When studying the issue, it is interesting, relevant, and gave us significant help to understand the reality of post-socialist countries, to get to know a number of works about Poland, especially the work of Aleksander Kobylarek *The Polish Humboldtian University in the Face of Paradigmatic Change* (2017). Here, the author draws interesting conclusions from the study/analysis of recent processes and notes that in the Bologna model, openness in communication has two dimensions. One is the enrichment and strengthening of communication between various environments, both on and off-line, an appreciation of the electronic circulation of knowledge and virtual communities of scholars, and new invisible cuties. The second

dimension should be an openness to the needs of the local environment, for which the university will become a gateway to the world of science and will be responsible for their real needs (Kobylarek, 2017). Thus the presented paper discusses the interdependence of Georgian reality with the analysis of Western practices and facts.

GEORGIA: HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE CONTEXT OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

The facts of any form of social development in the history of mankind testify to the successes achieved through education. At the present stage, education is one of the most powerful and proven means to achieve results in all areas of sustainable development (Finnveden et al., 2020) and in almost every context, because education has the most important mission of shaping society. Everyone has the right to education, including higher education, to be equally accessible to all, to the best of their ability to achieve universal well-being and development. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights states:

Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. Education should promote understanding, tolerance, friendship, and cooperation among all peoples, racial and religious groups for the maintenance of peace (United Nations General Assembly, 1948, p.63)

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights came into force by the resolution of the Supreme Council of Georgia on 15 September, 1991, soon after the declaration of independence of Georgia. The UN Delegation to Georgia, together with the Government of Georgia, various donors, international financial institutions, civil society, and academia, has developed a UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Agreement for 2021-2025, with the principle of comprehensive development Leave no one Behind (LNOB) (Government of Georgia & UN Agency for Georgia, 2020).

The fourth goal of the Sustainable Development Goal – education is universal and encompasses all levels of education - from an early age to higher education. It can be considered a challenge for the whole world, even for developed countries, where the rate of universal prosperity is high. Therefore, for our country, Education 2030 is an important issue under the Action Framework, it is also noteworthy that UNESCO's responsibility to coordinate and monitor the international community helps to resolve this issue. Consequently, resolving the issue requires the political will at the international level (all governments and societies) to cooperate to create a system that will address the existing challenges (UNESCO, 2015).

The goal of sustainable development – Quality of Education for All from Ten Areas, is the goal of equal access to higher education, it is worth noting

the expansion of the number of scholarships available in developing countries (UNESCO, 2017).

Georgia's accession to the Bologna Process (the Bologna Declaration was signed on 19 June, 1999. Currently, 47 European countries are involved in the mentioned declaration) has significantly changed the higher education system, bringing it closer to European standards. At the Bergen Summit in May 2005 (Georgia joined here) discussing the interim results and setting new, priority goals, the commitment to assist the new participating countries in achieving the goals of the Bologna Process was reaffirmed. It is noteworthy that the social dimension is committed here as well, stating that equal access to higher education is for all, and emphasises the need to create appropriate conditions for students so that they do not have problems completing their studies for social or economic reasons. Here it is worth saying that the social dimension includes the financial and economic aspects of government measures to help students (especially those from vulnerable groups) as well as providing them with guidance and counselling services to improve accessibility (Bergen Communiqué, 2005).

It should be noted that on 27 June, 2019, the National Center for Quality Development in Education was registered in the European Register of Independent Higher Education Quality Development Agencies (The European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education [EQAR]), which allows the country to cooperate more with the European Education Area (Batia-shvili, 2019). Particularly, all the diplomas issued within the programs accredited in Georgia mean that they are recognised in Europe. One of the interesting projects in terms of involvement in the European educational space, the requirements of sustainable development, challenges, implementation is the work of social programs for the financing of certain categories of students enrolled in accredited educational programs (undergraduate and graduate) based on the results of the Unified National Examinations.

Under the social program, the state education grant can be obtained by different categories of students, including students who have studied and received a document certifying general education:

- in the settlement approved by the List of Highland Settlements;
- in the occupied territory;
- In Azerbaijani-language general education institutions;
- In Armenian-language general education institutions;
- Students who are the children of the deceased for the territorial integrity of the country, etc. (the number allocated for each category is approved by the Government of Georgia).

In addition, since 2013, funding has been provided for affected students enrolled in the first and second levels of higher education, living in villages adjacent to the demarcation line (the program fully funds first-level students in higher education). At the present stage in Georgia, at all levels, it is realised that education is an important condition for sustainable deve-

lopment. Consequently, one of the main priorities for the government, this system has had important results with the reform. Several reforms have been carried out in the country to bring the country's education system in line with the modern requirements of the world, to be internationally competitive. However, we have to admit that there have always been and still exist many challenges to ensuring the development of human capital and its effective involvement in the development process of the country, to strengthen democratic governance.

Since 2014, Georgia, as a pilot country, has been involved in the project – European Student (5th wave), which aims to study the socio-economic status of students in European higher education institutions, and their living conditions. Following the recommendations developed at the current stage of the Seventh Wave (which ended in 2021) research, the Eighth Wave has begun (2021), covering the years 2021-2024. Thus the purpose of studying this issue is to identify the current situation and the problems and barriers to the functioning of the Common European Education Area, which are implemented with the financial and technical support of the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture, and Sports of Georgia. Therefore, it should be noted the recommendations developed in 2021 for higher education institutions: collaboration with employers (for the mutual interest of students in the learning process and working); establish/expand university-based student career development services based on strengthening the link between academic education and the labour market; to provide information to students about the peculiarities of the labour market; the concern of the state to increase the sources of funding for students; caring - the student sees a connection between his educational program and employment; appropriate infrastructural or administrative support for students with disabilities; development/expansion of student dormitory infrastructure; increasing equal access in different directions and reducing gender stereotypes (Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports of Georgia, 2019). Within the framework of this project, among many interesting issues, we considered it necessary (for further international cooperation, possible grounds for personal contacts) to get acquainted with the reasons for the decision of foreign students to come to Georgia, the source of information and the direction of study. Researches conducted over the years give grounds to see that in many cases, the reason for foreign students' arrival in Georgia is the availability of tuition fees, living conditions, the opportunity to receive a high-quality education in Georgia, as well as the moment of human well-being. The source of information named the following: students studying in Georgia, international websites of education, the website of the Ministry of Education and Science, international exhibitions, etc.; as for the students leaving Georgia are mainly involved in training programs organised by the European Union (Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports of Georgia, 2019).

Although a number of important measures have recently been taken to improve the higher education system in Georgia and the reforms imple-

mented in the education and science strategy for 2017-2021 were aimed at ensuring the relevance of education, strengthening the quality of higher education, research, technology and innovation, and internationalisation there still remain certain challenges, including improving quality and equity, governance, funding, and accountability. The education and science sectors are facing significant challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic situation. Therefore, the long-term strategy of education and science of Georgia for 2022-2032 was created, which aims to support sustainable development and to provide universal and lifelong learning opportunities. It is noteworthy that a number of international projects have been involved in the development of the strategy and the difficulties caused by the current situation are fully shared.

The Government of Georgia 2021-2024 considers the systematic and coherent approach to education reform for the construction of a European state to be an important issue for the development of human capital, and envisages a number of measures for the development of higher education, in particular: budget funding for higher education; a new model of financing the higher education system in order to promote the sustainable development of the educational institutions and the focus on the learning process of the educational process; Implementation of quality development support measures; development of a unified concept for the evaluation of research activities and doctoral programs; promotion of the state for obtaining international accreditation of higher education programs; continuation of the program Study in Georgia; continuation of promotional education programs for persons living in the Occupied Territories as well as undergraduate and graduate education programs for convicts; preparation of Georgia as an Erasmus+ program country, which will pave the way for the country to have access to all components of the program; continue funding to improve the infrastructure and learning environment of higher education institutions. It should be noted that the same document also addresses the issue of promoting environmental education, raising environmental awareness, and integration of environmental education issues in both the school and higher education system (Government of Georgia, 2020).

Georgia recognises European Higher Education and Youth Policy priorities, such as

Continuing Professional Development of Higher Education Professors and Recognising Innovative Teaching for Career Advancement, as well as Strengthening Social Orientation in Higher Education and Ensuring the Quality of Teaching and Learning. Following the resolution of the updated European Adult Education Agenda, Georgia is also obliged to significantly increase adult participation in formal and non-formal education and to achieve a minimum level of literacy, quantitative literacy, and digital skills in adults (Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports of Georgia, 2021, p.15)

In order to improve the quality of higher education, to improve the curriculum, the Law on Development of Education Quality has recently been amended to introduce cluster accreditation, which stipulates that only one field-specific program will be evaluated in the accreditation process within a year and that higher education institutions are supposed to present only programs of the particular area in a certain year. This will enable the National Center for Quality Development in Education and the Ministry of Education and Science to see how a specific field of higher education is developing. This will help the centre to train only the experts from the certain field which will be accredited next year, it will help to save and mobilise human and financial resources (Parliament of Georgia, 2022).

CONCLUSION

The official documents reviewed in the article show that, despite many generally complex challenges and the need for reforms, the relevant structures are actively considering the possibility of bringing into the Georgian educational space the following modern, international standards and creating conditions for inclusiveness. The possibilities of higher education institutions have been identified, which have developed and launched a number of projects – to solve the problems of the general goals of sustainable development, human well-being, development, and social change, and to work on the principle of a cooperation agreement, to determine priorities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to achieve the desired results, there is a demand for more cooperation – universities, the Ministry of Education and Science, the government, and active civil society, whose joint participation, results obtained at the local level, developed/implemented initiatives will contribute to the fulfilment of obligations, making the Georgian educational space attractive for international cooperation.

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