
7 Georgia

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7.1 NATIONAL AND HIGHER EDUCATION CONTEXT

National Context

Georgia is a country of approximately 3,716,900 people (National Statistics Office of Georgia, 2020) with an aging population; only 10.9 percent of its citizens are 15–24 years old (Central Intelligence Agency, 2020a). Nearly 32 percent of the population lives in Tbilisi, the capital city. Georgia is bordered to the north by Russia, to the south by Turkey and Armenia, to the southeast by Azerbaijan, and to the west by the Black Sea. The country contains two disputed breakaway territories, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, both of which have been occupied by Russian forces since the Russo-Georgian War of 2008 (Goryashko, 2018).

After the breakup of the Soviet Union, Georgia experienced an economic collapse unprecedented among its fellow former Soviet states (World Bank Group, 2018c). However, Georgia has done well economically in the past decade, demonstrating a strong commitment to economic reform. In 2020, Georgia was ranked the seventh most business-friendly country globally by the World Bank (World Bank, n.d.-g). Its GDP grew at an average rate of 4.8 percent per year from 2010–2019, and the poverty rate decreased from 37.4 percent in 2007 to 20.1 percent in 2018. Despite these gains, economic inequity is a challenge. Rural areas experience higher rates of poverty than urban areas, and ethnic minorities remain economically disadvantaged compared to ethnic Georgians (OECD, 2019a).

The youth unemployment rate is 30.8 percent (International Labour Organization, n.d.). To address misalignment between the skills of tertiary education graduates and the needs of the job market, the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sport has reformed and promoted vocational education and training (OECD, 2019a).

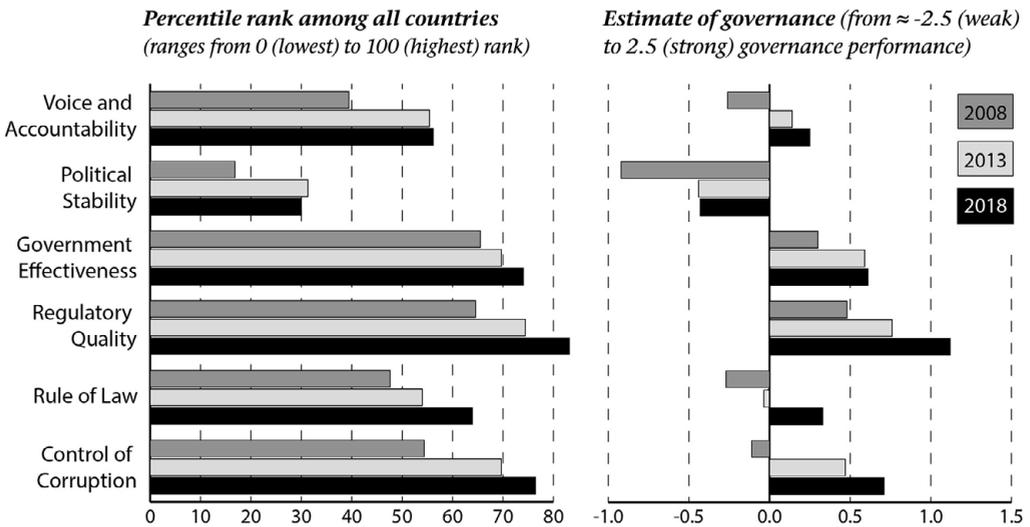
Since the 2003 Rose Revolution, Georgia has positioned itself as a “pro-Western” country. In 2014, Georgia signed an Association Agreement with the European Union, and the country has repeatedly declared its intention of becoming an EU member. This Western orientation is reflected in the country’s market-oriented higher education policies (Dobbins & Khachatryan, 2014).

The Global Competitiveness Index of the World Economic Forum (WEF) ranks Georgia 55th out of 141 countries regarding public sector performance with a score of 54.0 out of 100 and the burden of regulations ranked 11th with a score of 60.8 for 2018–2019 (Schwab, 2019).¹ It scored the future orientation of the government at 51.7, ranked 83rd. Related to corporate governance, WEF indicated a score of 73.2 and a comparative rank of 18. For the Skills pillar, WEF scored Georgia 69.8 out of 100 for the skillset of graduates and a score of 42.7 on the ease of finding skilled employees indicators. This ranked the country 46th and 120th respectively on those indicators out of a total of 141. So, although the country has favorable governance conditions, its future orientation and ability to find needed employees is relatively low. Although the government has some favorable conditions for higher education, it faces significant challenges regarding finding skilled workers and the skillsets of those individuals.

The World Bank Governance Indicators demonstrate that governance in the country is improving. Georgia is particularly strong in control of corruption, which measures the extent to which public power is used for private gain, and regulatory quality, which measures the extent to which government policies promote private sector development. Over a ten-year window, Georgia’s governance context improved, and in some cases significantly. Its control of corruption increased to the 75th percentile from the 55th. Its rule of law score increased almost as much comparatively (Figure 7.1).

¹ The prior competitive framework included a higher education pillar and a quality score. These no longer are included in the 4.0 version of the WEF framework.

Figure 7.1 Worldwide governance indicators for Georgia



Shape and Structure of Higher Education

There are sixty-four higher education institutions in Georgia, nineteen of which are public. Georgian HEIs are classified as one of three types: research universities, teaching universities, and colleges. Research universities are authorized to award bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees. Teaching universities do not perform significant academic research and award first and second-cycle degrees but not doctoral degrees. Colleges only award bachelor's degrees. In October of 2016, there were a total of 190,057 students enrolled in HEIs in Georgia (Erasmus Plus, 2019). In 2019, the tertiary gross enrollment rate was 64 percent (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2019).

The Unified National Examinations (UNEs), standardized entrance examinations, were introduced in 2005 to combat corruption in higher education admissions and to improve access for disadvantaged students (Chakhaia & Bregvadze, 2018). Students are awarded state study grants of 100 percent, 70 percent, or 50 percent of tuition based on their UNE scores. Students at both private and public institutions are eligible for state study grants.

Tuition fees, which are capped at the maximum state study grant amount, account for 90 percent of the total income of public HEIs (Erasmus Plus, 2019). Additional funding comes from private grants and donations, competitive state research grants, and the ministries of relevant fields.

Higher Education Governing Context

Higher education in Georgia is regulated by two main laws: On Higher Education (2004) and On Educational Quality Enhancement (2010).

The 2004 Law On Higher Education grants autonomy to public HEIs, allowing them to develop their own study and research policies, elect management bodies and officials, and manage their finances. This law, adapted from British-inspired steering approaches, provides rectors with increased financial and budgetary responsibility (Dobbins & Khachatryan 2015). However, the implementation of the law is limited by the granted autonomy. Curriculum is the responsibility of the academics working in collaboration with University administrators. However, the curricula require approval by the Ministry of Education (Dobbins & Khachatryan 2015, Gibbs et. al. (2022) give the example of institutional and program accreditation as evidence. The mechanisms of monitoring are such that they limit autonomy. Dobbins and Krhachatryan (2015), in their study of governance in Georgia and Armenia, argue that the shift to market mechanisms in Georgian higher education only extend to the point where the state is not undermined in its control.

The law also works to promote transparency in management by making the decisions, reports, and legal acts of HEI's managerial bodies accessible to all interested persons. Furthermore, academic personnel and students must be involved in decision-making. The law also defines a three-cycle higher education system consisting of bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees, bringing Georgia's system in line with the Bologna Process, which it joined as a full member in 2005.

Both public and private HEIs are monitored by the National Center for Educational Quality Enhancement, which is responsible for quality assurance, authorization of education institutions, management of the accreditation process, and promotion of integration into the European Higher Education Area. It was established by the 2010 Law On Educational Quality Enhancement. The director of the Center is appointed by the minister of education, science, culture and sports in coordination with the prime minister.

7.2 GOVERNING BODY PROFILE

Body Structure

According to the Law on Education, the highest governing body of public HEIs is the Academic Council. Public higher education institutions are also

governed by a Council of Representatives (Senate), rector, chancellor, and Quality Assurance Service.

Membership

Each basic educational unit has an equal number of representatives on the Academic Council. This number is defined by the institution. Representatives can be full or associate professors. Institutions may also allow independent research units to participate in the Academic Council. For example, Tbilisi State University's Academic Council has three representatives from each faculty and one representative from each independent scientific research unit. Akai Tsereteli State University has two representatives from each faculty on its Academic Council. Most public universities have between one and three representatives from each faculty on the Academic Council.

The Council of Representatives consists of student and academic personnel representatives from each of the institution's basic educational units. The membership of the Council of Representatives must be at least double the membership of the Academic Council, and students must comprise one-third of the body. Members of the Academic Council cannot be elected to the Council of Representatives.

Each basic educational unit must have their own Quality Assurance Service composed of professors and associate professors from the respective units.

Member Appointment Process

Academic Council and Council of Representative members are elected via secret ballot by student representatives and all members of the academic staff of the basic educational units.

Chair Appointment Process

The rector, the head of a higher education institution, is the chairperson of the Academic Council. They are elected via secret ballot by members of the Academic Council. The rector cannot be elected for more than two consecutive four-year terms of office. The chancellor is responsible for the administration of the institution, including financial and economic transactions. This position is elected by the Academic Council whose recommendation is verified by the Council of Representatives.

One member of the Council of Representatives is elected to be speaker of the Senate. The head of Quality Assurance Service is nominated by the Academic Council and approved by the Council of Representatives.

Board Accountability

Given that the Academic Council is elected by the University academic staff and students and the ministry has no direct involvement in its daily work, this body seems accountable to its electorate and to the rector who chairs the body. However, as noted above the ministry is highly influential in University efforts, including approval of curriculum and setting the financial and competitive context for the University (Dobbins & Khachatryan 2015).

Scope of Work

The Academic Council drafts and approves the institution's strategic development plan, approves study and research programs, and promotes integration into the European Higher Education Area. The Academic Council also nominates a chancellor for approval by the Council of Representatives.

The Council of Representatives has the authority to approve the chancellor's budget, approve the Academic Council's nominee for chancellor, and terminate the chancellor.

The rector is the head of a higher education institution. He or she represents the institution's academic and research interests.

The Quality Assurance Services within each basic educational unit promote high quality teaching, learning, and evaluation. They are overseen by the institution's head of Quality Assurance Service.

Commentary

The Rose Revolution and the Saakashvili government-initiated reforms spurred a series of market-oriented changes in Georgia that are reflected in the evolution of its higher education system and its governance structure. Although maximum tuition is set by the state, higher education institutions are able to manage their own finances; their leaders set and manage budgets. They are able to recruit students, creating an increasingly competitive context. They also elect their own leaders and management bodies and develop their own study and research policies. The state encourages competition

among institutions through its funding mechanisms, combats corruption, and sets quality assurance standards. As Dobbins and Khachatryan (2015) argue, Georgia higher education is pressured both by market forces and by governmental ones. “All in all, a unique model of governance has evolved . . . which seemingly deliberately mix market-based and authoritarian elements” (p. 205).

The country’s economy and political situation, trends in demographics, and the uncertainty in the region mean that universities are under stress. The challenges may suggest stronger alignment of the sector with external needs in terms of relevance but also funding, via tuition fees. However, even with the external demands on universities, there are no direct external voices in Georgian public higher education governance; all members of the governing bodies come from within the universities and the supreme governing body is chaired by the rector, who also is elected from within the University by the Academic Council. State steering is done through other mechanisms. The country a decade ago seemed to have comparatively high levels of a governance capacity context. However, it saw declines per the World Bank indicators, suggesting that it had capacity, but without continued attention that capacity has eroded.