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A study into Georgian universities' approach to the national standards of quality for teaching and learning

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a study conducted in Georgia on the issues of the university sector to implement new strategic principles and standards devised by the National Center for Educational Quality Enhancement (NCEQE) for learning and teaching in higher education. This paper specifically considers the government's institutional relations concerning the quality of teaching and learning. This is done by borrowing the conceptual framing of the governance relationship of Government and institution provided by Principle Agency (PA) theory. The paper presents the results of the survey and follow-up interviews and concludes that institutions differ in approach, embracing both symbolic compliance and professional pragmatism in regard to the accreditation requirements. A discussion follows, embracing a principle agency interpretation of what the results might mean in practical and policy terms for governance and the development of the sector. It is accepted that learning and teaching is a challenging space for nearly all universities across the world but the Georgia example highlights the dynamics of change within the context of a post-Soviet country and the emerging practical problems this legacy creates. The research identifies some of these tensions between national systems and institutional readiness. The paper closes by offering recommendations for improvement.

Background

The paper is an investigation into the provisions of teaching and learning in one emerging post-Soviet state in the Caucasus; Georgia[1]. It considers how the delivery of student-centred, high quality teaching and learning is mandated by the Government and delivered in higher education within a culture of institutional autonomy. Moreover, from the literature, the experience reported here and the competitive funding in the area of teaching and learning provided under the rubric of the European support for capacity building in non-European Union countries; Erasmus+,[2] the situations in Azerbaijan and Armenia are similar to Georgia.

Georgia is a small state located within the Caucasus which has been subject to Soviet occupation and continues to have Russian troops occupying its country. This Soviet history has left a legacy of central power and the tension is evident in the higher education sector and the way in which it is controlled and managed[3] This tension is between the post-independence players in the sector who look towards Europe and its education ideology enshrined in the Bologna agreement and those who favour the central control of the Soviet period. This is seen in the implementation of the higher

education law, if not in the wording of it. The law supports academic freedom and autonomy but the procedures of implementation fail to liberate institutions of higher education in ways that reflect this autonomy, seeming to support a regime of mistrust between Government, through its agencies, and the institutional players of the sector. This is evident in the procedures for institutional and programme accreditation.

The NCEQE is acting as the mediator between requirements and adherence by the universities. In this context, it is worth noting that Dobbins and Khachatryan (2015) have argued that Georgian policy 'shift to market-oriented steering instruments are only being adopted to the extent that they do not undermine the state's means for political control over higher education' (2015:189).

Georgian quality standards

Studies on internal quality assurance in Georgia (Bregvadze et al. 2020; Darchia 2013) indicate that the functions of the units responsible for quality assurance are mainly related to the evaluation of educational programmes, preparation for accreditation and, in this context, determining compliance of human and material resources and the programme. Research conducted by Darchia et al. (2019) to evaluate the process of implementing the new system of external quality assurance of higher education institutions in Georgia found interesting mismatches between the drafting of the standards for higher education and their understanding and implementation. For instance, concerning teaching methodology and learning outcomes they found that, 'academic and invited staff have poor understanding of the learning outcomes indicated in the programmes or even courses that they are teaching' (2019, 36). This theme emerged in their recommendations that higher education institutions should 'Promote better understanding of learning outcomes, update them in line with modern requirements and align relevant teaching material, methodology and assessment methods to ensure their achievement' (2019, 64). Yet as Tsotniashvili (2020) suggests, 'Georgia, still struggles to perpetuate the concept of student centeredness in the teaching, learning and research'. (2020, 80). She also advocates the 'provision of professional development programmes support updating the research and teaching skills (as needed) for academic staff is critical to improve the academic and research capacity of the country' (2020, 84).

According to Grdzelidze (2020) the Law of Georgia on Higher Education (Grdzelidze 2020) defines, amongst other things, the existence of quality assurance services both at the university and faculty levels in higher education institutions which are established as legal entities of public law and lists their functions, including: systematic internal evaluation of the quality of professional development of education and promoting the provision of a high level of teaching quality through the preparation of institutional self-evaluation for the authorisation/re-accreditation process. This law is premised on student-centred learning which, as Tsotniashvili suggests, is poorly defined although prominent in the legislation. (Sections 2.5 and 3 and 7 of the Accreditation Standards for Higher Education Programmes, https://eqe.ge/eng/static/549). Moreover, based on these requirements to receive their institutional accreditation, higher education institutions need to have an institutional policy on teaching enhancement and teacher training. It is up to the individual higher education institution to decide on the specifics of these measures and as the research will show these measure are inconsistent and in most cases not formally monitored.

The accreditation process is run by the NCEQE.[4] This process is based on self-assessment and experts' evaluation of the practice and resources of the institutions:

- Teaching and Learning is assessed under a number of standards;
- Teaching methodology and organisation, adequate evaluation of Programme mastering;
- Student achievements and individual work with them;
- Providing teaching resources; and,
- Teaching Quality Enhancement Opportunities.

The standards do not require evidence of actual practice and are presented as instructions from the authority to the higher education institutions in a form which supports our theoretical basis for the study of agency theory. The governance and control exerted through the managerial approaches to the reaccreditation process is critical for institutional survival, so compliance, at least in terms of what is described, ought to be, and is, high. However, the reforms may not be effective. Maassen (2017) has argued that the more leaders who take on and operate in line with the reform agenda's ideologies, 'the less effective they appear to be in realising some of the reform intentions. How can such a paradox be accounted for?' (2017, 293). He offers one possible answer: 'that national governance reforms in general have failed to do justice to the basic institutional foundations of the university' (2017, 293). This creates a tension between the opportunities that generally advocate institutions to function autonomously but are constrained by other aspects of government audit structure which are of a prescriptive nature that actually inhibits such autonomy. This, we believe, is the case in Georgia. As Dobbins and Khachatryan (2015) observe, the state tightly monitors management operations and curriculum design.

Theoretical underpinning

To investigate how governmental regulations and institutional adherence to them, the project utilises the conceptual framework of PA theory to investigate the ways in which teaching and learning standards are realised by the higher education institutions as agents for national policy. In this context, PA provides 'clear, logically-consistent and dynamic framework for examining government–university relationships from the selected perspective' (Kivistö 2008, 347). PA theory focuses on the ways principals try to mitigate this control problem by selecting certain types of agents and certain forms of monitoring their action. (Kivistö 2008, 339). PA theory developed within the economic context (Eisenhardt 1989) but is now more readily used for its explanatory power[5] in providing a normative interpretation of the relations of principal and agent. Kivistö (2008) states that the government–university relationship can be considered as an agency relationship when the following three conditions in this relationship are present: '(a) tasks that the government delegates to a university; (b) resources that the government allocates to a university for accomplishing the tasks; and (c) government interest in monitoring the accomplishment of the tasks'.

There is a currently a small but growing t literature on princple agency theory in higher education contexts: research (Yallew et al. 2018), recruitment agent management (Nikula and Kivistö 2020), enhancing (Lane 2007;jib) and the continuation of use of IT in teaching (Sandvik, Gulbrandsen, and Gulbrandsen 2021), in the analysis of provider provision in UK further education providers and, through this, in discussing local and national control of provision (Bocock 2017), development and control of quality assurance within higher education (Borgos 2013), funding of higher education (Liefner 2003; Cooley 2015), doctoral study in Georgia (Cherkezishvili, Sanikidze, and Gibbs 2020). Only the final paper uses PA theory in a Georgian context where the emergence of higher education policy moves towards Europeanisation within the specific socio-politics of a post-Soviet country.[6]

Yallew et al.'s (2018) literature review of agency theory in higher education during 2005–2016 found the PA theory was usually adopted in the studies that were focusing on system policy or institutional management and concludes that "informal asymmetries and goal conflict are clearly present in government–university relationships, which creates favourable conditions for the appearance of the agency problem (2018: 95). The literature does, however, indicate that there are limits to the imposition and control of agency principle approaches in terms of academic practice. Evidence for this is found in Wan et al.'s (2017) study of academics in Malaysia, where the principle redress to external motives of performance pay and other incentives fail to motivate active researchers, whereas space and time to research does. This supports Wilkesmann, Schmid, and Schmid's (2012) German study with professors and administrators. They found that the use of managerial instruments had little impact on academic teaching performance (although they note that younger

professors emerging through the new public management ideology were more inclined to be so influenced). They concluded that professors' behaviour, in the main, responded to intrinsically related motivation which reflected their academic status.

The authors consider that PA will help reveal within the Georgia context how the government uses its agencies to maintain central control of quality in higher education through the imposition of significant and invasive audit requirement at programme, faculty and institutional levels. It is suggested that the formality of these processes both implies mistrust in the universities as agents based on what is conceptualised in PA theory and leads to the potential for informational asymmetries and goal conflicts.

Methodology

To the best knowledge of the researchers, no comprehensive survey of attitudes to teaching in higher education, its importance to the institution and the structuring of teaching support had been conducted within Georgia. There were eight open-ended questions which were addressed to the Rector of each university in Georgia and administered via Survey Monkey to observe anonymity. All respondents were offered the opportunity of follow-up discussions. Nine respondents requested these (four Private, five State). The survey was constructed in English, checked for meaning and translated by the Georgian researchers, reverse translated to ensure accuracy and delivered to respondents in Georgian. For this survey we requested policy makers of the universities for comment defined as Rectors or other senior representatives of the universities, to complete the questions on behalf of the university, and not to give their personal views. These were chosen as they are responsible for the institution's responses to government under the law and would be most able to discuss its impact on their institution's action. The researchers who designed the questions include two Rectors (one State, one private) and two senior designated NCEQE Higher Education Reform experts. The universities were categorised as either private or public (State) and, using the Ministry of Education's definition of the type of the institution, into 'university' or 'teaching university'. The whole university sector was directly approached through the Rectors in the project team to participate. These are leaders in the National Rector Council for public and private Universities. The resultant overall response rate was 49%; and for each sector; 52% Public, 45% private. Within the questionnaire respondents were invited to be interviewed and five responded positively. These were identified as the respondents had to declare a contact address. They represented both public and private universities.

Table 1. Received questionnaire and total population.

Type*	Ownership	
	State	Private
University (31)	9**	7
Teaching University (20)	3	6

*University – institution of higher education which carries out higher educational programmes of all three stages and scientific research.

Teaching university – institution of higher education which carries out one or more higher educational programs (excepting doctorate programs). Teaching universities necessarily carry out educational programs of the second stage – master program/programmes (Ministry of Education website http://www.mes.gov.ge/content.php?id=131&lang=eng)

** One regional university

The analysis of the survey was conducted at question level, two level, and then at aggregate level within the type of institution. Table 1 shows the response numbers within each category. We did not ask the private universities to declare if they were with-profit or non-profit but given the similarity of responses this does not seem to have been a significant oversight.

The project was approved by the East European University and the TSU research ethics committees and received approval as being a non-invasive methodology which safeguarded and protected the dignity, rights, and safety of potential research participants. No vulnerable people were involved. The requirement of anonymity, project outline and purpose, and consent forms were sent with the questionnaire and subsequently sent to those who were interviewed.

Results (numbers in brackets refer to codes given to respondent).

The results to the open-ended questions in the survey are presented first, then a summary of responses is presented within the four types of university study in Georgia. Following that, findings from individual interviews are reported.

Survey (questions provided as an appendix)

In response to the first question of the survey which asked respondents to summarise their teaching and learning strategy for the enhancement of teaching and learning and the role of student engagement within it.[7] All respondents had such a strategy but it was described not in strategic terms but in terms of participants and actions. One respondent used the term 'strategy', stating that their teaching and learning strategy was 'creating an educational environment based on skills development' (R14). That is, it was based on student, Academic and other stakeholders' involvement. A prominent role was played by the institutional in-house quality service department and it concerned itself in a range of activities including skills development, sometimes called 'results orientated education' (R18), modern educational practices. For example, 'new approaches to the teaching and learning process are being introduced at the university which are distinguished by raising the qualification of the academic staff' (R8). The success of these activities was monitored, although no special evaluation mechanisms were mentioned in this question. The statement mirrors the requirement by NCEQE for the inclusion of such a strategy.

The second question sought to explore how the institution implemented this strategy. The response here revolved around teacher improvement and through professional development. Encouragement to research and publish practice-based research was mentioned in several responses. Monitoring and control is through observation and student surveys, and are detailed in regulatory documents in some cases. It was implicit that academics engaged in these processes although one respondent noted that 'there is a part of the staff that is quite difficult to persuade' (R15). In the majority of the responses, most central to them, alongside evaluation and auditing of teaching performance, was communication. This is clear in this response, where 'constant communication with staff, intensive involvement in their process' (R5) was the approach advocated.

Question three was central to the research and asked about support given and whether this was provided through a dedicated teaching and learning centre. Dedicated centres were mentioned in about a third of responses and this is typical. . There were equally as many institutions where the responsibility was one of the quality assurance services and HRM departments or delegated to specific faculty managements. Whoever was responsible, their tasks were similar: collecting data on staff, identifying or responding to already indicated needs within training programmes. External consultants were recruited to help in these teaching tasks as well as the use of internal mobility opportunities provided for staff. One institution offered a detailed description of their teaching centre where training was provided for new academics on a mandatory basis as well as providing support responses to existing academics.

Question four related to academic support by asking if the institution developed resources related to teaching and learning for their teaching staff. Most respondents took this question to reference budgetary support and answered in the affirmative; one answered simply 'no' (25) and

another 'insufficient' (10). The budget, where it existed, was variously allocated centrally or distributed through faculties. There was a lack of detail in what the resources provided were, although several mentioned external experts and international travel provision.

The next question attempted to extend the discussion on resources and the following question asked about development of training content and what form of recognition does it have? The majority of responders' sourced either individual, tailored courses or more general provision based on self-assessment surveys obtained from the faculty. In this sense it is demand led. There are instances where it is more centrally organised: as respondent R13 stated, the 'content of the training is provided by the trainer in the quality assurance service which is approved by the Rector'. A number of the universities relied upon international partners to provide courses and recognition in the form of certified learning and others argued that recognition is most intrinsic in the form of better higher student evaluations.

Turning to the structure of the programme, its length, the form it takes, (e.g. lectures, workshops, on-line sessions) respondents followed the on-demand model and so were not able to offer a portfolio of the course but there were a few responses which showed a well-planned staff development portfolio of courses of various lengths and content. These were in the minority and, when cross-referenced to previous answers provided by these institutions, showed that they had teaching and learning departments. These and others relied on external help, usually from a paired international institution. Those who mentioned length indicated one to three days. For the most part the courses were not mandatory, although they might be designated as advisable.

The next questions concerned evaluation of teaching quality and learning gain. Teaching quality may be evaluated against predetermined quality criteria set by the quality assurance services but is predominantly through student surveys with the addition, in many cases, of, graduate and staff satisfaction surveys and by student achievement in employment. Using employment aspects of student learning dominates the notion of learning gain. This seems to indicate that learning is viewed in terms of successful employment outcomes, although it is mentioned in many responses as the gain over time in examinations. One respondent stated that it is 'impossible to measure' (R16). Of the two concepts, improvement in teaching quality seems reliant on improvement in students' impression of teaching which relates to the NCEQE guidance on student-centred learning, while 'learning gain' is rather blunt and insensitively measured.

Finally, the respondents were then asked if they would support a national system of recognition of teaching quality and what form that might take. The overriding response can be captured by this answer: 'Professional development programmes should be established in institutions that should be based on common standards' (3). These should also be accredited by the authorities. There were some, but very few, that objected to this and the main reasons given were that they would not be able to respond to discipline-specific requirements and were against academic freedom. There were similar small numbers who supported a centralised programme.

These issues were further explored in a discussion question on how the academic staff were involved in the implementation and how its impact of the implementation was judged. This was discussed in terms of academic staff striving to implement the strategy, with some failing and their teaching becoming 'deplorable' (15). Indeed, in all responses a need for clarity of the required changes in practice were mentioned and for many it was a matter of 'constant communication'(5) through a wide number of modes, including focus groups, or developing "regulatory documents " (4) or setting targets and 'auditing programmes' (26).

In summary, data collected from the questionnaire gave a clear appreciation of the importance of both the requirements to structure higher education within the standards and in making efforts for this to be realised in practice. There was clarity for the most part in teaching and learning strategies, how they functioned within the overall organisational strategy and the importance of

communication. There are responses which show clear and imaginative strategic development; development of distinct centres to improve the provision of teaching and learning and strong involvement of students and faculty and in many institutions' other stakeholders. Most institutions, however, place the responsibility for enhancing teaching and learning within their quality assurance services division and/or decentralise it to faculty-level engagement. Almost all indicated that a budget was provided for the professional development of teaching skills and the provision of programmes (internally and externally) to support that. Some, but not all, required academics to undertake training, while others provided it on a voluntary basis. This enhancement of practice was something discussed in terms of individual needs analysis and at other times in terms of the longevity of appointment. Evaluation of teaching quality was predominantly through student surveys of satisfaction and student performance against programme outcomes. The evaluation of student learning gain was predominantly discussed in terms of assessment, although a number of responses also referred to employers and to the importance of employment. Finally, there was substantial support for a system of common teaching standards upon which teaching programmes could be built, but considerably less support for centralised programme provision.

Table 2. *Synthesis of response by type of university and its ownership*

From the above table the similarities of the universities is clear. Those designated as Universities tend to be more heterogeneous in their responses and more likely to have a distinctive interpretation of the Standards in their practice.

Utilising the interviews

With the help of five interviews offered by the questionnaire respondents who requested to be further involved, we deepened our understanding of three questions: (a) the meaning of student centred learning, (b) appraisal of teachers and their teaching, its process and its relationship with other academic requirements, and (c) the strategic implementation process and its monitoring by the NCEQE. A summary of the themes is presented in Table 3.

Table 2. Summary of clusters.

	Public	Private
University	• More independent approaches to teaching than other clusters • Wide range of support for standards and some for centralised programmes • A number with centralised offices for Continued Professional Development • Importance of QAS in almost all provision	• Less focused on teaching than public teaching universities • Some provide a centralised unit • Strong support for standards coupled with institutional autonomy • Programmes are mainly non-compulsory • Less coherence in this group than in the teaching group
Teaching University	• Decentralised approach to teaching improvement • Focus on employment • No compulsory requirements on teachers (except where professional bodies require)	• Most had some form of central support • Supported standards, and/or programmes • Student gain mainly QA responsible • Some training is certificated

Table 3. Summary of themes emerging form the interviews.

Themes	Examples
Meaning of student centred learning	Lack of consistency of meaning, contest meanings, focus on teacher skills not students
Appraisal of teaching and learning	Highly structured, purpose is to identify, process driven
Strategic development process	Document audit, focus on matching guidance rather than innovation, lack of engagement outside of audit function

Student centred learning

It was evident from the questionnaire that the development of the teaching and learning strategy, the requirements of the NCEQE for a more student centred approach was mentioned in almost all responses, yet there seems to be a lack of consistency about what that means. Ashwin (2020) has pointed to the contested meaning of this term but, in the questionnaires, the majority of the respondents linked the focus on student centred learning with the functionality of learning outcomes and articulated student centred learning mainly in terms of teaching procedures, not learning process. Indeed, many of the strategies revolved around improving a net deficiency model of teaching which was expressly identified with pre-Soviet education approaches to teaching rather than learning. For instance, respondent (9) suggested that student centred learning (SCL) was approached through 'raising the qualifications of staff', another feature was to link PBL with learning outcomes rather than the learning process and, for instance, SCL was related to learning outcomes and employment rates. Indeed, comments were given such as SCL 'results in oriented education' (16), or 'student involvement is minimal' (17) to creating an educational environment 'based on skills' (1). Where student involvement was present, and it was in many responses, it was via student satisfaction surveys which were used to satisfy quality assurance procedures.

Teacher and teaching appraisal

There were of course examples of the learning process mentioned and student involvement 'in the program development group' (11) with 'learning approaches based learning challenges' (10).

The interviews helped in exploring this further. The overriding themes from these interviews was a conceptual void between the Soviet system and the post-Soviet liberal enlightenment of a dialectic process of learning involving teachers and learners. Indeed, one of the concerns was the ability and the inclination of older lecturers to become involved and have faith in these new teaching and learning approaches. This manifested in the highly structured teacher monitoring process, heavily reliant on student feedback, and professional development as deficiency rehabilitation. Moreover, this process was driven by international relationships with European countries, mainly under the embrace of Erasmus + programs or through individually negotiated associations with specific European institutions. There was some evidence of progressive approaches such as problem-based learning and flipped classrooms and one university had researched the changes in student learning, finding positive results.

The interviews revealed that most institutions had explicit criteria for judgment, although it was mentioned that these were susceptible to personal judgment. The procedure also was linked in some cases to promotion, financial or academic incentive reward and, in other cases, to the intrinsic value of being a high-quality teacher. There were statements that consistent poor performance could lead to loss of employment, although no cases of this were reported.

These results pointed to an emerging system unused to flexibility and to some degree autonomous decision-making which, although discussed in liberal terms, were struggling under the yoke of procedural control within a sector low on resources, dependent on foreign expertise and where a neo-liberal market directs academic values and part-time itinerant workers as service providers have emerged to satisfy students in the most utilitarian way.

.Strategic implementation

Within the questionnaire the strategic approaches of institutions that unfolded in relation to policy directives was unclear. These findings were illuminated further by the interviews. Concerns were expressed that there was a lack of confidence in the academic understanding of what was involved in their commitment to change and in their teaching skill base. Moreover, the procedure of the quality agencies contributed to this in what was described as a 'document audit process' and, related to that, the whole process concentrated on student enrolment and retention numbers, not

on teaching or student motivation. This could lead, as one interviewee said, to a lack of concern for the intrinsic of teaching and learning and more for the external procedures which are involved. This understanding of the operation of review led to confidence in a process which really, we would argue, does not reflect the actual teaching and learning process. There were calls for the process to concentrate on teachers' soft as well as hard skills, and for consistency in the requirement to prevent, because of the size of the market, academics leaving for competitive institutions because they could and their teaching would be accepted, unaltered by SCL. The huge task of review by the NCEQE was given as a reason for the procedural approach and this may contribute to a process-driven system.

It was reported that the final NCEQE assessment tended to be on documentation, not on personal experience of, or in discussion with, the lecturers. This was further evidence to suggest the whole system was based on a procedure-driven model where central decisions were made without evidence of the actual experience of teaching or of student engagement. The interviews, in particular, had a theme of power of the ultimate decision maker without clear accountability. The research identified these tensions between national systems and institutional readiness and a perceived desire on behalf of the agency not to help in the resolution of emerging problems through consultation but to mandate change. This left some institutions unsure of how to respond and reinforced a power-based relationship with the agency.

However, this lack of resource may also be a way of perpetuating a system of control which has the same systemic flaw, albeit in a different form, from those for previous approaches to the sector. Indeed, this points to a more hidden control mechanism from the NCEQE and at an education policy which is in contradiction with itself: one where volume takes precedence over quality, achieved through procedure rather than process and control over support.

Discussion

The application of PA seems to have resonance with the findings of the research and the requirements of the Accreditation Standards. Specifically, considering the three broad clusters of information asymmetries, goal conflicts and opportunist behaviours, the theory helps to understand the results of the research in the following ways:

Information asymmetries

Much of what is proposed and the form of evidence is either in alignment with, or follows exactly, the evidence indicated in those standards. Yet when the universities were asked to comment on issues outside those questions which directly related to the standards, more diverse and interesting responses were produced. This implied that activities of institutions were reported in ways what most directly mirrored the questions asked for with the exception of a few institutions within all clusters there was a lack of detail in the actual practice involved (of course this might be more a reflection of the questionnaire). There was certainly focus on matching the written standards of the NCEQE to the letter but little support from the NCEQE to develop these in practice with the institutions. This led to a homogeneity of the systems requirement which might have benefitted from greater diversity in provision through more creative leadership. The interview did review that institutions had internal ways of performing which reflected resource and financial needs of the institutions rather than reflect the formulaic request for information from the agencies. Further evidence is the request from institutions for ongoing support from the NCEQE to help them understand what was actually required, a form of conversation rather than audit. This lack of clarity lead to feeling of asymmetries both in power and knowledge.

Goal conflicts

There is also evidence that the approach of many institutions is to only offer symbolic compliance to the strategy requirements,[8] using existing facilities to provide structure to a policy which needs its own infrastructure, often offering vague responses to the questions asked and replicating the terms used by the accreditation agency with what seems like little engagement. This description would cover the majority of responses but there were a number where professional pragmatism was shown in responses. Teaching and learning centres had been set up, there was advice but not overly reliant on external experts, learning gain was more sophisticated than simple changes in exam results, training programmes were systemic and monitoring was complex and relational. These few universities were state institutions. The majority seemed to lack clarity in their understanding of a student-centred approach, have indistinct implementation plans which are relevant only in a procedural way for management and control with the emphasis on the importance of student evaluations. This is functionally encouraged by the NCEQE which increased central control alongside the authorisation and reaccreditation role it currently undertakes and in so doing encourages symbolic compliance, attested to through evaluations which are paper based. There also seems to be a conflict in the Principals' own goals, based on the invasive nature of the controls employed and the assertion of institutional autonomy.

Opportunities behaviour

The in-depth analysis for teaching and learning issues, strategy implementation, appraisal of lecturers and common standards reveals a system still emerging from Soviet ideology and doing so at a different pace. Some institutions seem very clear in what student centred learning is and how to change the institution to avail students of it. There is some evidence that because of the resources available to the systems, academics play the multiple roles both as agents of, as well as subjects of, the NCEQE, and potential conflicts of interest in one's own institutional success in accreditation may occur. It was not possible to check the compliance of the agency in this practice. There is, however, tangential support for the suggestion by Chakhaia and Bregvadze (2018) who argue that "HEIs themselves negotiate with the government, often through personal connections and power networks (2018: 188).

These findings support the position of the Principle (Government and their expansion as the NCEQE) to use their accreditation powers to create information asymmetries and, from this, ambiguous implementation intentions of their edicts to their agents, the universities. The Principle's tactics for this is the significant and invasive use of audit activities which manifests their powers and control. Given the uncertainty of satisfying these requirements in practices, requirements take time and resources from within the institutions and their compliance to this structure is based on accreditation, without which the institutions are barred from activity. A more transparent, relevant and fit for purpose quality regime would collaboratively embrace the institutions in the design and organic development of the quality system. This would require greater trust between institutions and government, built on openness and dialogue. This may come as the post-Soviet adjustment matures, so that both principle and agent recognise and rely upon the action of each other to enhance the rigour of the higher education system and reputation this will build.

Recommendations and limitations

Georgia has had to develop a quality assurance mechanism when she transitioned from the Soviet Higher Education System which is based upon the European Higher Education Area and reflects a more flexible approach towards innovation and a higher education market after Soviet occupation. However, the development of policy and its implementation requires a culture where trust is based on the motivation for the process. These strong cultural influences are rooted in contextual realities

of the country and the move for universities from central control to autonomy has not been without problems (Saakashvili 2006; Campbell and Gorgodze 2016) and there are still remnants of those who do not wish to embrace the personal accountability and creativity of a post-Soviet higher education. This tension creates issues that need to be resolved without imperilling the integrity of the entire system.

There seems room for improvement through a more uniform adoption of teaching centres, the more formalised creation and adoption of teaching development programmes, mandatory or not, and the acceptance and even desire in some institutions for a centralised set of standards for teaching practice in ways that reflect their own mission and discipline diversity. There is also a role for the NCEQE which might be more clear in how the practices of their policy might be enacted, offering support as well inspections and training in the development of strategy and implementation of student centred teaching in ways that reflect the Georgian way and need. How this might be achieved and put into practice for the improvement of teaching quality and learning gain is unclear from the research but it reflects a sector willing to embrace both recommendations, should they believe it appropriate and feasible.

Limitation on the research findings show a sector concentrating on improving teaching practice but the methodology only captured 50% of potential respondents. The findings might be clearer if both teaching and research were investigated together. These comments are therefore not critical but a critique and, as we offer below, may be challenged through different actions of the NCEQE.

Notes

1. I am grateful to a review for specifying this point
2. (https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/projects/#search/project/keyword=teaching%2520and%2520learning%2520higher%2520education%2520armenia%2520&matchAllCountries=false),
3. Huisman, Smolentseva, and Froumin (2018) volume especially Chakhaia and Bregvadze chapter on Georgia.
4. Details of the accreditation process can be found at https://eqe.ge/en/page/static/549/akreditatsiis-protsesi
5. We recognise that the theory has its critics but, pragmatically, that it has reasonable explanatory power in the context of higher education governance.
6. Dobbins and Khachatryan (2015) uses a different theoretical perspective in their study of Georgia and Armenia.
7. Student engagement is a requirement for institutional accreditation.
8. As Jibladze (2017) observed in the adoption of Bologna reforms in Georgian State higher education

Disclosure statement

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Appendix – Open ended questions used in the survey

Teaching and learning strategy

(1) Please summarise your strategy for the enhancement of teaching and learning in your institution and include whether there is a driving philosophy on student engagement within it
(2) How do you implement this strategy with your academic staff?
(3) How do you provide support for teaching and learning? Is it through a dedicated institutional teaching and leading centre? If yes, what are the centre's functions and, if not, how are professional development activities organised and co-ordinated? Is it through Faculties, Schools or centrally by Human Resources departments?
(4) Do you have developed resources related to the teaching and learning issues for your teaching staff? If so, please indicate in what areas).
(5) How have you developed the content of this training and what are the main topics around which the curriculum is built? What form of recognition does it have?
(6) What is the structure of the programme, its length, the form it takes, (e.g. lectures, workshops, on-line sessions)? What resources do you use: those developed within the institution or from external sources?
(7) Are professional development programmes on teaching practice compulsory for all faculty to attend? If so, please explain the rationale for this. If not, please indicate what the exemptions are (e.g. who should attend and is this optional?)
(8) How do you measure teaching quality in your institutions?
(9) How do you measure learning gain in students?
(10) Would you support a national system of recognition or should it be based on common standards developed into programmes either by institutions or by a centralised programme provision?