Chapter 10

THE CHALLENGE OF BOLOGNA

The Nuts and Bolts of Higher Education Reform in Georgia

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1. PREFACE

The impact of Georgia's 'Rose Revolution' of November 2003, and of the peaceful political change that followed it, have been strengthened by a number of expatriate Georgian intellectuals who, for the first time in more than a decade, have begun to return to work in academia, building a knowledge society at home on the basis of *strengthening a stable, peaceful and democratic society*, as suggested in the Bologna Declaration (Declaration 1999). A message to this effect was delivered in the inaugural speech of the President of the Republic of Georgia, Michael Saakashvili, on January 25 2004. He highlighted education as one of the key strategic areas of development in building a free and prosperous Georgia (Saakashvili 2004). Incorporation into the European Higher Education Area offers Georgia a unique opportunity for integration with Europe beyond the traditional spheres of political and cultural co-operation by building close links in higher education and through this, offering the globalised world access to the treasures of the Georgian educational tradition.

2. INTRODUCTION

Georgia, as a former Republic of the Soviet Union, came into being as an independent nation state after the collapse of the Soviet empire in 1991. In April of that year, Georgia declared its independence, becoming a member of the United Nations on August 4, 1992. The following description is

V. Tomusk (ed.), Creating the European Area of Higher Education: Voices from the Periphery, 209–226.

typical of those that any Internet surfer eager to learn more about this neglected corner of Eurasia, the confluence of Europe and Asia, will find on their computer screen:

> Described variously as a part of Europe, Central Asia or the Middle East, Georgia has long been a flash point for cultural and geographical collision. [1]

From a geographical perspective Georgia is considered a part of Asia, but despite its historical mix of Western and Eastern cultures, its civilisation has always had a strong Western orientation. One frequently-asked question, particularly in the context of a growing interest in Georgia's integration into European structures is: Where exactly Georgia belongs in the modern world?

Although Georgia is the host of one of the oldest Christian communities and cultural centres, its route to independence across the centuries, and even millennia, has been long and painful. Only recently has it broken out of its international isolation and begun to explore the prospects of playing an equal role among the European nation-states. Finally, it has received a unique historical opportunity to open up and demonstrate its culture to the rest of the world. Political, economic and social integration into European structures during the past decade has been perceived as one of the principal means for national development. At the same time, becoming a part of Europe imposes great responsibilities: Georgia must prove its readiness to reform itself to European standards. This is also true for education in general, and for higher education in particular.

The new Government of Georgia is fully aware that human capital formation is the key to political and economic development and reform, and a precondition of mutually beneficial regional, European and global integration. The government is fully aware that the existing system of higher education falls short of meeting the expectations of Georgian society in its need to build a vibrant democracy and achieve sustainable economic growth. The necessity of higher education reform is clear both in terms of content and policy. Ongoing social change has highlighted the changing role of the university in society, its need to relate more closely to the needs of society, to shift from teacher-centred to student-centred modes of teaching, to develop an institutional framework for lifelong learning, mobility, etc. This has created momentum in the search for new solutions on which national higher education policy could rely. The Bologna Process offers both a fascinating challenge for Georgia, and an inspiration in meeting several of its high priority tasks simultaneously: becoming part of political Europe; reforming its higher education system in line with the consensus achieved among the majority of the European countries; preparing politically and

[1] http://www.lonelyplanet.com/destinations/europe/georgia/

socially for integration into the European Union; gaining access to the global labour market; and introducing mechanisms of quality assurance—thus European quality standards—and achieving access to European and world-wide educational markets.

3. THE CURRENT SITUATION

Education has a long history and solid traditions in Georgia. A good education has always been a matter of great cultural importance and social value, with highly-educated individuals enjoying considerable respect in society. The first university in Georgia (and in the Caucasus as a whole) was established in January 1918, four months before the country gained its first, short-lived period of independence from Russia. During the Soviet era, Georgia had the highest proportion of university-educated citizens among the republics of the Soviet Union.

Under Soviet rule the Ministry for Higher and Specialised Secondary Education in Moscow was solely responsible for all policy decisions, with respective national agencies located in the 'Republics' merely supervising the implementation of orders received from Moscow—passing instructions from the top of the system to the bottom, and reports in the opposite direction. Power hierarchies were steep and commands were implemented unquestioningly since any reflection on the rationale behind a given decision, or the strategies for its implementation, was not generally tolerated. The concepts of devolved systems of management and governance were not to be found in the dictionaries of the Soviet bureaucracy. Since 1989, all the former communist countries, Georgia amongst them, have undergone some of the most radical social transformations modern history has witnessed. Dramatic events in the political and social life of Georgia in the 1990s have resulted also in radical changes in the education system.

Since gaining its independence, the educational sector in Georgia has experienced a disastrous reduction in its budget. This was a direct consequence of the collapse of the Georgian economy, which between 1991 and 1994 saw a decline in GDP of more than 75 per cent. As a secondary effect of that, the share of GDP allocated to education was reduced from more than 7 per cent in 1991 to less than 1 per cent in 1994 (Perkins 1998). In 1997 education received 1.7 per cent of Georgia's GDP, against an average figure for developing and developed countries of 3.9 per cent and 5.1 per cent respectively (UNESCO 1997).

In addition to financial difficulties, problems inherited from the Soviet past, such as a lack of meaningful educational planning practice and a shortage of management skills, have aggravated the crisis in higher education

in Georgia. Ironically, although the Academe has been deeply shaken by the social and economic changes in Georgia since 1991, little effort has been apparent in adjusting higher education to meet those changes. Neither methods of delivery in education, nor educational content bear much relevance to the country's developmental needs, and as things stand now, both curriculum content and teaching and learning methods are outdated. The breakdown of the Soviet system of central planning and the disintegration of the USSR, combined with an extreme shortage of funds, disrupted both the links between universities and those between universities and the labour market—to the extent to which the latter had continued to function given that the formal sector of the labour market had by and large disappeared. In addition to this, the disintegration of Soviet research structures terminated joint research projects with other universities and research centres around the Soviet Union, this left entire fields of knowledge and research isolated not only from the ideological West, but also from the East.

Still, one cannot assume that the Soviet contribution to Georgian higher education was entirely negative. At the very least, it laid the foundation on which the new Georgian higher education would be established. Despite the absence of any legal guarantee on exercising academic freedom under Soviet rule, higher education institutions (HEI) did harbour intellectual dissent, preserved Georgian culture, and sponsored—within obvious limitations—free and objective scholarship. Despite hard times, the HEIs have managed to retain qualified academic staff. Although a significant brain drain did develop in the 1990s that continues to some extent to this day, the young generation of academics trained in Europe and the US have at least re-established their contacts with their local alma mater. Students, perhaps the most important agents of change in higher education, are demonstrating their desire for reform in a variety of ways.

Introducing modern standards to Georgian higher education could contribute to alleviating problems that the country is facing. Amongst other things, HEIs must train professionals with a strong sense of citizenship of and affiliation to the country, whilst at the same time acknowledging their freedoms, rights, and privileges; and while developing a new higher education system that would serve its own needs first, Georgian higher education should become internationally compatible. Here the aim of integration into the European Area of Higher Education offers the primary and most important point of reference.

The decree from the Parliament of Georgia "The Main Directions of Higher Education Development in Georgia", adopted on March 1 2002, includes an important statement:

> In the increasingly globalised world, higher education has become international by its nature. Thus it is essential the higher education system of Georgia become a part of the common European educational area through partnership relationships with international organisations and leading schools (Parliament 2002).

Although the Bologna declaration is not directly mentioned in the decree, it is evident that it offers the only available means of achieving its goals and of developing a modern, internationally relevant system of higher education. The Bologna Process provides the political impetus for reforming higher education and a structural framework for doing so. The Ministry of Education and Science has understood this and has planned for a range of special activities that should allow Georgia to join the Bologna Process in the spring of 2005.

The political aspects of the Bologna Process have played a crucial role in this decision. In addition to the opportunity of reforming higher education, joining the Bologna Process is expected to corroborate Georgia's affiliation with the European part of the Eurasian continent, or in other words, recognise its traditional 'European-ness'. Joining the Bologna Process can also be seen as one of the steps leading to Georgian membership of the European Union. A close relationship between the Bologna Process and the EU has been supported in a report by Zgaga (2003):

> Although the Bologna process was initiated as mainly an intergovernmental process, there is an evident and growing convergence with EU processes aimed at strengthening European co-operation in higher education. … the Process was no longer merely a voluntary action for the EU Member States, or for the candidate Member States either. Therefore, in the light of EU enlargement, the growing convergence between the Bologna process and educational policy making on the EU level will soon become more and more visible. However, since its establishment the 'Bologna Club' has been wider than the EU, and even after the forthcoming EU enlargement in 2004 it will remain wider. This can only give additional dynamism to the Process.

Although turning the Bologna Process into an EU sectoral project in higher education is considered by some commentators to be a highly controversial step (see e.g. Tomusk, 2004), clear political advantages for Georgia cannot be doubted: the Bologna Process—as the European higher education 'brand'—and EU membership can be used in the fight against the Soviet legacy in Georgia's higher education. Full advantage should be taken of this opportunity. But at the same time we should be aware that

> … joining the Bologna Club… demands hard work at the national level to improve and connect the 'local infrastructure' to agreed 'common roads': readable and comparable degrees, quality assurance, promotion of mobility, etc., etc. (Zgaga 2003).

Implementing the basic requirements and principles of the Bologna Declaration at the level of universities, government, and society as a whole is not an easy task.

4. EXPECTATIONS OF THE BOLOGNA PROCESS

The basic principles of the Bologna process, derived from the initial Bologna Declaration and the Communiqués of the high level follow-up meetings in Prague and Berlin, are as follows:

- Adoption of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees, essentially based on two main cycles.
- Establishment of a system of credits.
- International mobility of students and staff.
- Promotion of European co-operation in quality assurance.
- Promotion of the necessary European dimensions in higher education.
- Lifelong learning.
- Student participation in the governance of higher education.
- Public responsibility for higher education.
- Autonomous universities.

Where does Georgia stand in relation to these principles? How far does it stand from European higher education as expressed in the requirements of the Bologna Declaration? Some aspects of the possible implementation of particular parts of the Bologna Process in the reality of the Georgian setting are discussed below.

4.1 Adoption of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees, essentially based on two main cycles

The requirement of the Bologna Declaration concerning the adoption of a system essentially based on two main cycles, undergraduate and graduate, with relevance of first degree to the European labour market, could be considered as a major goal in modernising higher education in Georgia.

The Soviet higher education system was a version of the German model adopted by Russia in the early nineteenth century. On 25 April 1994, the

Academic Council of the Tbilisi State University (TSU) adopted "The Concepts of University Education", according to which the Anglo-Saxon model was to be introduced, starting with the Department of Physics. At the first level, that of the Bachelor Degree, broad higher education and special physics instruction was to be offered, whereas at the second level, Master Degree, holders of first-class Bachelor degrees (approximately 30 per cent of the graduates of Bachelor degree courses) receive a deeper and narrower specialisation. By 1998 almost all departments of the TSU, excepting Law and Medicine, had introduced the two-level model. However, this change was largely formal since neither the content nor the methods of teaching and learning were modernized: at the end of the day, five-year programmes were simply squeezed into four years, and Master degree programmes were not developed according to internationally established standards. While some departments have tried to develop Bachelor and Master degree programmes that include quality control mechanisms and have a strong research component (e.g. Social Sciences at the TSU); some departments have also created new Bachelor degree programmes with the help of their European colleagues (e.g. the Department of Telecommunications at the Georgian Technical University), either by themselves or with the support from various agencies (e.g. the EU Tempus-Tacis programme, Volkswagen Stiftung, the USA University Partnership Program), these constitute mere islands in the ocean of Georgian higher education across which the overall situation remains critical.

Georgia currently has more than 200 HEI, among them 26 state universities. For a country with a population of 4.5 million these are not necessarily figures that Georgia should be proud of. The mushrooming of private HEIs began in 1991. The vast majority of these are of poor quality and can only be viewed as 'diploma mills', despite being granted the same rights and privileges under Georgian law as the public universities. Weak management, lack of institutional capacity, as well as the absence of a proper legislative framework have prevented the Ministry of Education and Science from effectively regulating the Georgian higher education system. The involvement of the Ministry is limited to licensing the new universities and other HEIs. All issues related to the management of academic matters are in the hands of the institutions themselves, which often means that because of the lack of any effective quality assurance mechanism, universities design their degrees as they wish and there is nobody to advise them to do otherwise. The introduction of Bachelor and Master degrees mostly means that while the old structure has been destroyed, no common framework for new programmes has been established. This leaves the door open for corruption and cheating, it promotes low qualification standards, reproduces ignorance and creates false expectations for the future among the younger

generation that are based on degrees and qualifications that often do not represent any kind of learning outcome—useful, liberal or their opposites.

One lesson to be learned from this reform is that achieving national higher education reform by initiating uncoordinated local change is unlikely. In the absence of clear policy guidelines only chaos can ensue, even at leading universities. With respect to the duration of the Bachelor and Master programmes a number of models are used in Georgian higher education: 4 + 2, 3 + 2 and 4 + 1. To make things even worse, in addition to a variety of versions of the Anglo-Saxon model, the old Soviet system also lives on. The former system of graduate training leading to the research degrees of Candidate of Sciences and Doctor of Sciences remains unaltered.

Failure to distinguish between the expected learning outcomes at Bachelor and Master degree levels constitutes yet another significant problem that above all illustrates the weakness of policy underlying the reforms. Surveys conducted by the Department of Sociology of the Tbilisi State University (TSU 2000; Kachkachishvili 2001) clearly show that neither professors nor students are able to differentiate between study at Bachelor and Master degree levels, although the professors seem to perceive Master degree level training in terms of preparation for the Candidate of Sciences training, the so-called *aspirantura*. However, given the difficulties of fitting the *aspirantura* into the changing system of academic qualifications, such a perception can easily be interpreted in terms of using Master degree training as a preparation for training at the same level, while the limitations on access to knowledge and methodology severely limit the horizons for academic development, both for individuals and across the system. Identical courses are often delivered as a part of both Bachelor and Master degree programmes. Furthermore, the latter are often characterised by the absence of any more substantial research component, and the concept of professional Master degrees is also absent.

There is a lack of knowledge and understanding about what exactly the title of 'Bachelor' stands for and how the old five-year programmes should be changed in order to produce coherent and meaningful Bachelor programmes. This, however, should not be seen merely as an outcome of resistance on the part of the faculty and administration. Any reform requires an appropriate legislative framework and additional funding. Universities with severely reduced budgets cannot be expected to undertake significant programmatic and staff development tasks. On the other hand, students are clearly in favour of two-level higher education, particularly because of the additional options available in designing their own educational paths.

It cannot be denied that in political terms the main reason for introducing two-level higher education in Georgia is to demonstrate the commitment to westernise and appear European. Large public universities perceive it as a

means of gaining recognition within a broader academic community. Attempts are also being made to join peer-review and quality assurance initiatives offered by various agencies and organisations. For example the Universities' Project of the Salzburg Seminar has organised a review visit to the Tbilisi State University and has compiled a report that focuses on curriculum reform at the first-degree level (Salzburg 2002).

It is very often the case that reform does not lead to reductions in study and teaching loads, and this is so for the introduction of Bachelor-level training in Georgian higher education: all optional courses are additional to those already in existence. Furthermore, because faculty compensation and student fees have been based on contact hours, universities have actually had an interest in inflating teaching loads. Until 2003, for example, this resulted in 36 hours being the normal weekly classroom time. This limited faculty research activities whilst also curbing their ability to develop graduate programmes. Only in 2003 was this figure reduced to 24, and still further in 2004 to 20.

A further problem has been that labour legislation still does not regulate the status of Bachelor degree holders, consequently the Bachelor degree does not appear to be something one could enter the labour market with. This is the reason for so many, particularly private HEIs offering mainly five-year 'specialist' diploma programmes. The local labour market prefers Master degree holders, on the grounds that the qualification is seen as an equivalent to the old diploma. This, one might suggest, illustrates the cosmetic nature of the reforms so far.

It is hoped that joining the Bologna Process and integration into the European Higher Education Area will induce major changes in both the content and format of Georgian higher education. Overloaded programmes could be reduced to 25-course single major degree programmes and 27-course double major degree programmes; student mobility between faculties and universities could be introduced to allow students to build programmes according to their individual needs; research components could be increased not only for students but also for faculty; the introduction of Information Technology literacy would enhance access to new knowledge; traditional universities would move away from the teacher-centred models of education to student-centred models; higher education would relate more closely to the needs of the local and regional labour markets; different fields of study—for example, natural sciences, social sciences, humanities and arts—would be equipped with adequate teaching and research methodologies such as critical thinking and interactivity, group work, field work, problem solving, etc. It would also create an opportunity for national integration of the academic community with national standards for teaching, research and research ethics.

Whilst appreciating the positive impact that the Bologna Process could have on the restructuring of higher educational study in Georgia, we should be aware that while opening new perspectives in Europe, introduction of the 3(BA) + 2(MA) + 3(PhD) scheme could limit the chances of Georgian Bachelor degree holders entering graduate training in US universities that seem to question the value of the three-year European degrees (Chronicle 2004).

4.2 Introducing a system of credit transfer

As with the introduction of new degrees, the introduction of systems of credit accumulation and transfer has had a rocky history in Georgia. Two Georgian universities, the Tbilisi State University and the Georgian Technical University, have actually introduced credit point systems. Some small private HEIs, such as the European School of Management (ESM) and Caucasian School of Business (CSB) have also adopted credit systems, mostly based on the American model. The TSU credit system is unique and does not correspond to any foreign model, while that of the Department of Telecommunication of the Georgian Technical University is compatible with the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS).

It is not immediately apparent to an outsider what the roots of the difficulties in introducing a uniform credit transfer system are, be it ECTS or any other. Strange as it may seem to outsiders, the very idea of viewing education in terms of student workload is entirely novel in Georgia. If that novelty were not problem enough, then its financial implications threaten the traditional ways in which higher education has functioned, and in particularly the manner in which faculty teaching loads are calculated and compensated. Any such reform could easily jeopardise the already less than modest remuneration faculty receive, or more worrying for administrators, create loopholes for faculty to claim additional compensation for tutoring and other non-traditional teaching activities.

As stated above, at the Tbilisi State University the current average weekly student workload is approximately 20 classroom hours per week, to which should be added a minimum of 20 hours of independent work, in addition to mid-term evaluations. The problem is that credits continue to be calculated based on classroom hours, with the same figures used to calculate faculty teaching loads. Separating the two represents a major management challenge that requires the modification of both the university teaching regulations and the faculty compensation scheme. Whilst there is much talk about student-centred universities in Georgia, even resolving the rather straightforward administrative issues related to that constitutes a massive task in the context of the current level of management capacity in the

Georgian higher education system. Introducing a common system of credit transfer, in addition to allowing and fostering student choice and mobility, is crucial for institutionalizing life-long learning in Georgia. So far not enough attention has been paid to credit transfer and accumulation. Even newly launched programmes often ignore the issue of possible credit transfer, and in cases where credits are being used it is not always clear what they actually represent. Often, the requirements for students to obtain credits continue not to be transparent.

Two possible routes to a solution exist: either a consensus regarding the introduction of a credit transfer system compatible with ECTS will be reached among the universities; or a common system will be introduced by the Ministry of Education and Science, justified by the requirements of the Bologna Declaration and the European Higher Education Area membership, which are a high political priority for Georgia. However, the lack of information and coordinated policy poses a major obstacle to synchronizing Georgian higher education with the European developments. For example, although the Ministry of Education and Science had begun to require universities to issue Diploma Supplements, universities have failed to do so because of a lack of relevant information what exactly does the latter constitute.

The Bologna Process can be seen as a force that could potentially re-integrate the currently atomized Georgian higher education system at a new level, allowing the student mobility, choice and flexibility necessitated by the ongoing changes in society. Furthermore, Georgian students should be able to receive recognition for the credits obtained in other universities, at home or abroad. The same applies to foreign students spending a period of study in Georgia. Introducing a credit transfer system would also promote institutional research as well as curriculum reform, foster co-operation among universities and introduce international standards in teaching and research.

4.3 Promotion of mobility

The ongoing processes of globalization foster worldwide mobility of students and scholars, which supports economic growth and prosperity. As the higher education systems converge and degrees and qualifications become internationally compatible, universities seek talent wherever it becomes available. In an expanding marketplace, countries that create barriers against the mobility of students and scholars will be the first to suffer. Mobility may well, for the same reasons, constitute one of the cornerstones of the Bologna Process. Within the European Higher Education Area, students and faculty should be able to move freely and have their

qualifications recognized on a 'level playing field'. Barriers to mobility should be removed (McKenna 2004). As often emphasized in the documents related to the Bologna Process, mobility has significant academic and cultural, as well as political, economic and social aspects.

By joining the Bologna Process Georgia will become a player in the global marketplace of knowledge services and products. The question remains, however, as to whether a small country at the periphery of Europe can play a role equal to its much bigger partners? While global processes do open doors to mobility, for an unreformed Georgian higher education this might easily mean that both students and faculty leave. In a balanced situation the numbers of students and faculty leaving and entering Georgia should remain roughly equal. The international attractiveness of Georgian universities, for either faculty or students, however, has yet to be empirically established.

The first requirement here is the language of instruction. To attract international students, universities need to offer programmes in English. English, after all, is the lingua franca of the twenty-first century. In an increasingly English-speaking academic world, countries that have traditionally used their own languages for academic training are introducing English for various teaching and research-related purposes. Some small countries may be tempted to switch their higher education entirely into English. Even some Georgian universities, for example, the Tbilisi State Medical University and the International Black Sea University, already enrol considerable numbers of international students from countries like Turkey, Pakistan and elsewhere. Students and scholars from European and North American countries, however, have thus far been interested exclusively in Georgian Studies, that is, Georgian language and literature. It is unrealistic to expect significant numbers of students to be attracted from Europe, the USA and Canada to study other disciplines in Georgia in the near future.

Students from industrialized countries who study abroad do not typically earn their degree there, but rather spend a year or two in the country to broaden their horizons, academic and other. The question is of how to make Georgia more attractive to them. First and foremost, encouraging students and faculty to come to Georgia would require an improvement in the existing infrastructure and the upgrading of teaching, learning and research facilities. This would require additional funding that is not available currently. Still, despite the difficulties, and given that the political and economic situation will stabilise, it is to be expected that a number of the academics who departed for Western Europe and North America in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union will return and make their intellectual resources available to the renewal of Georgian higher education. International experience has shown this to be the case:

> More commonly, academics return home for lectures or consulting, collaborate on research with colleagues in their country of origin, or accept visiting professorships. The renewal of links between academics who migrate and their countries of origin mitigates this situation somewhat, but the fact remains that developing countries find themselves at a disadvantage in the global academic labour market. The same applies as well to small and more peripheral nations (Altbach 2004).

Although the perspectives laid out by Altbach do not appear overly optimistic, it is still believed that joining the European Higher Education Area would make Georgian higher education more attractive, if only for expatriate Georgian academics.

4.4 Promoting European co-operation in quality assurance

Per Nyborg explains the dimension of quality assurance in the Bologna Process in the following manner:

> Quality assurance systems will play a vital role in ensuring high quality standards and facilitate the comparability of qualifications. …quality assurance systems in each member state should be based on
> - a quality culture in the higher education institutions;
> - an independent body responsible for quality assurance on the national level.
>
> Co-operation between national quality assurance agencies is essential, developing common standards and common procedures (Nyborg 2004).

The importance of introducing a quality assurance system in Georgia has been widely discussed, but so far Georgia has failed to develop any modern quality assurance system for its higher education. Attempts to remedy this have been unsuccessful, despite a relevant presidential directive in 1998. Finally, the Parliamentary decree (Parliament 2002) discussed in the introduction to this chapter could potentially reverse this situation since it considers quality assurance to be a powerful tool in reforming the higher education system:

> Society—students, parents, employers, public authorities, funding bodies, professional associations, and other stakeholders—has a right to assess the quality of the services HEIs provide. This right comprises an assessment of the quality of the learning experience, the transparency of financial administration, and the direction of strategic management. Higher education institutions must be accountable to the public about

how and what they teach, how they allocate resources, and which strategic priorities they identify for their development.

The new draft Law on Higher Education[2] based on the Decree, stipulates the establishment of a State Quality Assurance Board, as well as Quality Assurance Units in HEIs. Those steps are fully in accordance with the principles of the Bologna Process. The establishment of a state quality assurance board is of crucial importance in the context of ongoing reforms since it offers both a structure and a process through which system-wide curriculum reform can be guided. In addition to this, quality assurance and accreditation allows the State to allocate its funding to universities that prove through open and critical self-assessment that they deserve funding from the public purse. Obviously, establishing a national quality assurance agency is not an easy task. It is well known that, for example, quality assurance must include an element of peer review. Peers should be drawn from outside the institutions concerned and may include non-academic stakeholders, as well as academics from outside Georgia. Georgia is small, and this may mean that truly impartial peer reviews will be difficult to conduct. This would suggest regional and international co-operation on quality assurance and accreditation, which, amongst other things, would increase costs.

Introducing units of quality assurance at an institutional level is even more important in allowing institutions and basic units to develop ownership of academic programmes and outcomes, to develop contacts with external stakeholders and to react dynamically to their changing needs. This means both that the system as a whole must be geared toward quality, and that the quality assurance mechanisms must be located at the lowest possible level. Establishing quality assurance units at the sub-institutional level would allow the staff and faculty to better understand related processes and secure their involvement in them. Such units, however, are not necessarily a substitute for system-level quality assurance mechanisms, but are rather complimentary to the national, top-down processes that would run in the opposite direction.

The Bologna Process offers an almost ideal framework for the creation of a quality assurance system in Georgia: given that the quality assurance board will be an entirely new structure and its operating rules, standards, evaluation criteria, etc., must be elaborated upon from the outset. Thus Georgia has a unique opportunity to develop a truly European quality assurance system. There is no need to change or adapt an existing quality assurance system to European requirements. Instead, the building of a national quality assurance structure that fully meets the requirements of the European Higher Education Area can begin.

[2] www.moes.gov.ge

4.5 University autonomy

Higher education institutions in Georgia were declared autonomous in a Government decree in 1992, what that meant, however, remained unclear. On the one hand, there was an intention to restrict the bureaucratic controls exercised by the Ministry of Education and Science in order to encourage higher education to innovate. At that time, higher education was still bound by highly restrictive regulations established by the Soviet regime. On the other hand, as a side effect of declaring universities autonomous without instituting sufficient measures for accountability, the doors were opened to a flourishing of incompetence and a decline in standards, even in comparison with the Soviet era. As a result, innovation developed side by side with corruption and decline. While some universities were corrupted rapidly and deeply, others developed new programmes, taking foreign partners as their measure. Unfortunately, it so happened that the negative side of university autonomy became more visible than the positive developments it facilitated.

Consequently, university autonomy has been surrounded by controversy in recent discussions related to adopting a new higher education act. The latest draft version of the Law on Higher Education presented in November 2004, says little about university autonomy. It appears as if the legislator is trying to avoid the issue entirely. Issues related to the governance of universities are being referred to lower-level legal acts, while on the other hand, attempts are also being made to suspend the elected bodies within the universities for a two-year period and concentrate power in the office of the University Governor who is appointed by the President of the State of Georgia.

While it is obvious that the government is trying to find the most effective way of reforming the higher education system and ending the decline in many of its constituent parts, ultimately such an approach will limit development, particularly in the better institutions. Joining the Bologna Process and referring to its core principles could possibly allow the introduction and maintenance of university autonomy, particularly if this were complemented with an efficient system of quality assurance. In the current political turmoil, when several formerly influential individuals are leaving higher education, reforms cannot be facilitated simply by restricting the scope of university autonomy. Instead, more complex solutions should be considered that combine the establishment of proper governing and management structures, introducing the principles of autonomy and making universities accountable before the public for their use of public funds. International peer-review should constitute a significant element of the latter.

4.6 The Social Dimension of the Bologna Process

As a newly independent country Georgia has set before itself the clear goal of joining the family of European nations and integrating fully into European structures. As a means towards this end, Georgia is seeking membership in every European association of states. Public understanding of education constitutes one of the principles of such integration. Joining the Bologna process would allow Georgia to integrate in the European labour market and offer the opportunity of developing its higher education in close connection with the mainstream of European higher education. How Georgia will be able eventually to determine its new place in a world that is both local and global, and develop a higher education that is locally relevant and globally attractive, only time will tell.

5. CONCLUSIONS

As can be seen from this brief discussion, Georgia's prospective involvement in the Bologna Process is multi-faceted. There are many questions that will obviously follow the whole process of higher education reform in Georgia if one considers the traditional conservatism of the higher education system, and the lack of information concerning the Bologna Declaration in particular. We can only hope that the Ministry of Education and Science will provide comprehensive information on the process in order to avoid misunderstanding and gain supporters for the Process among university professors, students and their parents, and society as a whole.

A general goal for Georgia is the creation of a modern system of higher education based on the European model. The Bologna Process provides a unique chance for Georgia to initiate comprehensive reforms quickly and efficiently.

Globalisation in higher education and research is inevitable. The challenge it poses lies in acknowledging the related the complexities and nuances and being prepared for them. Being a small and economically developing country, Georgia has to use all the support available to it to improve the quality of teaching and research in order to claim its due place in the internationalised world. Accordingly, as Altbach (2004) states:

> Internationalisation includes specific policies and programs undertaken by governments, academic systems and institutions, and even individual departments to cope with or exploit globalization.

The powerful and wealthy countries and their universities have always dominated the production and distribution of knowledge, while weaker

institutions and systems with fewer resources and lower academic standards have tended to follow in their wake. But Georgia does not need to fear losing its intellectual and cultural autonomy — the Bologna Process is not seen there as a trap for Georgian higher education, rather the opposite. That it will provide the most suitable framework for reform, and only a reformed higher education system can ensure the long-term development of the country in establishing a democratic society, protecting national and global cultural values, and defeating poverty and social exclusion.

Georgia is a newly independent nation. Global influences and internal issues have become the major driving forces for educational reform. The importance of the Bologna Process for Georgia cannot be overstated — it has ambitious targets that it knows will need time and enormous effort to realise.

6. REFERENCES

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