



Higher education contributing to local, national, and global development: new empirical and conceptual insights

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Abstract

Higher education offers the potential to support glonacal (global, national, and local) development. This study presents new empirical and conceptual insights into the ways in which higher education can help to achieve and exceed the outcomes enshrined in the Sustainable Development Goals. Open-ended online surveys were used to learn how academics in Georgia and Kazakhstan view the contributions of universities to addressing self-identified development challenges; and how universities work with the government and the private sector for realising their glonacal development potential. While the study provides ample evidence on the national manifestations of the developmental role of universities, it also shows that limited academic freedom and institutional autonomy impede the full realisation of the potential of higher education. The assumptions underpinning the academics' views on how higher education can support development are discussed in the light of an innovative framework of essentialist and anti-essentialist approaches. Juxtaposing the national with the global development missions of universities, the paper raises questions on the possibility of delinking higher education from the immediate human capital and modernisation needs of the nation-state and becoming concerned with the global, on promoting freedom to cultivate intellectual curiosity through education and research, and stimulating a more holistic imaginary of the developmental purposes of higher education.

Keywords Highereducation · Global development · National development · Kazakhstan · Georgia · Universities · Human capital · Human capabilities · Academic freedom · Institutional autonomy

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Introduction

Higher education can offer a strong potential for contributing to development (Boni and Walker 2016; Castells 1994; McCowan 2016, 2019; Oketch et al. 2014; Owens 2017). Throughout the history of humankind, institutions of higher learning have played an important role in society by educating the elite and producing pioneering achievements in science and humanities. The Platonic Academy in Athens (fourth century B.C.), the Musaeum in old Alexandria (third century B.C.), and the Imperial Academy in China (second century B.C.) are examples of such institutions. The first Western-style universities emerged in medieval Europe and despite being exclusive, supported the advancement of knowledge across the continent and beyond. With the expansion of university participation beyond the elite, higher education has acquired a greater potential for contributing to societal development. Universities¹ can educate citizens, statespersons, teachers, doctors, engineers, philosophers, lawyers, artists, and activists to support the development of peaceful, inclusive, and just societies. Universities can undertake basic and applied research to improve our understanding of life and to develop practical applications of scientific knowledge.

Building on the emerging literature on university-based research and teaching as contributors to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), this paper conceptualises higher education's contributions to development in essentialist and anti-essentialist ways. Essentialism recognises some properties of a phenomenon as essential and others as accidental, differentiating between essence and accident (Ellis 2002; Yablo 2016). The essentialist framing assumes that the essence of development is the advancement of human capital and the modernisation of societies. Consequently, the essentialist framing of the links between higher education and development essentialises universities' role in the advancement of human capital and the modernisation of societies. In contrast, the anti-essentialist framing is 'amoeba-like' (Ziai 2004); it does not attempt to pin down the essence of development and does not assume specific links between higher education and development. Therefore, the anti-essentialist framing can include various conceptualisations of how universities help individuals and societies realise their human rights and capabilities to pursue the freedoms that they value. In some cases, this can include the power of higher education for liberating minds and bodies, leading to the liberation of entire societies. The essentialist and anti-essentialist conceptualisations complement each other; hence, a holistic understanding of university contributions to development would encompass all of the essentialist and anti-essentialist ways of looking at this important but empirically elusive link.

This study uses the glonocal heuristic developed by Marginson and Rhoades (2002) to offer an understanding of how academics see the ways in which higher education can contribute to global/national/local development, and what kind of support universities need to realise their developmental mission. Building on essentialist and anti-essentialist approaches, we designed the study as an open-ended enquiry that would lead to the empirical data-based theorisation of the links between higher education and development. The investigation controlled for the researcher factor—their voice and positioning—by collecting the data using an online survey. At the same time, the open-ended survey allowed participants to construct their own narratives on what they recognised as the main challenges to their societies and the global community; how their university addressed these challenges; how academics saw their universities'

¹ In this paper, the term university is used interchangeably with higher education institution.

potential future contributions to addressing these challenges; and finally, how the government and the private sector could support universities in realising their developmental mission.

The study was conducted in Georgia and Kazakhstan, former Soviet countries which face simultaneous demands for economic, social, and educational transformations. Education has been both a driver and a reflection of these transformations, central to policy discussions associated with market liberalisation and Europeanisation. At the same time, the national education systems and practices have been path-dependent, with educators teaching and administrators organising education often much in the same way as in the Soviet times (Chankseliani and Silova 2018). The contextual section of this paper provides further details on the two countries' characteristics to prepare the reader for the findings section. Using the discourse of particularity emerging from the nuanced analysis of narratives from Georgia and Kazakhstan, this study attempts to contribute to a discourse of universality (Chankseliani 2017) pertaining to the purposes of higher education, that can carry theoretical relevance and applicability to other contexts. The paper opens with a conceptual framework that explains how the glonacal heuristic informed the design of the study and how developmental orthodoxies are used for interpreting the findings. The conceptual framework also expands on the multidimensional concept of freedom which emerged as central to understanding what is missing in the higher education-development link in the two countries. Subsequently, the methodological approach is outlined and the findings are presented in three sections. We start by reporting participants' perceptions of the biggest national and global challenges and the main purposes of higher education. This is followed by how the surveyed academics described university contributions to addressing the national and global challenges in terms of educating individuals, undertaking research, and engaging with their communities and the wider public. The paper ends with the discussion and conclusion section.

Conceptual framework

Universities operate within local/national and global dimensions which are 'heterogeneous in form and purpose. In the national dimension the purpose is the nation as an end in itself. The global dimension has no purpose. There the university is its own purpose' (Marginson 2011, p. 412). The glonacal analytical framework is used in this study as a heuristic device to connect and at the same time to distinguish the global and local/national dimensions of the university mission and thus improve our understanding of how higher education can contribute to development. The study is embedded within the international development space of higher education studies. Within this space, there exists a growing body of literature that examines the role of higher education in achieving the SDGs (Campbell and Mawer 2019; McCowan 2019; Owens 2017). The SDGs adopted in 2015 expanded the focus beyond primary and secondary education to include higher education. This was an important move as universities used to be missing from the international development agenda as evidenced by previous sets of development goals—Millennium Development Goals and Education for All. The SDGs cover a broad range of issues related to socio-economic, environmental, and technological development. One of these goals—SDG 4—recognises the importance of higher education by focusing on inclusive and equitable quality education and the promotion of lifelong learning opportunities for all. The main assumption underlying this paper is that universities have another important role in achieving the SDGs, as institutions that promote development.

This study was designed with the glonacal heuristic in mind and with an intellectual interest in exploring how different developmental orthodoxies would feature in academics' explanations of the links between higher education and local, national, and global development. Some approaches to explaining the role of higher education for societal development follow an essentialist stance, manifested in human capital theory or modernisation theory. According to human capital theory, there is a causal link between investment in education and individual/societal development. This link is normally demonstrated by using econometric methods to calculate rates of return on investment in education. Following this approach, higher education improves the skills and knowledge base, through teaching and research, and this leads to economic development. Modernisation theory promotes the idea of building modern values as opposed to traditional values. The essentialist orthodoxy thrives on the neoliberal assumptions of the limited role of the state and the expanded role of markets in promoting development. Theoretical and policy discourses have been dominated by the human capital approach and neoclassical economics. The main criticisms of the human capital and modernisation approaches are made from an anti-essentialist stance of the rights-based and capabilities approaches. The rights-based approach views education as a universal human right that should be guaranteed to all, while the human capabilities approach focuses on how education expands individuals' freedoms to pursue what they value. According to these approaches, higher education is more than a tool to acquire skills, knowledge, and credentials. Universities allow individuals to pursue freedoms that they value and that they have rights to pursue, and to develop their agency freedom, irrespective of social class, ethnicity, and gender, leading ultimately to holistic human development. The liberation approach is yet another way to view the role of higher education in development and this is linked closely with human capabilities. Thus, the contributions of higher education to development can be explained in very different ways. Although there are exceptions (Boni and Walker 2016; Chankseliani 2018), the existing academic writing on this topic is normally underpinned by essentialist assumptions of human capital and modernisation theories. A systematic analysis of literature has shown that the ways in which higher education can support development had been examined within five domains: earnings, productivity, technology transfer, capabilities, and institutions; most of these contributions were linked to the educational mission of higher education, rather than university-based research or engagement (Oketch et al. 2014). The present study views the essentialist and anti-essentialist conceptualisations as complementary, and attempts to approach the empirically elusive link between higher education and glonacal development holistically.

Development is a central concept in the study. The United Nations Declaration on the Right to Development defined development as 'a comprehensive economic, social, cultural and political process, which aims at the constant improvement of the well-being of the entire population and of all individuals on the basis of their active, free and meaningful participation in development and in the fair distribution of benefits resulting therefrom' (UN 1986). Building on this, glonacal development can be defined as an agency-based process of self-realisation of individuals, collectives of individuals, and nation-states that expands individual and collective freedoms and ultimately leads to the collective outcomes enshrined in the SDGs and goes beyond those outcomes. It has been argued that externally defined global challenges—SDGs—may not reflect locally valued, indigenous meanings of education equity and quality, and the ways to achieve these, in different international contexts; arguably, the goal setting process did not engage sufficiently in-depth with all relevant stakeholders such as learners, parents, and teachers from the Global South (Jerrard 2016; Sayed and Ahmed 2015). Therefore, instead of following the SDG framework per se, this study relied on participants to

identify the biggest local, national, and global challenges. The approach was adopted to provide more freedom to the participants in discovering and sharing their own, authentic understanding of university contributions to addressing the biggest challenges.

Individuals, collectives of individuals, and nation-states are agents of glonacal development, and they require freedoms to support development. Nation-states can be seen as the actors constraining or supporting freedoms of individuals and institutions. Freedom is a central concept in the fabric of this investigation, in part by design and in part due to the emerging empirical evidence. Georgia and Kazakhstan have limited traditions of personal, political, and academic freedoms for individuals to exercise their rights and to pursue what they value. In the context of limited positive freedoms, individuals may have limited capacity to act. Considering the unfavourable environment in terms of civil liberties and political rights (Freedom House 2019), individuals and institutions in these countries may be working in the context of external threat, coercion, or constraint. Amartya Sen (1992) refers to this as ‘control freedom’ and Isaiah Berlin (1969) calls it ‘negative freedom’. In other words, individuals and institutions operate in the environment with obstacles in the form of external interference to practice academic freedom, institutional autonomy, and democratic governance. Academic freedom and institutional autonomy are recognised as key conditions of good practice in higher education worldwide. Universities in Georgia and Kazakhstan have been in the process of redefining academic freedom and institutional autonomy and reinventing themselves to remain competitive locally, nationally, and globally (Dobbins and Khachatryan 2015; Jibladze 2013; Sagintayeva and Kurakbayev 2015). Academic freedom assumes freedom of research defined as autonomy in selecting research topics and methods, including but not limited to undertaking fundamental research. Wäscher & Deplazes-Zemp (2020) juxtapose the ideals of ‘freedom of research’ to those of ‘democratisation of research’, identifying the latter with socially desirable, applied research and technological innovation; they argue that ‘democratisation of research’ should not compromise the ideals of ‘freedom of research’. On the whole, realisation of freedoms is linked with the capabilities and resources available to individuals and institutions, and the social arrangements in which these agents of development are embedded. Sen (1992) refers to this concept as ‘effective freedom’. Bringing about change also requires agency and this is where agency freedom comes into play. Agency freedom denotes the active human will to achieve freedom for oneself and others.

Finally, freedom to imagine is linked with the negative and positive freedoms as well as the agency freedom. To what extent do academics possess the freedom to imagine university contributions to development that go beyond the essentialist understanding? The concept of imagery goes back to Jean-Paul Sartre (2004) who argued that ‘for consciousness to be able to imagine, it must be able to escape from the world by its very nature, it must be able to stand back from the world by its own efforts. In a word, it must be free’ (p. 184). This study raises questions on the role of freedom, understood holistically, in enabling universities to support glonacal development in its broadest sense.

Contextual overview

There are multiple reasons for selecting these two countries for the present study. Georgia and Kazakhstan share several similarities as they used to be part of the Soviet Union for 70 years and in the last three decades have been in the process of transition into competitive, knowledge-based, market economies. Both countries have implemented a number of public policy

reforms including the abolition of the Soviet-style corrupt system of university-based admissions and the establishment of centralised examinations (Bethell and Zabulionis 2012; Chankseliani 2013a, 2014; Opposs et al. 2020; World Bank 2012). Higher education landscapes in these countries are diverse, with institutions ranging from large national universities to small institutions of higher learning, with 128 higher education institutions in Kazakhstan and 63 in Georgia (GeoStat 2019; zakon.kz 2019). These include research-intensive universities and teaching-only institutions, private and public. Georgia and Kazakhstan represent the highest participation systems in the Caucasus and Central Asia, respectively, with tertiary gross enrolment ratio of 58% in Georgia and 50% in Kazakhstan (UNESCO 2017).

For most of the twentieth century, higher education in both countries was moulded to follow the Soviet model of university which was oriented on a clear fit between the higher education output and the manpower requirements of the communist economy, as established in 5-year economic plans. Universities also served as instruments for maintaining equal society and for socialising students into the communist ideology to prepare them for a life of ‘socially useful labour’ (Blumenthal and Benson 1978). With the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the penetration of Western culture, and the revival of pre-Soviet traditions, universities in the region underwent substantial changes. These changes were underpinned by the reconceptualization of the purposes of education, with the arrival of the capitalist market economy and the departure from the exclusive focus on the needs of the communist state. A survey of upper secondary school students in 1974 showed that ‘labour, serving the society, and contributing to the happiness of others were for them the most important social and moral values which determined the purpose and meaning of life’ (Zajda 1980, p. 125). In the last three decades, these two countries have prioritised the economic and political purposes of education, making the social and moral purposes less visible (Chankseliani and Silova 2018).

Both Kazakhstan and Georgia are members of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) that promotes academic freedom and institutional autonomy, and recognises universities as responsive to the wider needs of society. The EHEA aims to ensure that universities are sufficiently resourced to realise their missions of ‘preparing students for life as active citizens in a democratic society; preparing students for their future careers and enabling their personal development; creating and maintaining a broad, advanced knowledge base and stimulating research and innovation’ (Leuven Communiqué 2009; London Communiqué 2007).

Finally, there are substantial differences in the economic and demographic development indicators for Georgia and Kazakhstan. With 22% living in poverty, Georgia is a lower middle-income country, whereas Kazakhstan is an upper middle-income country with 3% living in poverty (OECD 2018a; World Bank 2017). Georgia is a resource-poor economy, whereas Kazakhstan’s economy is driven by oil and gas revenues. Georgia’s economy is highly marketised—the sixth in the world in terms of ease of doing business, while Kazakhstan is 28th (World Bank 2019). There are wide-ranging inequalities in education access and outcomes in both countries by geography, gender, ethnicity/native language, social origin, disability, and IDP status (Chankseliani 2013b, c, 2016, 2020). Unemployment is 11.8 % in Georgia and 5% in Kazakhstan (CIA 2019). Though unemployment is high, the development of the private sector is believed to be inhibited by severe shortages of knowledge, literacy, numeracy, and generic skills; most education offered at the post-compulsory level is considered to be of questionable quality and not directly applicable to economic activity (ETF 2017; Government of Georgia 2011; Karatayeva 2019; OECD 2018b; Perna et al. 2015).

Methodology

The study used an online survey to collect the data to address the following research question: How do academics in Georgia and Kazakhstan see the ways in which universities can support local, national, and global (glocal) development? An online survey allowed to control for the researcher factor—their voice and positioning—and at the same time gave an opportunity for participants to construct their responses, entirely on their own in their own time, on what they saw as the main challenges to the societies, locally, nationally, and globally; what their university was doing to address these challenges; what academics saw as their universities' potential future contribution to addressing these challenges; and finally, how the government and the private sector could support universities in their work on addressing these challenges. The survey also contained a rank order question on the main purposes of higher education for the respondent, for their institution, and the respondent's students.

The data was collected in spring 2019, using the Qualtrics web-survey platform. The survey was offered in four languages—Georgian, Kazakh, Russian, and English. The survey was distributed through the professional networks of the authors which resulted in a self-selected convenience sample. This study did not aim to achieve generalisability/transferability of the findings, but rather to develop a broader understanding of academics' perceptions of the links between higher education and development. Seventy-eight responses were received, of which 13 were empty. Sixty-five responses were analysed, of which 40 responses came from academics based in Georgia and 25 from Kazakhstan.

The open-ended survey responses were analysed thematically, focusing on the evidence relating to university contributions to local/national and global challenges through university education, research, and public engagement. Two supporting themes were related to 'the biggest national and global challenges' and 'the main purposes of higher education'; the evidence within these two supporting themes reveals participants' assumptions underpinning the connections they drew between higher education and development. All themes were merged into a narrative expanding on and interpreting the core areas of interest established through the research question. The study design did not follow the SDG framework per se, in order to give freedom to participants to identify the biggest development challenges and university contributions to addressing these. The SDGs were used to organise the section on main societal challenges below. This is followed by a brief section on the main purposes of higher education. Subsequently, the key findings on the ways in which universities can contribute to development are presented, broken down into sub-sections on education, research, and engagement.

The three authors offer a valuable mix of insider-outsider perspectives. The authors come from the region and have worked at universities in Georgia and Kazakhstan. The first author is currently based at a British university while the second and third authors are employed at a university in Kazakhstan. The first and the second author designed the empirical component of the study, with the feedback received from the third author. The first author distributed the survey to academics in Georgia, and the second and third authors distributed the survey to academics in Kazakhstan. The first author analysed the data from both countries, wrote up the findings, and prepared the manuscript for publication. The conceptualization and the conclusions were developed by the first author. The second and third authors read drafts of the paper and made appropriate suggestions.

By design, the study did not aim to compare and contrast evidence from Georgia and Kazakhstan. Yet, we chose to report the country affiliation in the findings to give some

indication to the reader of the country context which each of the quotes refers to. Additionally, the study did not aim to observe differences by gender, age, discipline, type of institution, or the position of the respondents. These were included in the data analysis which did not reveal apparent differences in participant perceptions. Even if such differences had been observed, the small sample size would make them unreliable. Instead, the study uses the open-ended survey results to develop broader insights into and interpretations of links between higher education and development. Thus, participants' responses are used to elucidate expansive links between higher education and development, without delving into any attempts to explicate the variation by participant characteristics.

The biggest national and global challenges

The participants of this study identified a wide array of development challenges. While some of these challenges mirrored the SDGs, others went beyond the global goals. It was revealed that the academics' views on the local challenges were almost identical to their views on the national challenges which led to the merging of the two categories in the process of data analysis.

Across the entire sample, the inadequate skills of the workforce (SDG4) and economic hardship were recognised as key national challenges. Unemployment in the context of a stagnant labour market (SDG8) was mentioned by more than two-thirds of the Georgian respondents, and poverty (SDG1) was mentioned by at least half. Participants linked these with economic instability, insufficient foreign investment, underdeveloped agriculture (SDG2), underdeveloped industrial base (SDG9), brain drain, and a weak small and medium enterprise sector. In Kazakhstan, economic hardship was normally linked to unemployment, low productivity, and underdevelopment of the industry sectors that are not natural resource driven. Many Kazakhstani respondents noted that the country lacked a well-trained, productive, competitive workforce to meet the labour market requirements that would ultimately lead to higher levels of economic development and better living conditions. Similarly, low/obsolete skills and the lack of well-trained professionals in all sectors of economic activity concerned many Georgian respondents. Youth migration, especially from Kazakhstan to Russia, was considered to be a contributor to the shortage of a competitive workforce.

The quality of education, understood broadly, left much to be desired in both countries (SDG4). Academics wanted to see educational institutions providing better support for 'individual self-realisation, based on their talents, interests and skills' (Geo). The mediocre quality of schooling, academic and vocational education, led to severe shortages of competitive workforce to meet the labour market requirements. In this context, academics were concerned with scarce public financing for education (Geo, Kaz), a lack of good teachers (Geo), limited opportunities for developing critical thinking and generic skills (Kaz), insufficient use of innovative teaching approaches (Kaz), and limited autonomy of universities (Geo, Kaz).

Increasing social inequalities (SDG10) between the rich and the poor were noted in both countries, with respondents indicating 'low success opportunities for people from specific backgrounds', social vulnerability, and social insecurity (Geo). Quite a few respondents in both countries considered the social welfare of the population to be a serious concern.

Almost half of the Georgian respondents mentioned the Russian occupation/territorial integrity/conflict zones as a major challenge for their country's development: 'more than

20% of the Georgian territory is currently occupied by a neighbouring country. We fear war. Politicians from the aggressor country are threatening to us. In the vicinity of the occupied territories, individuals are taken hostage'. Some feared that 'there [was] a high probability of armed conflict with Russia'. A similarly important political problem in Kazakhstan was corruption, mentioned by almost half of the Kazakhstani academics. Corruption, linked with an ineffective civil service, political illiteracy, and short-sightedness, was viewed as a serious impediment for the development of a democratic, independent state. Many more respondents in Georgia than in Kazakhstan were concerned with the slow democratic transition of the country (SDG16), explaining that the country suffered from 'limited experience of how to practice freedom of speech, how to enjoy democratic values'. An underdeveloped sense of citizenship, large numbers of politically inactive citizens, a lack of sense of civic responsibility, and weak civic society were mentioned by a number of Georgian respondents. One academic was particularly pessimistic: 'I used to dream of living in a truly democratic society but I am doubtful if democracy exists anywhere in the world' (Geo).

At the heart of most challenges, it was argued, lied the so-called cultural determinants. In most survey responses, the word 'culture' carried a strong connotation of self-criticism as it was used in the context of the culture of unwillingness to take responsibility, demonstrating dependent behaviour, having low expectations, inclination to stereotypical thinking, and rarely pushing the boundaries. These cultural characteristics, some argued, hindered the development of these countries and required drastic changes through the process of recalibration of values [ფასეულობების გადაფასება, переоценка ценностей], modernisation of consciousness, and mentality of population. Academics labelled their countries as 'developing', going through a transition from the Soviet to a market economy: 'the country is between and betwixt, which opens new spaces but can also be very challenging if the period is very prolonged. It faces foreign threats; it faces its own Soviet past, very much part of the habitus. Frequent changes and no clear strategy also hinder development' (Geo).

Bringing this all together, some of the biggest global challenges identified by surveyed academics included poverty, environmental issues, and illiteracy. Furthermore, terrorism, military conflict, and religious extremism were prominent themes, more so among the academics from Georgia. Skills development for the global economy emerged as a global challenge in surveys of Kazakh academics who linked this with the automatization of production, digitalisation, robotisation, and artificial intelligence. Respondents were also concerned about the lack of democracy and the rise of authoritarian regimes, populism, infringement of human rights and freedoms, nationalism, cyber security, and overpopulation. As one Kazakhstani academic noted, 'there are too many, but most are related to VUCA [volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity of general conditions and situations]'. Remarkably, a number of challenges identified in the SDGs were absent in the survey responses, such as gender equality, water and sanitation management, sustainable energy, inclusive and resilient cities, sustainable consumption and production, and access to justice.

The main purposes of higher education

The main purpose of higher education is to provide the time and space for individuals to learn new things and to discover who an individual is and what they want to become; this exploratory mission was central in the responses received. At the same time, 37% of the participants in both countries viewed undertaking applied research to solve real-world issues as the most or the second most

important purpose of higher education. Respondents differed by country in terms of the role of the basic research; 20% of the respondents in Georgia and only 5% in Kazakhstan considered basic research as the main purpose of higher education. The least important purpose of higher education, according to more than three-quarters of the respondents in both countries, was inertial, i.e. universities serve as the expected next step for young people after school.

The respondents' views on the main purposes of higher education differed noticeably from what they considered to be the views of their institutions and their students. Consistently, the respondents in both countries had an impression that their students viewed universities primarily as the stepping stone for individuals' employment. This confirms the findings of a recent study showing that employment is viewed as the key expectation from higher education in Georgia (Gorgodze et al. 2019). About 71% of the respondents of our survey thought that students were least likely to see university as the space for undertaking basic research for advancing scientific knowledge. Similar to students, institutions appeared to be driven by the instrumental purpose of providing the stepping stone for individuals' employment or further studies. This was the view of more than one-third of respondents in both countries. The academics did not feel that their institutions viewed research—either applied or basic—as the core purpose of universities; 54% of academics in Georgia and 35% of academics in Kazakhstan indicated that their university considered research as the least important purpose of higher education.

Thus, the responses to the question on the main purposes of higher education reveal the perceived gap between the academics on the one hand and their students and institutions on the other. Academics felt that they were not driven by instrumental values as much as their students and institutions when it came to the core purpose of higher education.

Universities contributing to addressing the national and global challenges

Surveyed academics explained university contributions to addressing the national and global challenges in terms of educating individuals, undertaking research, and engaging with their communities and the wider public. In order to realise universities' developmental mission, most academics reported working closely with the government and the private sector. While higher education falls under the purview of the national government in both countries, some respondents elaborated on the potential ways in which local governments could support the sector (see below). The mechanisms used by the national government to control universities and to distribute public funding were mostly seen as having an unfavourable impact on universities' institutional development. With limited freedom from government interference, limited academic freedom and institutional autonomy, a number of academics questioned how consistently their negative freedoms had been recognised.

Universities educating individuals

Universities as educational institutions can support local, national, and global development in diverse ways. Based on the analysis of participants' responses, two dimensions of university contribution were established—the instrumental and the holistic/humanistic. At the instrumental level, universities are expected to equip individuals with subject-specific and generic skills and knowledge, and credentials enabling them to work in professions and occupations. This essentialist dimension is underpinned by human capital theory. Most participants of this study viewed university

contributions to development predominantly in human capital terms: universities prepare teachers, medical doctors, engineers, social workers, entrepreneurs, chemists, biologists, physicists, psychologists, and other specialists who can fill/create jobs and pay taxes; at the same time, these professionals engage with developmental problems in their sectors/industries, such as tackling issues related to education, health, environment, social care, and others. The majority of our respondents argued that only by providing high-quality higher education, normally understood to be targeted for the national labour market, can universities address global and national challenges. Higher education institutions used different strategies to improve the quality of teaching provision, assuming the instrumental function of higher education that leads to employment. English language and IT skills development were considered central for many programmes. Recognising that large numbers of students started higher education without strong language skills, some universities in Kazakhstan provided intensive English language training.

Some respondents reported their experiences of tackling the problem of graduate unemployment by engaging with industry. Industry experts were invited to teach, labour market research was fed into course design, employer forums were organised, and employers were involved in providing guidance to students and graduates. Employers also offered student internships, practicums, and work experience programmes. Furthermore, universities worked to provide the most up-to-date infrastructure, such as libraries and labs, to support high-quality educational provision. Some infrastructure projects were co-funded by the private sector in Georgia. One way of supporting individuals to ‘create jobs and cut poverty’ (Geo) was the development of entrepreneurial skills which featured prominently in survey responses. Participants described their work in fostering entrepreneurial skills by supporting students’ business incubation and start-up acceleration ideas. Some universities even organised start-up weekends where students worked closely with relevant firms.

At the humanistic level, universities can empower individuals, by supporting students’ holistic development, including their self-formation during the transformative years that students spend in higher education. This anti-essentialist dimension is underpinned by human rights, capabilities, and liberation approaches. Selected respondents highlighted the contribution of higher education to the holistic development of individuals. This involved ‘bringing up active citizens who participate in peaceful protests’ (Geo), ‘challenge status quo and build healthier and equitable societies’ (Kaz), promoting universal moral values that help develop individuals’ understanding of themselves and the world around them (Kaz), and developing students’ environment-friendly worldview.

A number of university activities are both instrumental and holistic. Teacher preparation programmes were presented as an interesting mix of the essentialist and anti-essentialist approaches to universities’ contributions for development: ‘by educating prospective maths teachers, by raising their awareness about diversity of values and attitudes, and by cultivating social responsibility, our university promotes national development’ (Geo).

Furthermore, the development of generic skills in students was seen as important due to both instrumental and wider human development rationales. For instance, critical thinking and conflict management skills were viewed as part of the broader humanistic purposes of higher education, with the assumption that universities can empower individuals, by supporting their self-formation during the transformative years spent within higher education. Academics described open spaces for discussions and analyses, pushing the boundaries of critical thinking by using problem-based teaching methodologies, and encouraging ‘independent views and ability to make decisions and being a leader’ (Kaz). Conflict management skills were seen as aspects of character development that help individuals to resolve conflicts and undertake

mediation. Overall, there was considerable evidence across the survey of responses that most participants were aiming at ‘establishing favourable environment for students to flourish’ (Kaz). Modernisation of teaching and learning processes was often seen as central to achieving this.

The ‘modernisation’ discourse emerged powerfully across the surveys analysed. Modernisation was viewed as a process of better aligning the course offerings, curricula, and graduates’ learning outcomes—subject-specific and generic—to the labour market requirements. Following international standards, working more closely with employers and using technologies in teaching were viewed as key strategies for ‘modernisation’. Academics wished to make more information available about ‘the diversity of fields of study’ (Geo), to ensure that students were studying in the field that genuinely interested them and thus increase the potential for them ‘to have an influence on local, national and international levels’ (Geo). Some respondents aspired to more effectively develop students’ civic responsibility in order to ‘bring into existence a corruption-free community, that will find solutions to economic and political problems’ (Kaz), to empower individuals to contribute to nation-building and protect individual freedoms and rights (Kaz), and to ‘educate global citizens who can help solve VUCA issues’ (Kaz). Finally, a few academics mentioned the issues of equal access to universities for various disadvantaged groups and how much there was to be done to make universities accessible for individuals from a low socio-economic background, ethnic minorities, and residents of rural areas.

In order to implement higher standards of education, the government would need to provide considerably more funding in the form of direct allocations to institutions and scholarships for disadvantaged students. The needs-based financing of students would ultimately support the ‘social integration across the country’ (Geo). To achieve higher standards, the government would also need to help universities ‘with the capacity building to introduce new pedagogies that promote critical thinking and engagement with literature, and incentives to apply those pedagogies’ (Kaz). Some also argued that government backing was required for the establishment of new institutional forms of HE, solely focused on teaching, such as community colleges (Geo) or an open university (Kaz).

Finally, there were indications that higher education institutions would need to work with local governments to be able to more effectively support their local communities. For example, universities could serve as regional education and training hubs and deliver short-term programmes to retrain those with obsolete skills and skills gaps (Geo, Kaz).

Universities undertaking research

The majority of the respondents viewed the research role of higher education in addressing the biggest development challenges in applied terms. Applied research is underpinned by human capital and modernisation theories and assumes that the value of research is that it is ‘scientific’ (vs. ‘political’ or ‘moral’) and aims to reveal the ‘objective truth’. These were the assumptions of the absolute majority of the study participants when explaining the links between university-based research and local, national, and global development. Many participants argued that by producing applied research, their institutions were contributing to the immediate needs of society. One example was the research undertaken at the Child Development Institute, a ‘multi-profile institute conducting research and supporting the high-quality service provision for child and adolescent development’ (Geo). Other examples included university-based research institutes/centres/groups/projects, studying civic education, ecology, or biodiversity (Geo). Selected participants also shared their thoughts about the importance of establishing the culture of research-based teaching as research is ‘the foundation for a high quality teaching process’ (Geo).

Academic's imaginaries of the future role of university research for glonacal development included the following four broad ideas. First, advancing the understanding of industry needs and undertaking more applied research to be able to 'find solutions' (Geo) to the problems facing business development and the public sector nationally and globally (Geo, Kaz). Undertaking more and better applied research on developing climate change mitigation & adaptation measures (Geo). Second, scaling up the translation of basic research findings into practice and/or coming up with new ideas for applied research (Geo, Kaz), such as various theoretical scenarios of development (Kaz), the effects of climate change in the region, or low-carbon energy development (Geo). Third, improving the communication of research findings, for example, the research in the field of education would need to be communicated to teachers in the form of brochures and booklets that are accessible (Kaz). Finally, boosting the image of science, creating the environment where research and innovation is encouraged, where science and scientists are popular (Geo).

Neither the current experiences nor the future imaginaries of university-based research included the so-called blue skies research or the critical or radical science for addressing the biggest development challenges. The blue skies research assumes that research does not need to serve any specific ends and can be an end in itself, allowing academics the freedom to pursue their intellectual interests. In this regard, blue skies research can be viewed as the domain that expands individuals' freedoms, in line with the human capabilities and liberation approaches. The survey responses did not contain any indication that blue skies research as such was considered important when discussing the role of higher education in addressing glonacal challenges.

In order to conduct more and better applied research, academics repeatedly highlighted the need to develop the university research capacity and to expand research funding streams. The research infrastructure, such as labs and research centres, required adequate resourcing and support was needed to establish business incubators, start-ups, and spinoffs. A number of academics across both countries expected considerable assistance from their national governments in terms of 'creating incentives through financial and regulatory measures' to encourage universities to generate more funding through research (Geo). Commercialisation, it was argued, would help universities to generate income to be reinvested in further research (Geo). 'Legalisation of the provisions for research commercialisation and development of a model of an entrepreneurial university' (Geo) were offered as important starting points. Such a model would bring about extensive collaborations with industry, it was argued, and would enable mutually beneficial technology transfer and knowledge exchange. Some academics proposed the introduction of performance-based funding for research that would involve the institutionalisation of the national assessment of university research productivity. Finally, some Kazakh academics suggested the creation of endowment funds, in collaboration with the private sector, to provide financial stability to universities. While the potential for collaboration with the private sector was generally viewed extremely positively, there were considerable reservations regarding the potential for a productive partnership between the government and universities for the purpose of addressing societal challenges.

Universities engaging with their communities and the wider public

The study revealed various forms of community and public engagement through which universities supported societal development. Academics offered a range of examples of public engagement with non-academics for the purposes of developing an understanding of a specific topic of interest such as sharing their research findings on 'societal problems on policy level

and in public debates' (Geo), 'providing expertise through participating in many economic, political, social, sector committees and commissions contributing to social integration' (Geo), 'preparing strategies, legislative initiatives and propose to the parliament and at the local level' (Geo), 'fostering volunteerism and charity work' (Kaz), providing MOOCs to make the knowledge accessible to the wider public (Kaz), raising awareness on the Russian occupation by participating in peaceful protests, supporting student activism that challenges status quo to bring about more healthy and equitable society' (Kaz), popularising mathematics by preparing and distributing free copies of the scientific-popular magazine 'Mathematics' (Geo), raising awareness of 'the matters of social justice and better inclusion of different groups' through various public events (Geo), and organising public events that promote equal access to knowledge or develop tolerance (Geo). Public events included but were not limited to public lectures, debates, workshops, and summer schools. All of the above activities were undertaken with the belief that '[universities] can set an example of better inclusion and better democracy' (Geo).

The above 'enlightenment' function was complemented by the community engagement, i.e. collaboration(s) between universities and their immediate or wider communities locally/regionally, nationally, or globally, for the purpose of knowledge and resource exchange and reciprocity. The examples of community engagement encompassed working with prisons and NGOs (Geo), organising scientific conferences/workshops (e.g. on civic education, global warming, ecology), and participating in similar events organised by other universities to 'create space for pluralism' (Geo). Participant academics also shared their experiences of working with secondary schools on improving the teaching of civic education and supporting the development of active citizens (Geo, Kaz). A few academics worked with the private sector on corporate social responsibility projects (Geo).

In the future, academics intended to engage more with the wider public through civic activism to raise awareness of societal values revolving around individual freedom and human rights (Geo). They hoped to continue to expand their 'civic and professional activities' by raising the awareness of environmental challenges and coordinating various community activities such as tree planting, charity events, supporting clean open-air community spaces (Geo); making more public statements, participating in public campaigns and peaceful protests (Geo); getting involved in various social projects and innovations; and engaging with mass media to reach wider audiences.

The majority of the respondents were striving to deliver high standards of education, research, community, and public engagement through collaborations with international partners, industry, civil society, and other universities, integration with the global academic community and internationalisation of research, recruiting international students (Kaz), supporting student and staff academic exchanges, increasing the attractiveness of universities for foreign academics (Geo), development of entrepreneurial universities (Geo), academic staff rejuvenation (Geo), advocacy for equality (e.g. scholarships for socially disadvantaged students), and promotion of democratic governance structures (Geo). Most participants hoped to expand their collaborations in the future to ensure that universities addressed the national and global challenges more effectively, thus utilising the 'academic and societal potential of universities' in full (Geo).

Discussion and conclusion

This study presented local manifestations of how universities in Georgia and Kazakhstan do and can contribute to addressing development challenges through educating individuals,

undertaking research, and engaging with their communities and the wider public. In both countries, education was at the forefront of universities' development mission. While the survey responses offered some indications of alternative orthodoxies of development, the majority of responses were largely embedded within the essentialist discourse on development. For most participants, the idea of development was strongly tied into the human capital logic of economic growth/poverty elimination and modernisation. To use Walter Mignolo's (2011) words, the narratives highlighted 'production instead of regeneration', while being constrained by the boundaries set by the nation-state that is universities' funder and regulator.

Participants of this study explained the educational function of universities through a mixture of the essentialist and alternative approaches, focusing on both the economic benefits of university education for individuals' lives and the broader society, and the potential of higher education to enhance individual rights and freedoms to pursue what they value. However, the evidence on alternative orthodoxies of development was very limited, considering that at the start of the survey, almost half of the respondents indicated that the main purpose of higher education is to provide the time and space for individuals to learn new things and to discover who an individual is and what they want to become. Instead, respondents seemed to be guided by what they claimed were students' and institutions' views on the main purpose of higher education—purely instrumental. Furthermore, while a handful of academics mentioned increasing social inequalities between the rich and the poor, hardly any of them shared their thoughts about the ways in which higher education could address these inequalities.

When reporting on the research and engagement function of universities, the respondents largely focused on the essentialist orthodoxies of human capital and modernisation and showed interest for bigger questions of economic development. Applied research was seen as a domain that forms a part of the glonacal development mission of universities. To use Wäscher & Deplazes-Zemp's (2020) conceptualisation, most of the surveyed academics shared the ideals of 'democratisation of research', focusing on applied research and innovation, rather than 'freedom of research', i.e. the autonomy of selecting research topics not necessarily considering their social desirability. While blue skies research is sometimes viewed as unpredictable and useless, it provides the freedom to explore and to imagine (Collini 2015). Finally, there was very limited evidence to show that the respondents had considered critical or radical science when they shared their thoughts about the contribution of research to addressing the biggest development challenges. Very little was shared about the role of knowledge created through research at universities in the perpetuation or change of the social and political order.

Perhaps these findings are not that unexpected. In the last three decades, Georgia and Kazakhstan have prioritised—at least in policy discourse—purely pragmatic ideas about developing human capital, establishing particular expectations for post-socialist education transformations (Chankseliani and Silova 2018). This includes accounts of the acquisition of skills and knowledge in order to increase the productivity and competitiveness of individuals and nation-states, ultimately leading to the economic modernisation and the creation of a knowledge economy. Modernisation and transition discourses prevalent in former Soviet countries imply that economic and technological changes lead to the emergence of advanced societies with enhanced socio-economic and political systems. Although these expectations have not materialised in the last three decades, the belief in a causal link between investment in education and individual/societal development remains powerful. The supremacy of the economic purposes of education made the formerly popular social and moral purposes less

visible, as the human capital orthodoxy typically overlooks the social and moral purposes of education (Mercer et al. 2010). Given the prevalent focus on the economic purposes of education, the issues of education quality/labour market relevance—rather than issues of equality/equity—have received predominant attention in policy/practice accounts and in the academic literature pertaining to these former Soviet countries (Chankseliani and Silova 2018). Reflecting the state of the art, education quality appears to be the common ground that unites the responses of academics in this study where a common assumption is that good quality education is the labour market relevant education.

The participants of this study mostly used modernist vocabulary, viewing universities as institutions of authoritative expertise and legitimate knowledge that required change in one direction—university governance. Academics in both countries felt strongly about their respective governments interfering in universities' internal affairs by introducing new, disruptive regulations. 'It would be better if the government did not interfere at all, as the frequent changes in government standards and requirements for universities lead not to quality improvement but to paperwork [бумаготворчеству]', explained one academic (Kaz). Most participants of this study craved for an environment free from extensive regulatory burden and supportive of their 'real' academic freedom and institutional autonomy; an environment where academics would teach what they felt was most appropriate, free from external interference, and would explore research topics that genuinely interested them. These intellectual freedoms seemed to have been somewhat compromised. There were indications that the universities required democratic, participatory governance structures within universities, where academics and students would be able to participate in developing the university strategy, and where young academics would be supported. Instead, the university governance was in the hands of a few powerful individuals who often 'use the Soviet patterns of management and interaction' (Geo). The system, it was argued, required democratisation of the governance structure through 'radical' changes (Kaz). Thus, a theme emerging in many responses was that universities needed more freedom from external (government) interference and more democratic structures of internal governance to develop academic freedom and academic integrity and thus to better contribute to what the surveyed academics considered were the biggest development challenges. On the whole, while selected Georgian academics developed a more critical stance with respect to both higher education and political governance models, most of the Kazakhstani academics reported stronger preoccupation with the economic development rather than the political freedoms agenda.

In the context where academics can exercise limited freedoms, some are daunted by the monumental nature of global development challenges. One participant of this study shared: 'the problems I have identified are so global that contributions of a single institution are unlikely to be sufficient to solve them' (Geo). Another participant noted along the same lines: 'I don't think that my university can do much to prevent global warming' (Geo). In these two quotes, 'global' (albeit used in different contexts) denotes something remote, unattainable, that nation-state-bounded and controlled universities may find hard to imagine tackling. But perhaps 'global' points to the direction that has the potential to open up new ways of thinking about university contributions to development? Focusing on the 'global' could involve delinking university's mission from the immediate human capital and modernisation needs of the nation-state and becoming largely concerned with the global where 'university is its own purpose' (Marginson 2011, p. 412). A global mindset could promote more freedom to cultivate unmitigated intellectual curiosity through teaching and research, leading to a more holistic imaginary of the developmental purposes of higher education.

This study defined glonocal development as an agency-based process of self-realisation of individuals, collectives of individuals, and nation-states that expands individual and collective freedoms and ultimately leads to the collective outcomes enshrined in the SDGs and goes beyond those outcomes. In order to be effective in supporting glonocal development, perhaps universities need to practice their freedoms and resist being exclusively tied to the immediate interests of the nation-state; perhaps universities need to educate individuals, following high standards, not only in a narrow human capital understanding but also more holistically, developing humanistic values in critically thinking, environment-friendly, and politically active citizens. Therefore, perhaps our subsequent discussions need to start with considering what our core expectations are, when it comes to universities' developmental mission, and what conditions would be conducive to the achievement of these expectations. Based on our deliberations as part of this study, a holistic approach to university contributions to glonocal development would encompass essentialist and anti-essentialist outcomes and imaginaries. And the foundational condition for this holistic approach would be for the agents—individuals, collectives of individuals, and nation-states—to nurture freedoms—positive freedoms, agency freedom, and the freedom to imagine.

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