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Drivers for Internationalization of Georgian Higher Education

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Drivers for Internationalization of Georgian Higher Education

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Drivers for Internationalization of Georgian Higher Education

Abstract

Internationalization of higher education has been on the rise almost everywhere in Europe for the past three decades. Countries like the United Kingdom have put higher education at the heart of their export strategy,[1] whereas countries in Eastern Europe are relatively active in student mobility but less internationalized in other areas (faculty profiles, research outputs, institutional expansion abroad). However, as a result of factors such as an unprecedented number of European students benefitting from free and quality higher education available in other countries, and the strengthening of economic nationalism, we see the focus on internationalization is changing in many Western countries. This study investigates the drivers of internationalization in Georgian universities, a country that adopted internationalisation as a national priority at a time when many other countries were reversing internationalisation policies. Data was collected through interviews with Georgian ministry officials, heads of governmental agencies, rectors and faculty from Georgian universities in addition to documents and website analysis. This study presents an insight into national, institutional and individual drivers for internationalization in Georgia and the challenges experienced.

Keywords: *internationalization, Georgian higher education, higher education reform.*

[1] An overview of the higher education exports and their value to the United Kingdom economy is provided by the debate on 19 July 2018 in the House of Lords, available at https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/lln-2018-0079/ consulted August 12, 2020.

Introduction

This research investigates the main drivers for the integration of international elements into Georgian Higher Education. The internationalization of higher education in many regions of the world has been widely documented in the past three decades. As often noted, internationalization is somewhat of a one-size-fits-all term, used to describe diverse processes and programmes. These range from '[student and faculty] mobility, mutual influence of higher education systems, and internationalization of the substance of teaching and learning to institutional strategies, knowledge transfer, cooperation and competition, and national and supranational policies' *(*Kehm and Teichler, 2007*)*. More recently, internationalization has been defined as 'the intentional process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions and delivery of post-secondary education, in order to enhance the quality of education and research for all students and staff, and to make a meaningful contribution to society' (de Wit et al. 2015).

In Europe, the main instruments for internationalization have been the Erasmus programme which started in 1987 and the subsequent Erasmus Mundus programme. The introduction and multiplication of foreign language programmes (some of them in partnership with other universities and sometimes granting dual degrees) led to a higher number of foreign students, and also opened the door for international faculty recruitment and the internationalisation of research in many European universities. At macro level, internationalization programmes served both economic and political purposes. For instance, student mobilities helped the EU economy by preparing European students to work in other member countries and making the EU economy more globally competitive. Other initiatives (such as TEMPUS) achieved the political goals of diminishing the gap between the new candidate countries and older Member States.[2] The expansion led by internationalization started to be questioned once the unintended consequences of this process became obvious: the commercialization of research, diploma and accreditation mills, and the impact of international rankings on institutions (Knight, 2004). Confirming the predictions of the earlier warning signs, Altbach and de Wit reflected more recently that

[2] http://internacional.ipvc.pt/sites/default/files/Tempus%4020%20-%20A%20Retrospective%20of%20the%20Tempus%20Programme%20over%20the%20Past%2020%20Years.pdf

> The unlimited growth of internationalization of all kinds—including massive global student mobility, the expansion of branch campuses, franchised and joint degrees, the use of English as a language for teaching and research worldwide, and many other elements—appears to have come to a rather abrupt end, especially in Europe and North America (Altbach and de Wit 2018: 2).

Outside the EU, Georgia has also placed internalization high on the national higher education agenda. While for EU members, internationalization has arguably a financial component (due to the considerable EU funding available for research in particular) this is less so in the case of Georgia, which has limited access to EU funding and only moderate dependence on international students' fees. Previous research (Campbell and Gorgodze, 2016) found that the three main engines driving internationalization efforts in the country were perceived to be 1) western influences, 2) national university accreditation processes, and 3) faculty and students returning from abroad. This study found other drivers and asked why the internationalization of Georgian higher education had become a national priority at the very time when many other countries were experiencing a reverse of internationalization policies. I investigate whether the political will and the funding that has been allocated have changed this perception and I contribute additional perspectives on internationalization in universities outside the capital.

Research design

As a starting point, Ministry of Education documents and relevant websites were reviewed, among them the *Study in Georgia* programme website and universities' web pages to gather and corroborate information. An interview-based study followed Knight's (2004) suggestion to investigate internationalization by looking both at the top process (national and institutional) and the bottom (institutional and individual). For the top-down perspectives, interviews were conducted with nine higher education professionals including a former Deputy Minister, the Rector of Georgia's largest university in the capital city, the Deputy Rector from one of the largest universities outside the capital (in the Adjara region), a high ranking leader from San Diego University Georgia, a Head of Department from the Ministry of Education, a high ranking official

from the International Education Center (the state agency in charge with managing hundreds of scholarships for Georgian students studying abroad), two senior staff members from International Offices in two separate universities, and an official from the GIZ-Georgia (the German agency for international development). For bottom-up perspectives, ten faculty at all levels of seniority in four of the largest universities were interviewed. The semi-structured interviews were conducted in 2018 and 2019, in English, nine of them in person and ten by Skype. The transcripts of interviews were sent to the interviewees for their approval. The interviewees were asked what drove the internationalization of Georgian education in their opinion, and what evidence was there to support their view. The interviewees were asked to reflect on the drivers for internationalization and to estimate their importance and urgency as seen from their own perspective as policymakers, faculty or officials. They were also asked to provide as much evidence as possible to substantiate their views. Most of the participants offered both an institutional perspective on internationalization and their personal one - either as staff member or as faculty.

Internationalization in Georgian higher education

The internationalization agenda in Georgia has been promoted for several years as an effort to align with Western higher education and to overcome the challenges from the past. Some of these challenges were related to the Soviet time when universities did not train students to be civic minded but to work in the planned economy (Sharvashidze, 2005). Additionally, the communist regime interrupted the tradition of teaching the social sciences and organized a different doctoral studies cycle (Kovács, 2014). Some other challenges have to do with the economic difficulties of the 1990s when the severe underfunding of universities resulted in an underperforming higher education sector that had difficulties attracting good faculty and lacked the facilities needed for students. The so-called Rose Revolution of 2003 reversed this course. President Saakashvili declared that higher education needed change and described efforts to stem corruption and increase the transparency of the sector from admission exams to faculty appointments (2006). Just as in the case of Armenia (Matei et al. 2013) the *rapprochement* to the EU was viewed as a priority for the country, and higher education was considered as a tool to achieve this goal.

A major step that confirmed the 'European' trajectory and the Saakashvili government's educational reform initiatives (Jawad, 2005) was made in 2005 when the enlargement of EHEA towards the East (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine) took place. In the beginning, the motivation of European Partnership countries for joining the Bologna Process was either to increase EU integration or to benefit from the financial advantages in the field of higher education (Toderas and Stavaru 2018)**.** As noted by Dobbins and Khachatryan in the case of Eastern Partnership countries, the Bologna Process is a mechanism, which has a convergence-promoting force (2015).

In later years Georgia expressed the intention of becoming a full EU member and made efforts to further bridge the gap in higher education. In June 2019, the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR) Committee concluded that the Georgian National Center for Education Quality NCEQE complied substantially with the ESG as a whole and approved the application for inclusion on the Register, valid until 2024[3]. Georgia was one of the two Eastern Partnership countries (after Armenia) to join EQAR, and the rest of the agencies from Eastern Partnership countries are only affiliated.

Another tool to bridge the gap with the EU countries has been through the use of mobilities. The official statistics of the European Commission show a significant raise in the number of Erasmus mobilities: Georgian students and staff going to EU countries on Erasmus programmes between 2015 and 2018 totalled 3613, increasing steadily from 695 in 2015 to 1109 in 2018 (EC 2018). The total number of students and staff moving to Georgia on an Erasmus mobility was 1973 for the same period, with a significant increase from 2015 (190) to 2019 (699) according to data from the official statistics of the European Commission (ibid.). Overall, Georgia has attracted 24% of the total budget for international credit mobilities available for Eastern Partnership countries, more than their regional neighbours Azerbaijan (8%) and Armenia (12%) combined (ibid.).

[3] The approval of the Application by NCEQE - National Center for Education Quality Enhancement (NCEQE) for Inclusion on the Register is available at https://backend.deqar.eu/reports/EQAR/2019-06_A70_Approval_Decision_NCEQE.pdf

With regard to the total number of foreign students (including EU students) pursuing degrees in Georgia, data provided by the Ministry shows that there were 12945 foreign students in 2019. This was an increase from 9439 in 2017.[4] The majority came from India (6820 in 2019, an increase from 2895 recorded in 2017), followed by Azerbaijan (1475), Iran (546), Iraq (544), Israel (532) and Nigeria (523).

Georgian students have also pursued degrees abroad funded by using their own resources and through state scholarships. In 2014, the International Education Center was set up with the purpose of supporting young Georgians in studying abroad. The Center has awarded over 500 scholarships to study in 26 countries, with most students opting for the U.S.A. (88 fellows), the U.K. (75 fellows), Hungary (75 fellows) and France (40 fellows).[5] Scholarships are accepted under the understanding that scholarship recipients will return to work in Georgia after graduating. Support for reintegration is also available: for example, GIZ-Georgia helps graduates returning from German universities to identify suitable jobs and tops up their wages for 2 years if they choose to work in the public or non-profit sectors.

Academic positions for returnees can be found not only in state universities but also in private ones, which have more flexibility to offer better salaries. One of the new institutions, which is perhaps symbolic for the drive to internationalize, is the establishment in 2014 of the Tbilisi campus of San Diego State University The campus offers undergraduate degrees in several engineering fields to Georgian and foreign students with support from the U.S.-funded Millennium Fund.

However, while the pace and achievements are incontestable, there are also voices drawing attention to the fact that the Bologna-inspired reforms were introduced in order to gain international recognition but have triggered in fact only a symbolic system-change without deep transformation. Building on institutionalism theories (Meyer and Rowan 1977), Jibladze (2017) ─ herself one of the alumni returning to Georgia with foreign degrees ─ has noted that the changes of the higher education system were, in fact, less transformative and that they instead created

[4] According to official data obtained for this study from the Ministry of Education- actualized for November 2019.
[5] http://iec.gov.ge/en-us/About-us/Statistics Consulted January 10, 2020.

decoupled institutions. She describes institutions as having the appearance of their Western counterparts while holding onto a path-dependent core, similar to impressions collected in other former communist countries (see Nastase 2015).

To sum up, significant reforms have been adopted in Georgian higher education, leading to increased transparency, less corruption and more diversification in the higher education sector. While certain voices have raised warnings about some of these changes being more cosmetic than systemic, there are undeniable changes in the Georgian education landscape. In this context, the next sections will focus on what has driven internationalization and how it has been linked to the changes so far and Georgia's aspirations as a country. The picture provided by interviewees was relatively uniform with most of them agreeing on a limited number of drivers as outlined below.

Higher education as a tool for a political agenda

Most participants indicated that the main driver for internationalization was the political will for alignment with Western nations and particularly with the European Union. The former Minister of Education noted that

> The internationalization of education is seen as a gateway to the EU. For this reason, the current Minister of Education[6] has made the statement in a meeting with EU Commissioner Navracsics that Georgia aims at becoming an Erasmus Program Country in the future and not just an Erasmus Partner Country as it is now. At this stage, the experts from both parts (Georgia -EU) are working on a timetable and conditions to be met for this to happen.

Other interviewees noted that the desire to get closer to the EU is only logical because 'this is where we belong' (International office staff member) and 'what else is there for us, this is the logical path' (Faculty member).

Part of this national narrative is the cessation of academic ties with Russia, where Georgians had colleagues and partners for many years, and whose language many Georgian academics still speak

[6] On November 10, 2019.

(although this is no longer the case for younger generations). The political factor was invariably quoted as the main reason for the lack of formal ties with Russian institutions. Both faculty and staff agreed that beyond the political stance, Georgian society lacks trust in Russia due to the occupation of some Georgian territories, so that initiating formal relations with Russian partners might create tensions in society and reflect poorly on universities. One staff member noted that 'collaboration exists in multi-lateral formats but not bilateral because bilateral relations need to be both ways: for Georgians it is difficult to go to Russia (due to Russian visas) and they do not feel that good there'. Additionally, a faculty member noted that 'the social sciences are much politicized in Russia and it makes sense to engage with partners that are serious about real research'.

Georgia's desire to increase ties with the EU affects its worldwide internationalization efforts due to restrictions in areas other than higher education. For instance, in order to align with EU standards in the field of immigration and border control, many university applicants from countries like Libya, Nigeria, Iran and Saudi Arabia experienced visa problems, and a large number of applicants were not able to attend the university because their visa application was rejected. As the representative from the San Diego State University (SDSU) in Georgia noted:

> Many families in countries like Nigeria or Libya are looking for a safe country with affordable education to send their children to and Georgia has a lot to offer and it is very attractive for them. But the visa requirements also depend on Georgia's EU aspirations and the criteria they need to meet in this regard, so they walk a tight line that does not depend entirely on them.

The immigration-related requirements imposed by the EU might also affect Georgia's aspiration to become a regional hub. The former Deputy Minister noted that

> We not only want to be close to EU, but to maintain good relations with the regional neighbours and to become a regional hub for higher education. We cultivate relations with countries further afield, in Asia and Africa, with the same intentions of attracting them as higher education clients and partners in other fields.

To sum up, the political endorsement of internationalisation in Georgia came across very strongly in interviews and was expressed by informants at all levels of seniority. The complex geopolitical situation has led to a strong orientation towards the EU despite the challenges it poses for international (non-EU) student recruitment.

Higher education as an export product

Many participants said that finance was a very important diver of internationalisation. This has two major components: the desire to attract EU funding for projects and mobilities and the income brought by foreign students paying high fees.

All but one of the participants to the study mentioned the effects on universities of severe underfunding in recent years. The SDSU official noted that

> Georgian universities were hit very hard by the underfunding from the past, particularly in STEM fields where investment is needed to keep up. Their laboratories and facilities mandatory for science disciplines were hit the hardest.

A faculty member also noted that going to conferences abroad or accessing journals was very difficult, and it still is for some universities that are smaller and less financially stable. Another faculty member reflected that 'We absolutely need to be part of EU projects, especially large ones that expose us to good partners because funding for research is still very limited in Georgia'. Yet another faculty member noted that being part of the EU projects

> allows us to have conditions similar to those in EU countries, so it bridges the gap in terms of research quality … at our department getting EU funded projects is a priority. Very often they come with enormous bureaucracy, but they are still worth it because we would not be able to cover many activities from own sources.

The rector I interviewed noted that for his comprehensive university the income from international students does not make a big impact, but 'in medical schools they pay more than 3 times higher

tuition fees than local students (7000+ Lari vs. 2250 Lari for domestic students)'. The same view was shared by the official from the San Diego State University who noted that foreign students pay fees that are also used to subsidize Georgian students' studies. One faculty member noted that

> We are way cheaper than many Western universities, but still the income foreign students bring can have an impact. This is why we need to increase the quality not only of what happens in the classroom but also of facilities.

The Rector also indicated that his institution 'is currently building dormitories with pools, sport facilities and all the technology expected. We [the leadership] expected that, by attracting international students, the tuition fee will help pay for the facilities in the longer term'.

In 2004, recruitment of foreign students was made a priority through a governmental programme titled *Study in Georgia.* The website (visited on 9 November 2019) listed 109 English language programmes (55 undergraduate, 43 Masters and 11 doctoral programmes) and 7 Russian language programmes at institutions throughout Georgia. No opportunities for scholarships were listed (although institutions like the International School of Economics have available a limited number of merit-based scholarships). The programme was launched with great expectations, but it seems to have achieved less than initially planned, partially because of the unfit strategy for recruitment and partially due to limited coordination between the Ministry and universities. The official from the International Education Center noted that 'some 20 coordinators were sent around the world to recruit students, but this strategy did not pay off. They could try helping universities to recruit rather than have external agents recruit on behalf of universities'. Despite challenges, the rector interviewed mentioned that,

> The number of international students is currently as high as 13000 and increasing despite challenges, which forces Georgia to invest in education to stay competitive because this is a market that rewards good universities with good reputations and international recognition.

Georgian universities are, therefore, interested in attracting foreign students and are competing with an educational offer of affordable programmes in a stable country. While most fee-paying students are currently medical students the aim of education officials and universities alike is to become attractive in other fields too. To achieve this, local higher education institutions have been investing in upgrading the infrastructure available for local and international students in the hope that income from international students will help recover the investment in facilities.

Quality enhancement

A further driver was the desire to offer degrees recognized for quality education for Georgian students, for them to be competitive and adaptable. This was a national and institutional priority linked to political goals of being accepted as a member of the EU. The vice-rector from the capital stressed that the increase in quality is a governmental priority because 'quality pays for itself; when you offer quality, everybody wants to be partner with you, and students come to you'. The rector also stressed that 'internationalization is not a purpose in itself, in a vacuum, it is really a tool to increase quality through EU funding and academic exchange'. He also mentioned that 'quality needs to be recognized, and this is why Georgia got into EQAR and is making everything possible to achieve recognition'. He mentioned multiple efforts made by his and other universities to invite colleagues to Georgia, to increase the visibility of Georgian education and to be on the map of quality education. For example, the next meeting of the International Association of University Presidents was planned to take place in Georgia.

For quality to be recognized, the Georgian universities are also taking other steps: two programmes at Tbilisi State University received a visit from an accreditation team from the United States in November 2019. The university was also preparing to invite the European University Association (EUA) for an institutional visit. The Medical University made efforts to be part of the World Federation of Medical Education (linked with WHO) and achieved a good step towards improving the reputation and recognition of the Georgian medical degrees.

Participants (with two exceptions) mentioned internationalization as a key development towards going up in international university rankings. The former Deputy Minister noted that 'a sign of the internationalization of Georgian higher education is the presence of Georgian universities in rankings (THE and Shanghai) while other universities from Caucasus countries were absent'. To increase their research output and prepare their students for research, one faculty member stated that in her university the majority of faculty desired to be part of internationalization and 'they voted that doctoral students need to have publications in English in good journals even if this rule is tough for the professors too (the university will try to help them in identifying journals and translating)'.

Professional opportunities for faculty and students

All participants mentioned Georgia's pre-Soviet tradition of having an elite educated abroad. Most participants viewed the current drive for internationalization as a way of returning to the traditional cosmopolitan nature of Georgian academics as set up by the founding fathers of local universities. A faculty member explained this very eloquently:

> The founder of our school was educated abroad both in Russia and Germany, and many previous scholars were educated in both Russia and Europe (France, Germany). Not only university professors but the Georgian cultural elite were always educated abroad and skilled in [foreign] languages. For instance, in 1918 when the first university was established [now Tbilisi State University], all the professors invited to teach were educated in European universities. After the sovietization, all professors with foreign education were not really well accepted, and this is where the tradition broke.

Other interviewees mentioned that at the first opportunity in the 1980s, the universities started to send faculty abroad: 're-internationalization in Georgia started in 1988 mostly through students going to study abroad when the first scholarships were offered to students from Georgia' (IEC official). A faculty member from a social science department also recounted that: 'In the late 70s it again became possible to send some students abroad but in limited numbers'. From their

department, they could send students in the 1980s to universities from the socialist camp and other non-Western parts. As one faculty member explained, 'In the 80s, the first ethnographer was sent to India. Then they were allowed to go to Poland, and other socialist states. But even those countries were limited in terms of what they could offer because they were not at the forefront of disciplinary development'.

Faculty expressed a desire to catch up with the trends in their fields, particularly in social sciences which have been politicized or, in some cases (psychology, sociology), even removed from the curriculum. The same senior faculty member describing the early scholarships available in the 1980s reflected that,

> Because in the soviet past many things were interrupted, the methodological and content development in social sciences, it is important to catch up. I have been trying constantly to catch up because the time we lost was tragic; there are so many new developments, new methods, we have to constantly try to catch up and keep up.

A more junior faculty member noted that,

> I know there was a gap in us being part of the larger academic world, but I think it has been bridged significantly. I personally feel that I am part of the larger academic world and have the duty to keep up, not to lag behind, and I can do that best through partnerships.

Several senior faculty mentioned that they had a duty to offer students the kinds of opportunities themselves had in the 1990s and 2000s.

> The state could not fund us 15 years ago, but there was a scholars' exchange programme (ISET/RESET) offered by the Open Society Foundation which then supported the creation of new networks: a project called Building Anthropology in Eurasia created a network that still continues and is very useful to this day. These projects changed the world for scholars...they were important for internationalization because it gave Georgian scholars access to top experts in their field. In one project, Harvard University and really top scholars in the field participated. These contacts and meetings are very valuable to this day. I experienced that and want my students to experience this opening, but today these

> programmes no longer exist so we need to use the opportunities through EU programmes and other international programmes (Faculty member).

To further illustrate the pressing need to help students, she stated that

> When I started to develop my career there were not so many students interested in going abroad. There was less competition. Now the Caucasus is not anymore so interesting and this is a limitation for our students. They are more ready because they speak languages, but there is more competition, so we need to help them as others helped us.

In a nutshell, some respondents see the drive for internationalisation as an act of restoration, a return to the traditions denied during the Soviet times. Part of this restoration is also the desire to have faculty and graduates with international experience, connected to the state of the art in their fields and competitive beyond the national borders. Interestingly, the analysis looking both at an individual level and the decision making one (as suggested by Knight 2004) shows that individual faculty are more likely to see the drivers in a historical context (both in terms of their personal history and that of the nation). The policy makers reflected primarily on drivers as linked with the present and the future, and less of the past.

Support for research and other drivers

Several interviewees among both faculty and university leaders, mentioned that internationalization is essential in developing research and in supporting the move from faculties dedicated mostly to teaching to those where research plays a major role. The Vice-Rector from the university in Tbilisi noted that ‘you have to understand that research is very expensive, but it puts you on the map. So far, my university was very good at teaching, but now research has become a priority’. The rector from Tbilisi also stressed that ‘without research we cannot go up in rankings, and for research we need to be part of transnational networks. Rankings and research are important to my university, and we need internationalization to boost them, and particularly EU funded projects’. A faculty member also noted that ‘to keep the pace with the global academic community

is very hard and costly: travelling to conferences, registration fees even if you present papers, publishing, all require funding and through international projects, we can secure this funding'.

Additional drivers for internationalization were mentioned, including institutional and personal ones. The Head of Department from the Ministry of Education indicated that the decrease in population affected Georgian universities, and internationalization was a means to fill the places that could not be filled internally. Two faculty members were of the opinion that internationalization was the only way of rooting out faculty without relevant knowledge while two others mentioned the need to open the minds of the society at large by cultural exchanges. The Vice-Rector from the university outside Tbilisi mentioned internationalization as a tool to stand out, to gain visibility which was difficult to attain for a small university outside the capital. In the Vice-Rector's words 'maybe countries that give up internationalization have become tired of being famous, but my university, away from the capital, still needs to survive in the big globalized world, and internationalization helps with survival'.

To sum up the working of these five drivers, at a policy level, internationalization seems to be driven mainly by the political will to get closer to the EU, with education being one of the tools to achieve a *rapprochement*. At an institutional level, the reasons are several: the aim for quality enhancement through international exchanges, to prepare students for their professional lives in Georgia and abroad and the financial motivation, particularly in medical schools. At a personal level, faculty seems motivated by the desire to catch up professionally - made even more acute in certain disciplines like social sciences (which have been previously marginalized and even prohibited) and engineering (where lack of funding affected the level of technology endowment). Additionally, most faculty mentioned a sense of duty toward students. Some professors work to create travel and research opportunities for their students similar to those they had themselves while others are driven by the belief (supported by research) that students need internationalization to be competitive and to get good jobs.

Challenges to internationalization

Several challenges to internationalization were recurrent in the interviews. Among them were the rigid salary scales at public universities. The low salaries available for junior professors make it especially difficult to hire talented graduates of foreign universities, as they have a better chance of getting a high income in the private universities or outside academia. Also, the limited incentive systems for faculty available for university leaders was often quoted as a major challenge to attracting faculty with foreign degrees and speaking foreign languages, much needed for foreign language programmes and for conducting internationally visible research. English language competencies were limited among senior Georgian faculty who had not studied the language in school, and this made new hires essential for internationalization.

Additionally, as the senior leader from San Diego University mentioned, 'many professors are of retirement age but cannot afford to retire due to the low pension available. Sadly, they are forced to hang on to their positions, cling to their former reputation, and prevent younger colleagues from joining or advancing in the university'. This shows that policies such as the pension system, which are not in any way influenced or controlled by universities, have nevertheless an impact on internationalization.

The lack of reform of state university administration was also quoted as an impediment to internationalization, mostly linked to the low salaries available for administrators and their lack of appeal for competent people. Additionally, the vice-rector from the Adjara region noted that they badly need administrators who speak foreign languages because 'there is a lot of administration in European funded projects, much of it in English…and with students and faculty we can see results of language training but for administrators it is harder'.

Several sources also mentioned an overall need for better coordination between ministries dealing with internationalization, in addition to a visa system that prevents students from certain countries from attending university. Additionally, the vice-rector from the university outside Tbilisi noted that 'we do get a lot of support from the local authorities of the region but almost none from the Ministry, not even with visa support. They should spread the word more, try to involve those that are not in Tbilisi more, but I do not see that happening'.

The challenges to internationalization reflect national conditions not dissimilar to those in other Central and Eastern European countries (among them Slovakia, Hungary and Romania) where universities are granted limited staffing autonomy.[7] They also highlight the effect of policies from fields unrelated to education (immigration policy, the pension system, the organization of central and local administration) on the activity of universities and the push for internationalization. The regional universities seem to be disadvantaged in the competition for government resources by comparison with those from Tbilisi (although they do have local support). These findings point to the multitude of conditions needed for internationalizing higher education in countries newer to this trend and the political will required to reform policies outside the education system and align them to the internationalization effort.

Conclusion

Internationalization in Georgian higher education is driven unsurprisingly by multiple factors among which the political will is a very important one. Not unlike Saakashvili's statements in 2005, the present policymakers state their desire to be part of the Western sphere and view internationalization of education as an important tool. Georgia is not alone in using higher education to support a new national identity and narrative (Matei et al. 2013 discuss the case of Armenia). Some interviewees linked the need to internationalize with recapturing the spirit of Georgian intelligentsia from pre-Soviet times, a return to a state of normalcy. Others reflect on Georgia being a small country with limited resources to compete in a globalized world.

From official documents and interviews, the general impression is that internationalization is a policy priority, and Georgia is open for relations not just with EU or the U.S. but also with countries in the region and beyond. Nevertheless, the sense gathered from the interviews points rather to a selective, *targeted internationalization* where engaging with their neighbour (and political enemy) The Russian Federation is not desired. My research echoes the findings of earlier studies (Toderas and Stavaru 2018, Dobbins and Khachatryan, 2015) and confirms that not much has changed in the academic relations between Georgia and Russia and that this separation continues to be part of the national narrative.

[7] See https://www.university-autonomy.eu/dimensions/staffing/, Consulted January 15, 2020.

Another finding is the strong support for adhering to European Standards and Guidelines with the view of accessing EU grants needed to finance academic research and exchanges. Internationalization, and particularly academic engagement with the EU, is seen almost across the board and at all levels as a tool to increase quality through EU funding and academic exchange. For this reason, Georgia has been active in EU funded research programmes, ranking number 10 in terms of activity among all non-EU countries. Most interviewees noted that Georgia is, to a large extent, forced to internationalize because the national budget is insufficient to independently support the desired development of the higher education sector. In Bathory and Lindstrom's (2011) phrase, 'the power of EU's purse' provides a strong incentive for Georgia to open up in order to attract funding. Building on resources dependency theory (Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978) we could advance the conclusion that EU resources are vital to Georgian research, and therefore internationalization is as much a choice as it is a need.

Increasing research output is also needed to improve Georgian universities' standing in international rankings. Georgia is doing better than the rest of its Caucasus neighbours but is struggling just as most other Eastern European countries and for the same reasons: a history of universities as teaching institutions and of research being located in academies of sciences; limited funding to higher education; language limitations; and the added burden of a turbulent recent past (Boyadjieva, 2017).

As pointed out by a faculty member and an administrator, the internationalization of higher education seems to be also externally driven or 'supported or even desired by external partners'. For example, the U.S. has supported the Millennium Challenge, which financed the establishment of the Tbilisi campus of San Diego University as a way to support STEM education in Georgia. The American university partnered with three Georgian universities, Georgian Technical University (GTU), Ilia State University (ISU), and Tbilisi State University (TSU) to offer internationally recognized undergraduate degrees. Additionally, other initiatives like the one funded by the German government through GIZ support internationalization through funding academic exchange programmes.

To conclude, Georgia's reasons for internationalization are very much part of the effort to develop a pro-European and pro-Western national identity and educate citizens in this spirit. The main arguments against internationalization that led to a reversal of policy in parts of Europe are not present in Georgia: the state funding is used primarily to cover the costs incurred by national students; and foreign students rarely remain to work in the country, while students from certain countries cannot even enter the educational system. Therefore, the argument of foreigners taking local jobs or abusing local resources was not present. The only drawback to internationalization mentioned by four out of 17 interviews is the loss of Georgian language as an academic language if internationalization continues, but universities try to address this concern by including solely readings in Georgian at undergraduate level and making efforts to translate into Georgian key research articles published in English. In brief, Georgian academics and policymakers see that the benefits brought by internationalization far outweigh the potential disadvantages.

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