

## QUALITY ASSURANCE OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS

This issue offers insights into how the south Caucasus countries of Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia as different sovereign nations with their distinctive cultures and ideologies share a geo-political commonality of fairly recent Soviet occupation with 20% of Georgia territory under occupation. They share a desire to develop, modernise and operate an effective higher education system which, through creativity, ingenuity and imagination supports their educational, cultural and economic ambitions. To that end they all joined the Bologna Process at the Bergen Ministerial Conference in 2005 and have undertaken reforms of their post-colonial futures, intended to improve the quality of higher education within their country and provide opportunities for students and academics' mobility, improvement in teaching and learning regimes, the creation of quality assurance instruments which provide direction and focus to internal and external quality assessments and accreditation and have begun to focus on their research infrastructures. As members of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), each country has had to address its own higher education sector in order to formally comply with the agreement necessities which critically required independent quality assurance bodies which had responsibility for programme and/or institutional accreditation. The consequences for each are different and details of how each has responded cannot be fully covered in this selection of papers in this special issue. What has been achieved, we feel, is a representation of responses which shine a light on the way the South Caucasus has answered the requirements for EHEA membership. It acts as a catalyst to discussion on the future direction of higher education in the region, including the furthering of large-scale alteration of national systems to include private institutions alongside nation-supported academies.

Each of the papers in this special issue offers comments upon progress at a country level, reflecting action at either the strategic systematic level or at the institutional tactical levels. The papers emerged from a discussion following a conference on higher education held in Tbilisi in 2021, organised jointly by the East European and Tbilisi State universities. We contextualise each paper and introduce it under three headings:

- Post-Soviet Legacy;
- Quality Assurance and its ramifications; and
- Future direction

## Post-soviet era

All three republics share a legacy based upon the single Soviet approach to higher education provision, although how they have responded to the opening of their systems is not homogenous and retains their distinctive cultural and ethnic diversities albeit under the rubric of the Bologna Process. What is common is their shared desire to reset their economies, especially the introduction of market economies and the underpinning neo-liberal ethos which was infused into their educational systems. Smolentseva, Huisman, and Froumin (2018) consider these to be: “a centrally planned organization and financing, subordination to multiple sectoral ministries, a national curriculum, a vocational orientation based on the combination of strong basic education and narrow specialized job-related training, a nomenclature of types of higher education institutions, tuition-free study places and guaranteed employment upon graduation combined with mandatory job placement” (ibid: 1-2). The issues facing, and the tension created in, the higher education system of one of the three countries, Georgia, is explored in our first paper by Oleksiyenko.

## Quality Assurance

As the EHEA states, “quality assurance agencies act as a support for institutions in their continuing development and, equally, have a key role as protectors of the public interest” (EHEA) and each of the three countries has progressed developing such agencies, The manner of their success is charted by the Thematic Peer Group C on Quality Assurance actions report (2022)<sup>1</sup> and summaries of the development of these agencies and the challenge they face are provided in Table 1.

Table 1 – Key Features of Quality Assurance in the South Caucasus<sup>2</sup>.

### Armenia

The internal and external quality assurance system in Armenia, based on European Standards and Guidelines (ESG), was developed since 2008 when the Armenian National Center for Professional Education Quality Assurance Foundation (ANQA) was established

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<sup>1</sup> TPG C activities are dedicated to the development of quality assurance systems that are in compliance with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area

<sup>2</sup> Based on the Thematic Peer Group C on Quality Assurance Action report and National Centre for Educational Quality Enhancement (NCEQE) country report.

and started its functioning. ANQA became a full member of The European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA).

The country the progress to be achieved by 2024 includes:

- Review of legal basis and development of regulatory framework for implementation: of: institutional and programme accreditation
- The integration to QA of micro credentials
- Cross border QA to QA of Joint programmes
- Implementation of research and desk analysis on the challenges and state of art of the above-mentioned matters.
- Peer-learning activities and conferences for sharing experiences.

### **Azerbaijan**

In order to develop more robust quality assurance systems for the higher education sector, assist the HEIs in the enhancement of quality and improve the international ranking of HEIs, the Education Quality Assurance Agency (TKTA) was established with the presidential decree signed on December 29, 2019. To that end, "Rules on Accreditation of Education Institutions", approved by the Decree of the Cabinet of Ministers on December 14, 2020, mandate the Education Quality Assurance Agency (TKTA) to implement and coordinate state policy in institutional and program accreditation of all education institutions. At present, the TKTA develops the external quality assurance (QA) - institutional and program accreditation - criteria based on the newly adopted "Rules on Accreditation of Education Institutions" and the ESG.

The country progress to be achieved by 2024 includes:

- To establish the robust external and internal QA systems in line with the ESG and state standards;
- To develop the national ranking system for HEIs and programs;
- To increase the participation of stakeholders in the decision-making process of the HEIs;
- To foster internationalization process at HEIs;
- To facilitate the shift from teacher-centred to student-centred education at the HEIs.

## **Georgia**

The NCEQE was established in 2006 as the National Center for Educational Accreditation (NCEA) to conduct institutional accreditation. After the first round of the revision of the external quality assurance system in 2010, the National Center for Educational Quality Enhancement (NCEQE) was established as its legal successor. The new Law on Educational Quality Enhancement established NCEQE as independent in its activities and operation, with its structure and responsibilities defined in a Charter which was adopted in 2010. NCEQE is recognized as a sole national body authorized to carry out external mechanism of assuring and enhancing educational quality. NCEQE implements two external quality assurance mechanisms of higher education: authorization of higher educational institutions and accreditation of higher educational programs.

The progress to be achieved by 2024 includes:

- The HEIs need to analyse data obtained through internal and external QA mechanisms and develop certain follow-up activities with specific scopes to avoid overlap. In addition, these follow up activities need to be in line with specific QA goals and objectives.
- Need of strengthening studentss capacities for their involvement in quality enhancement activities at their institutions and beyond.
- Participation of international experts in program accreditation need to become wider.
- Challenges caused by the "small country syndrome"

### *External Quality Assurance*

The quality of higher education and compliance with quality assurance mechanisms given in the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ESG) of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) have been a hot topic of discussion for many years and pose substantial challenges for countries of South Caucasus countries. We read in the article by Ilyasov, Imanova, Mushtago and Sadigova an analysis of the issues of quality assurance in the legal framework of Azerbaijan, the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the

European Higher Education Area (ESG), and makes relevant recommendations to improve regulations.

### *Internal Quality Assurance*

As can be seen from some of the future goals of all three nations, that the development of internal quality systems is a priority. This is the task that is addressed in the article by Sharvashidze, Grdzeldze, Sikharulidze, and Gabrichidze. The paper presents an analytical framework developed for Tbilisi State University. The paper is based on indicators, software tools and metrics, intended to meet individual needs of the institution to understand their quality issues in the context of the whole university mission and align it with their strategic goals.

### *Teaching and learning*

More specifically, the functions of research, teaching and learning of institutions have become more of a focus for student centred learning. This focus has seen an important shift in pedagogical practice, and requires a praxis of high-quality teaching, the technical and theoretical mechanisms to ensure it delivers on resources. Isaeva and Aliyev's paper reveals how higher education actors in Azerbaijan conceptualise excellence in teaching and how they promote it at different levels. As teaching excellence becomes a measurable aspect in implementing strategic change at national and institutional levels, this study utilises a qualitative methodological approach to observe and investigate the conceptualisation of the phenomenon. From a more specific and Armenian perspective, Vardanyan, Safaryan and Movsisyan in an Armenian context highlight the perceived benefits of English as a method of instruction to boost internationalisation and quality assurance by revising institutional policies, mechanisms and tools towards a student-centred and labour-market-demand standpoint at national and international levels. The third paper under of this critically important aspect of quality in higher education is provided by Chokoraia who discusses from a Georgian viewpoint the notion of plagiarism. In her paper she provides a discussion of the use of evaluation software and how its application can identify plagiarism and thus help in understanding its cause, intentions and how this knowledge could be used to improve the educational experience.

### **The Future.**

Within a culturally sensitive context, Tavadze explores the notion of the responsibility of the university in the global context and attempts to link it to the concept of quality broadly

conceived. Specifically, it is argued that there are certain similarities between the discourses of philosophy of higher education (global responsibility of the university) and political philosophy (global justice). explores the notion of the responsibility of the university in the global context and attempts to link it to the concept of quality broadly conceived. Specifically, it is argued that there are certain similarities between the discourses of philosophy of higher education (global responsibility of the university) and political philosophy (global justice).

RON'S ARTICLE TO APPEAR HERE IF ACCEPTED WITH SIMILAR SHORT COMMENTARY

#### *A Footnote*

Each of the papers which appear here can be read as offering insights into the ethos of scholarship which pervades the changing structures of South Caucasus higher education policy, strategies and actions. They call upon international exposure facilitated by Erasmus, from academic experience outside the region and on the importance of praxis in the evolution of systems and practice that enhance student experience. The papers are thus exciting as individual examples of scholarship and when read together give a feel, if no more, of the activities and struggles of academic in difficult time within the region.

In this respect we want to acknowledge the difficult conditions academics and all members of the academy face. All three countries have experienced occupation and fears must surely remain of another loss of their own sovereignty, if not their dignity. We send our support to colleagues in Ukraine and these three brave countries.

#### References

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