



Difference Between Political Intent and Action: Implementation of Recent Changes in Doctoral Education in Georgia

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Abstract

This paper examines a specific case of policy formulation and implementation to shed light on the dynamics of higher education policy implementation in Georgia. As in many post-Soviet countries, Georgia's higher education sector has undergone significant policy shifts; however, academic analyses of the drivers and implementation of these reforms remain fragmented. This paper focuses on the recent Doctoral Education Framework (2024), offering insights into persistent systemic challenges related to policy implementation. The analysis draws on interviews with policymakers and institutional actors responsible for enacting the new doctoral regulations and examines the intended objectives and anticipated outcomes of the 2024 framework. This approach enabled us to examine stakeholder understandings of policy intent, implementation processes, actor mandates, and anticipated behavioural responses. The study relies on primary qualitative data supported by secondary qualitative and quantitative sources. In doing so, it contributes to the developing literature on higher education policy realization, which—despite recent studies—remains historically underdeveloped.

Keywords Georgia · Higher education · Policy implementation · Doctoral education

Introduction

The paper is structured as follows: the first section should present the research context and problem statement, including the history of doctoral education reforms in Georgia; the second section is devoted to the relevant literature and conceptual framework, with a detailed discussion of Winter's model; the third section presents the methodology; the fourth section elaborates the findings; the fifth presents

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our discussion; and the sixth section - the conclusions, recommendations, and limitations.

The Context and Problem Statement

Research on Georgian higher education identifies several waves of quality assurance (QA) reform since independence (Amashukeli et al. 2020; Pipia et al. 2024). According to Pipia et al. (2024), QA reforms progressed through four main stages. The first wave (2005–2010) introduced the Bologna Process and established the National Centre for Educational Accreditation (NCEA), creating initial QA structures but attracting criticism for excessive bureaucracy. The second wave (2010–2015), following the 2010 Law on Education Quality, created the NCEQE and aligned programme and institutional accreditation processes with the 2005 European Standards and Guidelines (ESG). The third wave (2015–2018) strengthened external QA mechanisms in line with ESG 2015 and shifted the focus from punitive evaluation towards developing a quality culture. The fourth wave (post-2018) introduced cluster accreditation as the dominant system-level reform (Pipia et al. 2024). As noted in studies of the 2015–2018 reforms, it remains “less expected that the QA reform will have a substantial system-level impact in terms of the actual enhancement of higher education quality in the country” (Amashukeli et al. 2020: 91).

Most recently, on 30 August 2024, the Doctoral Education Framework (Ministry of Education Science and Youth, MoESY, 2024) was adopted “to promote the development of doctoral educational programmes and scientific research activities in Georgia through external mechanisms of quality assurance” (Annex 6 to the 141n Amendment of 2024 30/08 to 65n Framework Document for Doctoral Education 2024: 2). The framework establishes requirements for doctoral programmes and interprets accreditation standards using internationally recognized practices, including the Salzburg II Recommendations. It covers four domains: (1) doctoral education programmes, (2) support services and academic supervision, (3) resources, and (4) quality assurance. It requires programmes to be research-driven, strategically aligned with institutional priorities, and oriented towards producing original, internationally relevant knowledge. The framework mandates transparent admissions, ethical research practices, clear learning outcomes, and regular evaluation of student progress. HEIs must also provide academic, career, and mobility support, while supervisors are required to maintain regular consultations, comply with workload ratios (1:3 or 1:5), and adhere to transparent supervision agreements and evaluation mechanisms. The Doctoral Education Framework functions alongside accreditation standards and specifies detailed qualitative and quantitative requirements regarding staff qualifications, supervisory ratios, admissions criteria (including two years of relevant work experience), assessment procedures, and material and financial resources such as conference participation and research funding. A recent study (Gibbs et al. 2025) argues that although the new doctoral framework represents a positive development, its effective implementation depends on strengthening institutional capacities, ensuring consistent interpretation, and establishing robust monitoring procedures.

The phases of development of the higher education system illustrate the complex engagement of Georgia's post-Soviet legacy with the neo-liberal notion of competition and international quality standardization through the Bologna process. The struggle is not dissimilar to many post-Soviet countries in the liberation of central control, confronting corruption and embracing market economies (Smolentseva et al. 2018). As the above suggests, Georgia's reform trajectory has repeatedly relied on centralized policy interventions, bringing issues of implementation to the fore. According to Oleksiyenko, this legacy has kept, "Georgian universities relegated to a peripheral status regionally and globally" (2023: 6) This, as the above shows, has required significant policy initiatives many of which have embraced a top-down, instructional, and centralized power narrative (Huisman et al. 2018; Oleksiyenko 2023) and has brought the subject of implementation to the fore (Scott 2018).

When implementation is addressed, it is typically framed within Europeanization (Amashukeli et al. 2020) or public administration theory (Gibbs et al. 2023). This paper represents, we believe, the first attempt to investigate policy implementation in the Georgian higher education sector. This research investigates the challenges associated with the successful implementation of the new doctoral policy, with particular attention to those responsible for its enactment—namely senior institutional administrators and supervisors, who form the primary focus of this study. While the new framework is intended to enhance the doctoral student experience, evidence from Georgia (Gibbs et al. 2025) indicates that doctoral students are often largely unaware of policy changes unless they are directly affected by them. Moreover, the higher education sector has a well-documented history of limited student involvement as meaningful contributors to policy development processes. As this study examines the policy at an early stage of implementation, the lived experiences of doctoral students are not yet fully evident and therefore fall outside the immediate scope of this research.

Despite increasing attention to Georgian higher education, research on policy formulation and implementation remains limited. Existing studies tend to be descriptive or focus on issues of access and quality (Campbell and Gorgodze 2016; Huisman et al. 2018; Pipia et al. 2024, Gibbs et al. 2025).

Positioning the Study—Literature on Policy Implementation in Higher Education

Within the implementation studies, higher education is discussed by several sources. The range of frameworks and models developed to investigate implementation forms a dialectical relationship between policymakers and the implementing institutions which are either top down, or bottom up, and, more recently, a combination of both, such as the Winter framework used in this study. The dominant review of the literature into higher education implementation is offered by Stensaker (2018). According to him "wide variety of approaches and theoretical perspectives seem to be applied in current published works" (2020: 2257). Further, he asserts that these "approaches are characterized by utilizing theoretical perspectives that downplay the importance of the top-down and bottom-up distinction, while having a more well-defined and

limited empirical focus” (2020: 2257). These thoughts are echoed in more recent reviews offered by Viennet and Pont (2017), Berkovich (2021), Pilato et al. (2022), and Salmon (2025). Moreover, Salmon (2025) comments that “Most papers did not position themselves as making recommendations for improving policies or solving problems with policy implementation” (2025: 14). Khelifi and Triki (2020) have suggested that research in the sector has tended to ““remain aloof” rather than exploring policy implementation ‘on the shop floor [...] at the point of delivery’” (2020: 532).

Winter’s integrated implementation framework (Winter 1990, 2003, 2012a, 2012b, 2015) aims to integrate many different contributions into a single model which, according to Sørensen and Paulsson (2020) “sought to bridge the gap between top-down and bottom-up in a so-called “integrated implementation model” (2020: 1057).

Winter’s model integrates political, organizational, and behavioural dimensions, allowing researchers to trace where and how these gaps emerge. This provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the dynamics of public policy implementation and is of further importance as the study concentrates on Georgian universities. The model highlights five key components: the policy formulation process, the organizational and inter-organizational implementation structures, management behaviour, the behaviour of street-level bureaucrats, and the responses of target groups (Singh and Ehlers (2019). Furthermore, the model posits that successful implementation depends on the alignment of motivation, capacity, and control across all actor levels, and that weak links in this chain often lead to “symbolic” rather than substantive policy realization.

Given the trend in the literature to move towards a more integrated framework of study and the absents of specific recommendations, we chose to ground our research in a model that reflects more practical application. To do this, we chose to interpret our findings. We argue that Winter’s model is particularly valuable for analysing why policies often diverge from their original political intent once implementation begins.

Moreover, the framework allows us to structure the analysis of policy implementation in the higher education context by considering the following aspects:

- Disaggregating causes of potential poor implementation. These may include governance (conflicting signals), organization (low capacity or competing priorities), or front-line behaviour (resistance, coping).
- Analysing academic and professional motivation. HE Poly often confronts strong professional norms and Winter’s emphasis on motivation helps explain why staff may resist or reinterpret policies that they perceive against their interest.
- Identifying coping and symbolic compliance. In some cases quality assurance regimes produce “tick-box” behaviors, creating the gap between formal compliance and substantive change
- Connect autonomy and accountability. The centralized intervention of Government as a legacy of the Soviet past. This perspective allows us to analyse how

different mixes of state steering, market instruments, and institutional autonomy may influence implementation patterns across institutions.

Based on the data collected within our research on doctoral framework in Georgia, several issues in the design and implementation process discussed above signal a weak alignment between the reform's intent and its expected outcomes, suggesting that stronger, more coordinated action from policymakers will be required to ensure the achievement of the reform's stated objectives.

Methodology

The paper represents a qualitative study of policy creation and implementation in Georgia, and analysis is based on data collected between January and March 2025 from three principal stakeholder groups with direct influence over doctoral education policy implementation in Georgia and recipients: policymakers, university management (serving as street-level bureaucrats in this study), and doctoral supervisors (target group).¹

The first stakeholder group comprised representatives from the Ministry of Education, Science and Youth (MoESY), and the National Center for Educational Quality Enhancement (NCEQE). Participants from this group were selected based on their formal responsibilities in doctoral education regulation, policy formulation, and quality assurance. In total, two policymakers participated in this strand of the study.

The second stakeholder group consisted of senior management representatives, including vice-rectors, deans, and heads of doctoral schools from selected higher education institutions. The selection of universities was guided by national administrative data provided by EMIS, ensuring coverage of institutions with the largest doctoral candidate populations and the greatest system-level relevance. Altogether, six universities were included in the study, comprising four public and two private institutions. Five of these institutions were located in Tbilisi, while one represented a regional university (Imereti region), allowing for limited geographic diversity. Within these institutions, eight senior management representatives with between seven and twenty-five years of experience in higher education leadership and doctoral education governance participated in individual interviews.

The third group, doctoral supervisors, was selected through a snow-balling principle within the same universities. In our study, it is them, who are considered the target group for the policy. Altogether thirty-three doctoral supervisors took part in six focus groups, with each focus group including between four and six participants. Participants represented a wide range of professional backgrounds and institutional roles. Supervisors participating in the focus groups had between five and thirty years of academic experience, ranging from first-time supervisors to highly experienced academics overseeing multiple doctoral candidates.

¹ Using May and Wwinter's terminology (May & Winter, 2009).

The overall sample included both women and men across all stakeholder groups, reflecting the gender composition typical of senior academic and policy roles within the Georgian higher education system. Although age was not collected as a precise numerical variable, participants generally fell within the mid-career to senior professional range, approximately between 35 and 65 years of age. The quality agency and the ministry were represented by senior officials able to talk with authority on behalf of their organizations (Table 1).

The data were collected without reference to any prior framing of a conceptual implementation framework. Lator winter's framework was used to give a practical frame to present the discussion of the results and to formulate recommendations.

All interviews and focus groups were carried out online using secure Zoom video-conferencing platform, which ensured accessibility for participants across institutions and regions and enabled consistent recording procedures. Individual interviews lasted between forty-five and sixty minutes, while focus groups lasted between seventy-five and ninety minutes, allowing sufficient time for interaction, clarification, and collective reflection. Of the eight interviews conducted, seven were held in English and one in Georgian. The Georgian-language interview was fully transcribed and translated into the common language of the researchers and publication prior to analysis. All six focus groups were conducted in English. All audio material was fully transcribed (first by Zoom Transcript, then by team members), cleaned and adjusted for grammatical and stylistic coherence prior to the analysis. The Georgian-language interview was fully transcribed first and then translated into English.

A semi-structured research design was adopted. The interview and focus group protocols were developed on the basis of prior desk research. The key thematic areas explored included doctoral supervision models and expectations, supervisory workload, governance and funding in doctoral education, and the alignment of doctoral education with national research and education priorities and doctoral education policy and implementation. The stimulus questions guiding the interviews and focus groups are provided in Appendix 1. This design ensured that discussions were grounded in existing evidence while allowing participants to elaborate on their own experiences and institutional contexts.

All interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded with the informed consent of participants. Prior to participation, individuals were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, confidentiality safeguards, and their right to withdraw at any stage. Transcripts were anonymized, securely stored, and used exclusively for academic and research purposes, in line with established TSU ethical standards.

The analysis employed a thematic approach to the collected data which highlighted emergent themes for the stakeholder. The material was processed and analysed using Dedoose (10.0.59), a cloud-based platform developed by Fielding Graduate University and UCLA, to combine narrative depth with systematic analytical structure.

The overall analytical approach was conceptualized as a two-stage process. The first stage focussed on structured coding and categorization of the data, while the second stage involved interpretive synthesis, cross-stakeholder comparison, and the

Table 1 Study Participants

Participants	All	Women	Up to 7 W/E*	7-15 W/E	Over 15 W/E	STEM	Social Sciences	Other	Private**	Not in the capital***
Policymakers	2	1		2		N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
University management	8	4	1		7	N/A	N/A	N/A	1	2
Academic supervisors	33	17	6	4	23	15	3	15	4	6

*W/E works of experience in that specific role

**Works at private education institution

***Education institution is not located in the capital city

development of higher-order themes. Although multiple coding steps were undertaken within the software environment, these steps formed part of an iterative analytic cycle embedded within the two broader stages, rather than representing separate analytical phases.

Coding was conducted by members of the project research team with complementary expertise in doctoral education policy, quality assurance, and institutional governance. For each stakeholder group dataset, initial coding was carried out independently by two team members. These independently coded datasets were subsequently shared with the wider project team for structured feedback. During this review process, team members discussed code definitions, addressed areas of overlap or ambiguity, and refined the coding framework where necessary. This approach ensured analytic transparency, enhanced interpretive consistency, and reduced the risk of single-coder bias, while preserving sensitivity to stakeholder-specific contexts.

To support both depth of analysis and systematic comparison, three separate Dedoose projects were created, corresponding to policymakers, university senior management, and doctoral supervisors participating in focus groups. The decision to maintain separate projects was analytically important. It allowed each category of stakeholders to be analysed as a coherent dataset shaped by distinct roles, responsibilities, and levels of influence towards the policy implementation process.

Within each project, manual coding was applied using inductive coding at first to ensure all the emerging themes will be carefully observed. Codes were organized hierarchically into parent and sub-codes, creating a structured taxonomy that reflected layered dimensions integrated implementation model. At a final stage, the deductive codes were derived from the Winter's integrated implementation model and the variables associated with each of the stakeholder category. However, the framework was not imposed on the data; rather than that, it was used as an interpretive lenses to organize empirically derived themes.

Integration of data across stakeholder groups was achieved through collective interpretive discussions. Themes were examined in relation to areas of alignment, divergence, and contradiction between policymakers, institutional leaders, and supervisors. This comparative logic was central to the analysis, enabling the study to move beyond single-perspective accounts and to develop a system-level understanding of doctoral education policy implementation in Georgia.

All participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and confidentiality protocols. Data were anonymized, securely stored, and used exclusively for academic purposes. Taken together, the combination of collaborative coding, stakeholder-specific analytic structuring, iterative synthesis, and explicit integration strategies strengthens the credibility, dependability, and trustworthiness of the study's findings.

Findings

The research findings present a nuanced picture of dynamics of the current reform processes of doctoral supervision in Georgia, pictured through the perspectives and characteristics of the three principal stakeholder groups who are tasked with policymaking and its enforcement, university leaders, and doctoral supervisors. While all actors align with the overall intent of the policy to enhance the quality of academic supervision, their perspectives are filtered through their responsibilities vis-à-vis their respective roles in policy implementation that clearly illustrate the areas of convergence as well as points of divergence and respectively threats to positive response to the policy reform.

The research reveals five central themes. These are:

- Policy intent without clarity or transparency in implementation
- Lack of a clear and focussed strategy reflecting the need of society
- Supervisor standards
- Operational burden
- Administrative burden

Policy Direction

Policymakers described the process of the Doctoral Education Framework development as highly elaborate, reporting the use of international experience with regard to Doctoral Education standards, use of accreditation standards, feedback from international experts (specifically from experts involved within Ethics Erasmus programme), and discussions within national experts (structured feedback requested from universities, the draft standard presented and discussed during HE conferences, etc.). So, the process could be regarded as participatory involving ample communication channels but not being transparently clear to the participants who act as agents of the policy but was, in actuality, a top-down drive process.

In this, the role of the MoESY emerges as strictly normative and strategic. It approved the policy as well as is behind the Unified Education Strategy 2024–2030, which covers doctoral education under its higher education part. However, the clear strategic priorities to what is expected from doctoral education in Georgia, beyond very general statement of quality, access, and efficiency—its contribution to personal, economic, and societal development—does not exist. Among all stakeholders, there was a concern that the policy lacked the direction:

“We don’t have any kind of national strategy or national priorities in research, neither us nor the Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia... universities may submit PhD programs in every field... we evaluate all of these programs” (representative from NCEQE).

To fill the gap, universities either complain about its “non-existence” or interpret it in their own way:

“These priorities are linked with the European Union priorities... cultural heritage is included, but focus is on STEM, biodiversity, ecology, green and blue economy” (representative from university management).

Across stakeholder groups, there is a shared narrative that the reform of doctoral education aims to enhance the quality and credibility of supervision and research. Policymakers frame this intent through regulatory instruments. As the NCEQE representative stated,

“We have elaborated separate quality assurance criteria for doctoral education ... the previous standards were not ensuring the quality evaluation of the programs” (NCEQE representative)

Lack of a Clarity in the Overall Doctoral Strategy

University management and academic supervisors explicitly align with the policy objectives, quoting the need for better student–supervisor ratios, higher academic supervisors’ qualifications, and better implementation of supervision processes. However, they also highlight the operational burden. The revised standards suffer from being inadequate or unfeasible to implement under the current academic or economic infrastructure. This was recognized by NCEQE:

“From the perspective of the universities; these could mean more challenges. Of course, in the process of implementation these new standards” (NCEQE representative).

However, it seems, no plans to share these challenges were put forward.

Turning to fees, university management representative confirmed that not only are the fees heavy for students but failed to cover the cost of provision:

“It is not a big amount to cover everything and all the expenses we have at the university” (representative from University Management).

But there was no clarity in funding for this enhancement. As one of the responded pointed out:

“The situation is complex and that simply improving supervisor qualifications or involvement may not be enough to address the issue—financial support and systemic changes are essential.” (representative from supervisors group)

Others also claimed that institutions normally depend on additional external funding to ensure programme or institutional development quoting existing funding models as a major limiting factor.

“funded by government to restore that campus [campus for one of the programs], because with our financing, it would be impossible to do.” (representative from University Management)

In another context, though reflecting the other respondents’ views on limiting factors of funding the policy reform, the MoESY representative commented in their interview that

“I think whole country is waiting for a new funding model, which I hope ... will be fully ready ... from 2027” (MOESY respondent).

Both policymakers and university management confirm that the reform aimed at tighter control over quality, and will, in reality, result only in decreasing the number of doctoral programmes. The MoESY representative noted that

“The new standards will decrease the number of PhD programs, because supervision capacity will be a limiting factor” (representative from MOESY).

Such statements illustrate a failure of policymakers to understand the importance of implementation as part of the integrated policy circle and leave more ambiguity in the system.

Improving the Engagement and the Quality of these Engagements of Supervisors

Standards addressing the academic quality of doctoral supervisors refer to formal quantitative and qualitative requirements for academic supervisors.

“They must have at least one article published in an international journal in the relevant field... We have defined the ratios between the supervisors and the candidates... now we have defined at the national level...” (representative from NCEQE).

But such low and poorly defined requirements for an active researcher (mono author, joint or referred book or chapter) can be met by scepticism in other Bologna Process signatory countries. Such ambiguity seems more targeted at maintaining a market than raising standards. Further, the decision on a three-year limit on doctoral study in Georgia with the conditions of study where unavailability of student stipends or fellowship opportunities meant that

“In most cases either they [students] do not have the kind of financial support, or they have just a little amount of money... most of the PhD students are working... it’s very difficult doing PhD and working at the same time...” (NCEQE representative)

However, several institutions had already responded to the challenges identified in the new framework. For instance

“We recently changed rules. Not only for supervisors, but for academic personnel we set minimal research requirements. We did this to ensure that our

personnel have significant publications, significant international cooperation” (Representative from state university).

Another stated that

“We have four doctorate programs... The new standards... are not so new for us because we were implementing most of these procedures.... So, we are concentrated on full doctorate studies, on quality and not quantity. That is our mission, that is written in our strategic planning process and in strategic plan”. (Representative from state university).

Supervisors confirm that sporadic training exists, but many rely on personal networks and prior experience rather than systematic development. The university managements also often quoted that

“We provide special training on good practices of supervision, but no additional financial support... supervision is part of their regular workload” (Representative from state university).

This view is at odds with many of the comments from the supervisors themselves for example.

"While there hasn't been a specific training session for doctoral supervisors, there has been a focus group meeting about plagiarism, which included both doctoral candidates and their supervisors"

and

“while we haven't explicitly felt the need for constant training, there are always new trends and ideas to learn... after interacting with doctoral students from other countries”

Among the discussions good practice was identified from management and supervisor from one university in different forums.

Manager-

“Training for doctoral program leaders and academic staff is held at least four times a year, organized by the Quality Assurance Service”

and

supervisor

“there is indeed a need for such training... it is crucial for supervisors to stay updated with modern trends and challenges.”

For supervisors, the reform is seen as necessary but meaningful only if accompanied by adequate resources. Supervisors describe strong intrinsic motivation but warn of

burnout and discouragement under growing formal demands and shrinking institutional rewards:

“Supervision is recognized in hours but not rewarded... motivation depends only on personal dedication” (supervisor focus group)

In summary, all groups recognize the importance of strong supervisory relationships, but their priorities differ. For policy holder, the priority was control over the research experience and supervisory load of the supervisor in a way that enable audit. University leaders focussed how to evidence this selection process whereas supervisors themselves were more concerned the actuality of proving an enriching experience for the students and the cost to the supervisor in terms of their time and conflicts with other aspects of their academic roles such as maintaining engagement with different publishing cultures. In tone, managers were more positive in describing trainings than supervisors themselves.

Operational Burden

While universities respond to policy, they also highlight the operational burden of the new policy. As one representative noted:

“(Limiting number of students per supervisor) is a challenge... because [under the old practice] some of our professors already have five students. So at least these regulations should have the transitional period.” (representative from university 2)

the universities also perceive the reform as a restriction of access, fearing that fewer doctoral slots and reduced flexibility across disciplines will further weaken research capacity and the pipeline of young scholars. While it is a contradiction recognized in the policy, the consequences, as highlighted within the quote below, are not addressed.

“Limiting students per supervisor without increasing funding means either fewer doctoral places or overloading existing staff” (representative from University Management)

Another unrealised burden is the specifications of publications acceptable in students’ doctoral submissions (an integral part of the doctorate). One supervisor commented:

"Stricter publication requirements could be beneficial but the rule that requires a list of acceptable journals could be problematic... such a list could limit the opportunities for doctoral candidates, as they may be able to publish in journals that are not on the list but still meet academic standards. There is a need for clear, flexible guidelines rather than rigid lists."

University management shares the reform's vision but face structural and financial constraints. The participants noted that "regulations define the limits rather than support development". Their responses also reveal concern that reforms may inadvertently shift doctoral education towards cheaper, less research-intensive fields, reproducing inequality across disciplines.

Administrative Burden

The research shows that all groups recognize the importance of capacity and motivation, but policy frameworks rely more on regulatory compliance than mentoring to successful implementation and additional resources. The NCEQE representative noted that "each institution is responsible for ensuring support services, but frequency and quality of supervision are left to them". This is especially perceptible considering the gaps in funding within the current higher education financing system.

"The ministry's view also is that the main problem is in our higher education funding model" (ministry representative).

"The new regulations requiring foreign reviewers for dissertations and the need to translate theses into English add to the difficulties." (supervisor focus group)

Finally, from one supervisor a comment which is expressive of much of the research

"it is challenging to integrate global academic standards into Georgia's higher education system."

Discussion

According to the government sources, the design of the Doctoral Education Framework was participatory involving prior consultation with national and international experts undertaken during several national-level conferences (representative from NCEQE, news on MoESY and NCEQE websites). At the level of policy formulation, there is a high degree of convergence in intent. All stakeholders agree that the reform aims to improve doctoral education quality through clearer standards, structured procedures, and enhanced supervision. The Doctoral Education Framework Document embodies these goals through national-level standards, supervision ratios, and eligibility criteria for supervisors. Yet, as the evidence indicates, the design remains primarily prescriptive and regulatory, emphasizing compliance mechanisms over systemic support structures.

This imbalance reflects what Favero et al. (2012) terms an authority implementation logic, where policy success is expected to flow from rule clarity and enforcement rather than actor motivation or capacity. The reform of doctoral education in Georgia exemplifies this dynamic. With accreditation standards which were more qualitative than quantitative, the coordination between these levels remained limited,

and policy translation often depended on informal interpretation. Through Doctoral Framework policymakers try to bring quantitative indicators for academic supervision, thus clear intent, however, without supportive instruments and resources such as funding schemes, mentoring frameworks, or capacity-building structures, the policy design risks producing formal compliance rather than the intended quality assurance culture.

Policymakers have delegated implementation responsibility to universities without ensuring corresponding capacity, funding, or incentives. This delegation faces the risk of partial or inconsistent policy adoption. While some universities demonstrate initiative in developing training and support services, others remain passive or constrained by limited resources. The adoption process thus reflects a fragmented organizational field, where implementation outcomes are contingent on institutional capacity rather than national consistency.

Winter (2012a, b) notes that successful implementation requires managers who can balance control with discretion, enabling front-line actors to internalize and adapt policy goals. In the Georgian case, however, management behaviour is shaped by compliance imperatives. The new quantitative requirements for supervision, though endorsed by all the participants, divert university leaders focus on meeting quantitative standards rather than building internal cultures of research excellence. The reform's reliance on quantitative metrics—such as supervisor–student ratios and publication requirements—risks discouraging innovation and ownership among implementing actors.

The use of blanket criteria, such as uniform supervisor–student ratios, further restricts local flexibility and ignores variations in institutional capacity, disciplinary norms, and research cultures. As a result, managerial focus shifts towards procedural conformity rather than developmental improvement.

Winter's framework builds on Pressman and Wildavsky's (1973) seminal insight that implementation success decreases as the “complexity of joint action” increases—when multiple actors, with divergent interests and decision points, are involved (Winter, 2012a, b, p 265). At the operational level, the reform's success depends on street-level bureaucrats—academic administrators and mid-level staff—who interpret and enact the policy on the ground. Winter describes these actors as operating in “situations characterized by many demands and limited resources”, where they “cope by rationing services, making biased priorities among cases and clients, controlling clients, and modifying policy goals and client perceptions” (Winter, 2012a, b, p 274).

This Georgian case fits this pattern closely. University administrators and department heads tasked with implementing the supervision standards report resource shortages, unclear guidance, and overextended personnel. They adapt through pragmatic solutions—minimal compliance with documentation requirements, selective supervision load redistribution, or postponing structural adjustments until accreditation deadlines approach. This adaptive but conservative behaviour contributes to what Winter defines as symbolic implementation: compliance in form, not in substance.

Finally, at the level of target group behaviour, the policy's effects are felt most acutely by doctoral supervisors and candidates. Supervisors, as the direct targets

of regulation, face increased formal requirements, heightened accountability, and reduced autonomy—without parallel gains in institutional or financial support. As one supervisor summarized, “We have more requirements but fewer opportunities to fulfil them”.

From Winter’s perspective, this response illustrates the interplay between motivation, capacity, and control. Supervisors remain intrinsically motivated and committed to academic standards, but their capacity to deliver quality supervision is undermined by excessive workload, limited institutional incentives, and weak systemic support. Over time, such imbalances are likely to erode motivation and perpetuate the cycle of path dependency—a pattern where actors continue pre-existing routines to “avoid real change”.

According to Winter’s model, successful implementation depends on balanced interaction across all dimensions—effective design, coordinated organizational behaviour, enabling management practices, capable street-level agents, and motivated target groups. In the Georgian case, the dominance of control and the weakness of capacity and motivation mechanisms produce an elevated risk of symbolic adoption. Unless complemented by supportive instruments—such as targeted funding, mentoring systems, and national coordination structures—the reform may achieve formal compliance without the intended improvement in doctoral supervision quality.

Conclusions, Recommendations, and Limitations

The Doctoral Education Framework Document has established a necessary regulatory foundation for quality assurance and alignment with international standards. However, the reform’s current configuration—dominated by compliance requirements and lacking corresponding enabling measures—risks suffering from a gap between formal alignment and substantive change.

In Winter’s terms, the reform demonstrates strong control but weak motivation and capacity components. As a result, implementation tends towards symbolic compliance rather than transformative change. Without a shift towards a more balanced policy mix—combining regulatory oversight with supportive instruments and incentives—the reform risks reproducing procedural conformity without achieving its intended outcomes: improved doctoral quality, stronger research ecosystems, and enhanced supervisory culture.

To mitigate these risks, we recommend the following:

- Engage institutions more substantively in shaping doctoral programmes and articulate a clearer national strategy that defines the economic, cultural, and societal purposes of doctoral education
- Move beyond a primarily regulatory approach by introducing supportive and incentive-based mechanisms, including dedicated PhD funding schemes, increased national grants for students, and institutional capacity-building programmes.
- Establish National Support Mechanisms for Doctoral Education.

- Create a joint platform and resources to share good practices, provide training modules, support research supervision and mentor supervisors, and foster collaboration between universities.
- Provide coherent and purposeful feedback on the implementation of the framework with clear benchmarking of its implementation.

In summary, enhance institutional capacity of implementors by linking reforms to funding models and resource allocation.

This study was conducted at an early stage of the implementation of Georgia's Doctoral Education Framework, shortly after the formal introduction of the reform. Therefore, the analysis captures the initial interpretations, expectations, and perceived responses of key institutional actors rather than observable long-term effects. As universities are still in the process of aligning internal procedures with the new regulatory framework, it was not yet possible to assess concrete outcomes such as improvements in supervision quality, doctoral completion rates, or research productivity.

In addition, the analysis focussed exclusively on academic supervisors as the primary target group of the reform. Doctoral students were not included, as contemporaneous survey evidence indicated limited awareness of the new framework among students, likely due to the short period since its introduction. While this narrowed focus limits insight into student perspectives, it strengthens the validity of findings related to early implementation dynamics among those directly responsible for enacting the reform.

Taken together, these limitations position the study as an early, formative assessment. While it cannot evaluate policy outcomes, it provides a timely evidence base to inform future adjustments and highlights the need for follow-up research.

In sum, while this study cannot yet evaluate the reform's tangible outcomes, it provides a timely and empirically grounded snapshot of the early dynamics of implementation. This positioning offers a valuable opportunity to influence the reform's trajectory by informing future policy adjustments that are better aligned with the capacities, motivations, and constraints of those responsible for delivering change.

Appendix 1

Institutional groups of supervisors focus group briefs

- How are students allocated supervisors?
- How are you or other supervisors rewarded for the extra duties, and how does supervisory work fit into their research and teaching work programmes?
- Have you or other supervisors had supervisor training, and what should this contain?
- Are you or other supervisors able to support student in all research methodologies, and what happens if they cannot?
- How could supervision be more effectively organized

- Do you or other supervisors see diffidence in policy and practice and how could these be better aligned

The semi-structured interview questions of institutional leaders and heads of doctoral programmes

1. The perceived importance of the internal policies, procedures, and resource give to students and to supervisory staff.
2. The perceived importance of the national policy and internationalization:

For semi-structured interviews with national bodies, including quality agencies,

- How do you monitor the student experience of doctoral students? Or is that an institutional issue
- What are the resource requirements you expect from universities offering doctoral provision, and how do you monitor them?
- Since the change in supervisory qualification what deference have you found in institutional practices
- Is there an expectation to have a world-class system for doctoral education, what is the strategy to obtain this?
- Should any assistance to doctoral students be provided in terms of fees and living expenses, and should it be linked to interest importance, e.g. infrastructure, innovation, early years education?
- Should institutions be stopped from offering supervision if you don't have current national or world-class academics to offer supervision?

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