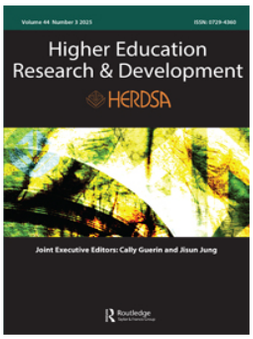

Higher Education Research & Development

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/cher20

A preliminary study on the reality of autonomy in Georgian universities

Paul Gibbs, Irma Grdzelidze & Tamar Sanikidze

To cite this article: Paul Gibbs, Irma Grdzelidze & Tamar Sanikidze (16 Feb 2025): A preliminary study on the reality of autonomy in Georgian universities, Higher Education Research & Development, DOI: 10.1080/07294360.2025.2456846

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2025.2456846

HIGHER EDUCATION RESEARCH & DEVELOPMENT
https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2025.2456846

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

A preliminary study on the reality of autonomy in Georgian universities

Paul Gibbs[a], Irma Grdzelidze[b] and Tamar Sanikidze[c]

[a]Faculty of Education, Middlesex and East European Universities, London, UK; [b]Faculty of Education, Tbilisi State University, Tbilisi, Georgia; [c]Georgia Innovation, Inclusion and Quality Project, Ministry of Education and Science, Tbilisi, Georgia

ABSTRACT

The paper considers the issue of academic and institutional autonomy having become central to the identity of the university and how it remains a contemporary signifier of the relationship of scholarly activity, the university and society. This is particularly true in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), where the management of national higher education systems with different traditions seeks to find comparative consistency in the levels and quality of their awards. Specifically, this paper considers the Republic of Georgia's reality, firstly, against other post-Soviet signatory nations of the Bologna Process within the EHEA using secondary data from European Universities Association's (EUA) Autonomy Scorecard[1] (2023) and, secondly, through a qualitative analysis of key participants in the Georgian higher education sector. This reveals the simulacra of autonomy and the dependency of universities on the State's centralised control mechanisms created through the legislation and implemented agent: the national quality assurance agency.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 5 March 2024
Accepted 17 December 2024

KEYWORDS
Republic of Georgia; autonomy; universities; academic freedom

Introduction

The emergence and totalising effect of the neo-liberal university as an economic resource, both in creating personal and societal wealth, dominates the purpose of universities.We will not rehearse the causes and consequence here as it is sufficient to state that these pressures put a strain on the nature of the model of university ethos derived from the Humboldtian model. This has led to teaching and research outcomes which reflect the shifts in the balance of the university's purpose towards the goal of employment, weakening a freer intellectual exploration of knowledge, and potentially the loss of their autonomy amid short-termism and multiple consumer stakeholder accountability. Dependent on these changes, moral authority is potentially compromised by audit cultures which conceive education as an accountable investment which may pervade and

CONTACT Paul Gibbs P.gibbs@mdx.ac.uk Middlesex and East European Universities

[1]We recognise this is not the only instrument that has been developed and list at least four others, Academic Freedom Index, Freedom in the World Report, *De Jure* Scorecard of Academic Freedom and the Academic Freedom Monitor.

subsequently degrade notions of academic and scholarly integrity. This has led to the assimilation of market values in universities' own academic practices, including a notion of autonomy where governments' (and supra national powers such as those created by the owners of global world rankings of universities) enframing of the habitus of intellectual endeavour leads them to be part of a process of economic development rather than seeing education as an end in itself, where 'truth (the essential and first condition of learning in general) is the main thing' and the utility of practice-based teaching promised to the government 'is of secondary importance' (Kant, 2005, p. 225).

This is played out on many levels of reality including personal greed, national enmeshment, global research, global mobility and false cosmopolitan ideals which reduce the university to a simulacrum for autonomy, academic and organisational, which are not freedoms but constraints of political and economic forces of governmentality. Indeed, Oleksiyenko (2020, p. 2) calls this phenomenon in post-Soviet higher education 'surrogate academic freedom', suggesting 'that it undermines the emergence of practices of critical inquiry and reinstates a repressive totalitarian mindset. Those professorial voices who ostensibly defend critical inquiry thus remain ambivalent, as academic integrity is compromised by poor judgements when it comes to resolving ethical dilemmas as well as long-established traditions of self-censorship' (2020, p. 20). These forces garner external and poorly understood populist justifications which destabilise and cast doubts upon the university as an entity able to act autonomously in a national context for the common good.

We maintain that truth and trust are the principles of academic autonomy but these are also being eroded by the external imposition of quality control, notions of free speech, commercialisation of discoveries and donor requirements, which may cause the organisation of the institution and the academic idea of a university to collide (e.g., Barnett, 2011; Hammershøj, 2019). The threat is manifest in the downgrading of a notion of truth based on openness and rigour, through the potency of post-truth reconstructions of reality in public discourse. Under these conditions, the 'foundational premises of logic, rationality, deliberation, debate, reason, contemplation, reflection and academic freedom are of even greater necessity as the university seeks to ensure open and unconstrained expressions of truth' (Davids, 2021, p. 1191). This is occurring while the emergence of a post-truth era, which, according to Oleksiyenko and Jackson (2021), ought to put pressure on the universities' responsibility to speak out in support of dignity, freedom and independence.

We recognise that these arguments seem repetitive of those found in the literature but our lack of originality is no reason to accept the self-serving and self-deceptive, politically motivated directives imposed upon educational institutions, ostensibly to enable greater transparency and accountability but whose function is more to do with controls. A compelling argument for this is offered by O'Neill: '[T]eachers and learners, like others, need to be held to account, but this requires intelligent systems of accountability that do not distort primary activities' (2013, p. 4). Moreover, this is a direct attack on the premise that higher education institutions are academics who are trustworthy and warrant autonomy to speak the truth. The consequential threat is to downgrade a scholarly ethos of truth as a justification for autonomy, and replace it with the utility of the market and post-truth notion of ungrounded *doxa*. The impact of these changes

amounting to the retreat of academic autonomy is identified by Lott at a global level and he concludes that '[A]cademic freedom is under threat across the globe and a wave of substantial academic freedom decline affects not only autocracies but also (liberal) democracies' (2023). Further, Kinzelbach et al. (2023) estimate that academic freedom is in retreat for over 50% of the world's population.

Given this international background, we turn to Georgia as our focus for the small case study presented here. It investigates how rectors, deans, academics and students perceive how government intervenes, collaborates or facilitates organisational and scholarly autonomy.

Contextual justification for the study

Georgia is a small state located within the Caucasus which has been subject to Soviet occupation and continues to have Russian troops occupying its country. This Soviet history has left a legacy of centralised power. The tension is evident in the higher education sector in the way in which it is controlled and managed. The Georgian higher education system is still emerging from its hierarchical Soviet structure. Since Independence in 1991, it has moved, not without problems, from central control over the universities and programmes offered in the Republic (Campbell & Gorgodze, 2016) to models of higher education quality more like European and American systems (Saakashvili, 2006). The alignment of Georgia's education systems to the European education pattern began in 1999, when the Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications for Higher Education in the European Region (the Lisbon Convention), which had been signed in 1997, was ratified. In 2004, Georgia adopted a law on higher education officially establishing its three-stage teaching system and, in 2005, it joined the Bologna Process at the conference in Bergen. The sector consists of State and private providers with profit providers accounting for just over 70% of higher education institutions and 40% of student enrolments (Galt & Taggart, 2023).

The principles of autonomy of the higher educational institution are as stipulated in the Constitution and the Law of Georgia on Higher Education. The Georgian Constitution[2] guarantees academic freedom and autonomy. This is found in Article 27 – Right to education and academic freedom [extract] 3. 'Academic freedom and the autonomy of higher educational institutions shall be guaranteed'. It is further developed in The Law on Higher Education in Georgia where it clearly states the following (Chapter I, – General Provisions, Article 2. Definition of Terms): '(b) Autonomy – freedom of a higher education institution and its basic unit to plan and implement independently their academic, financial-economic and administrative activities'. However, the existing *de jure* protections may fail to protect all core aspects of academic freedom, For instance, Smolentsev and Platonova (2023) suggest that Georgia (alongside three other countries; Kazakhstan, Lithuania, Estonia) highlight how the State's infrastructure of control, implemented through the accreditation and quality process, actually signals and facilitates rectors to lead their institutions to maximise their own institution's autonomy – a task we believe is required of an emerging post-Soviet state but not self-evident in emerging economies. The support of this premise is provided in the most recent University Autonomy in Europe IV, The Scorecard 2023 (2023), produced by the European Universities Association. The EUA is the leading authority in comparative studies of autonomy

in European higher education systems and their work is reported in their autonomy and governance website[3], stating that 'To be successful in their research and teaching missions, universities need to be able to take their own decisions'. To this end, they have developed an instrument to measure autonomy based on four dimensions – organisational, financial, staffing and academic – to show country profiles and provide comparative data. The four criteria used to investigate national higher education systems within the EHEA are provided in Box 1.

Box 1. EUA definition of measurements of institutional higher education autonomy.

- organisational autonomy (covering academic and administrative structures, leadership and governance);
- financial autonomy (covering the ability to raise funds, own buildings, borrow money and set tuition fees);
- staffing autonomy (including the ability to recruit independently, promote and develop academic and non-academic staff);
- academic autonomy (including study fields, student numbers, student selection as well as the structure and content of degrees).

It should be noted that this is the first entry for Georgia, so no tracking of change over time can be offered and more sufficient statistical analysis is also prohibited. Table 1 shows Georgia's outcomes, which are referenced amongst post-Soviet states in the EUA survey to give context.

Comparing the above four countries, Georgian universities have less flexibility in student numbers than Estonia, it cannot select its students as can the other three countries, it has a similar limitation on the introduction of new programmes, experiences restrictions on the choice of language of instruction and finally, unlike the other countries, it is limited to the national agency for program accreditation and so cannot select an authorising quality assurance agency.

As can be seen, Georgia's higher education system performs well enough in the first three criteria but it is the fourth, Academic Autonomy, where its performance is generally below that of others in the group. It is this aspect of autonomy in particular that we explore in more detail in our qualitative study where we concentrate on how Georgian stakeholders see the impact on indicators in the EUA study on the functional autonomy of State universities.

Research approach

Following the position of the project in the light of the EUA's study, the next stage was to seek views from stakeholders of the higher education system. This was a preliminary

Table 1. Comparative Scores on the EUA autonomy score cards for post-Soviet state and ranking (overall ranking are in brackets)[a].

Country[b]	Staff %	Financial %	Organisational %	Academic %
Post-Soviet countries				
Estonia	100 (1)	77 (4)	73 (13)	95 (1)
Latvia	89 (11)	90 (1)	66 (16)	55 (22)
Lithuania	83 (15)	61 (19)	88 (5)	53 (24)
Georgia[c]	**95 (4)**	**71 (9)**	**66 (16)**	**48 (27)**

[a]There were 35 nations in the EUA Score card.
[b]See 'University autonomy in Europe IV' (2003).
[c]Georgia is the only non-EU country in the survey and indicates its commitment to the European higher education community and its values.

study and the research design was restricted to State universities, rectors, deans, professors and students. The use of the smaller case study approach helped highlight the systemic issues and challenges relevant to the Georgian higher education sector. The aim was to review how the stakeholders felt about the State's engagement with the university, and whether it helped or hindered the development of academic autonomy. In this sense, it took the theoretical notion of academic autonomy as operationalised by the EUA and explored how small groups of experts considered whether the concept had relevance to their world experience. We employed a realist evaluation (Manzano, 2022) to the setting up of the focus groups and analysis of the data.

The small-scale case study used a qualitive research methodology. The recruitment of the selected universities was limited to those who are EUA members and the largest State universities in Georgia.[4] A cascading participant selection was used to select by the rectors (based on the criteria below) to nominate from their own universities: 1 dean, 1 professor or senior academic and 1 student to take part in focus groups.

Four in-depth personal interviews were conducted with the rectors of these universities as the researchers considered that they would be most aware of both the individual academic autonomy issues and those that affected the university as an institution. The selection criteria for the focus groups were based on university academic and administrative rank and final-year undergraduate status. There were no other criteria given to the rectors. This was judged to be adequate for the preliminary study presented here. Each group consisted of four participants from each of the selected universities and a member of each focus group was allocated a code to identify them in the analysis of the process. All participants were notified of their right to withdraw and of the confidentiality of their individual contributions. Contributions were recorded on video and transcribed. Three focus groups were provided, as stimulus material, a summary of the EUA autonomy report, and, based upon the research objectives, a discussion guide was developed for the focus group discussion session. The questions were derived from the subsection for academic freedom used in the EUA Autonomy Score Card. A summary of the findings is provided in the appendix as Table A1. The participants were encouraged to discuss their views and current perceptions regarding their own institutional and individual academic freedoms. The average duration of the interviews was 30 min and the focus groups 45 min. All participants were informed of the voluntary nature of participation, their right to reject the invitation and to leave the interview or focus group at any time and were assured of their anonymity.

In Table A1 (in the appendix but discussed in the general introduction to the results) the data presented is based on a thematic analysis of the responses of all participants to each subsection question. The thematic issues at the core are elaborated in the discussion section. This analysis created a structure for the discussion section based upon stakeholder membership and for the overall theme identified. Each groups' participant was identified in the text by a separate set of Roman numerals (rectors, academics, students) or capital alpha (deans). This enabled the anonymity of all participants to be maintained.

Results

Cross participant group comments

The themes that emerged from Table 2 showed little concern for the impact that the state and its agencies had on the system. All four groups were satisfied with the idea of State control because of: inadequate administrative abilities, fairness and the potential that if the numbers were given to universities then supply of graduates would outpace privileged jobs. It followed then that the ability to select students was not seen as critical to the role of the university. Again, State control was welcomed because it reduces accountability, does not call on academic resources and prevents corruption. The contracts imposed on registration and approval of new programmes and their content were seen to be a distraction rather than a reason to change. In summary, participants expressed little concern for autonomy other than that it might increase their workloads or reduce their economic value.

Rectors

> Overall, the increase of autonomy is a positive switch but the current funding system represents a serious obstacle for different reasons.[i] This opening quote seems to encapsulate the feeling of the rectors interviewed. They were aware of the restrictions on the autonomy of the university but saw very little concern for them in their functioning as universities. Perhaps the most significant concerns were related to student recruitment. Here, there was apprehension that institutions should have more say in the motivation and subject knowledge of students allocated to their institutions. As one stated 'participation of the universities in the student selection is of absolute must!' [ii]. However, a number of the rectors mention the need for academic integrity in such selection: 'the risk of the corruption during the student selection and admission is still high'. [iii]

The selection of alternative quality agents for anything other than modules was not seen as feasible: 'The market is not sufficiently developed to enable the existence of different options' [iv] and the need to gain approval for different languages of instruction again was not seen as a concern. One rector was clear that changes in the system would help remove the bureaucratic elements and enable the neo-liberal market mentality to flourish. 'The market and the competitiveness shall be determinant here rather than the Ministry. For the university – it is concerned with more flexibility in decision making, time efficiency and in turn competitiveness of course' [iv].

Deans

The deans considered the autonomy issues for the institution juxtapositioned to the overriding structural control by the Government and its agencies through various forms of invasive governmentality: quality assurance, overly time-consuming bureaucratic processes to gain approval from authorities to act, and in the perceived inability for institutions to act strategically and independently, which seemed, for the most part, accepted rather than worthy of questioning. For example, the quota system where student numbers are requested by the university can, in what often seems an arbitrary rationale from the national authority, be rejected. As one respondent stated, in order to document such a request and 'receive the number of students we need, we must

submit a lot of information and complete a lengthy questionnaire. We must also demonstrate that we have the necessary resources to provide quality education. We have not had any problems in this regard' [A].

The[5] maximum fees are set by the Ministry of Education and Science for all degree levels although public universities may charge tuition fees to students not benefitting from State support, but they cannot exceed the set ceiling unless they obtain government approval in each individual case. These significantly impact on the strategy of an institution as they are homogeneous for all disciplines, prohibiting innovation and creativity: 'financial independence and stability would give universities more freedom to decide more boldly and correctly on the number of students. This applies not only to the total quota, but also to the distribution within the quota' [B]. This also restricts the full range of courses being delivered, where expensive science programmes are poorly funded and less expensive humanities and social science are over-subscribed.

The issue of selecting students is hardly critiqued by the deans. The allocation of students through the National exams system is generally accepted or even applauded for undergraduate students based on impartiality and lack of resource or inclination to undertake individual selections. More strategically, [B] suggested that 'our universities are not ready to make a correct evaluation of the education provided in the school to determine readiness' for university education. It was also seen as a filter on numbers, in that society is not 'so mature that it is not necessary for everyone to have a higher education. If we remove the exam system as it is, I am almost certain that the number of applicants will double' [D], which for 'D' was a bad thing affecting quality and the market for graduates. There were dissenting voices who suggested 'that universities should intervene in the process of admitting bachelor's students' [C]. Things are different at Master's level where a hybrid entrance process is enacted. Entrance for these students is dependent on both national and institutional testing and this approach was supported as a collaboration which was worthwhile given the requirement of less resources needing to be dedicated from the universities for the selection process owing to the smaller numbers involved. Overall the deans' acceptance that the universities have limited interest in the selection process of students seems unlikely to encourage autonomy and development. It seems an abdication of institutional autonomy and their purpose as generators of knowledge rather than processing knowledge.

Regarding quality assurance, there was consensus that 'it is necessary for there to be an external quality mechanism that asks questions and to which the institution has to answer' [C]. There was little appetite for wider accreditation options based on the size of the sector and the ability of institutions to benefit from greater external accreditation even though the 'process of accrediting each programme is very problematic, time-consuming, and resource-intensive. It is also not always very objective'[6] [B]. However, perhaps more revealing was the comment from [E] that 'we are still a country with a post-Soviet system, and these elements of centralisation are more prevalent here'.

The deans' responses were well informed of the academic engagements with Central authorities compared to the third stakeholder group, academic staff, who were more concerned in their discussion with the practice of the centralised processes.

Academic staff

This group also recognised the control mechanism of fees and their level and availability determining universities' strategic control over the process of autonomous action reduces autonomous agency. As one suggested, the quota system is 'ultimately an economic rather than a bureaucratic constraint' [i], with participant [ii] agreeing 'that there should be some regulation on the number of students that universities can accept', [i] and went further and expressed a belief that the state 'should intervene to ensure that universities have the resources they need to provide quality education to all students'. There was something which alerted us to a notion of autonomy which was surprising and the following quote is more extensively from participant [iii] talking about requesting an increase in the number of students.

> We filled out a large document with standards and supporting documents, etc. I see autonomy in this, as it shows that the university is ready and willing to have more students and is doing everything it can to achieve this, such as providing the necessary resources. However, whether what we wrote in the document is true is a separate matter.

This quote reveals the notion of autonomy that the academics are operating under: the right to do what is required, in the way required, and the pointlessness of the exercise as its veracity is not checked, which is hardly freedom to act from the constraints of the State.

The same acceptance is evident in the selection of students. Indeed, as the exams are held independently of university, participant [iii] suggests that it is 'a great comfort for the university, if we take into account the Georgian reality that everyone knows everyone, etc., that is, the university is free from unnecessary attacks'. Participant [ii] summarised the situation with their statement: 'I do not see a problem with university autonomy in this area as long as the state is ultimately responsible for organising the exams'. More bluntly, participant [iv] offered this justification to support national exams: 'Our problem was corruption, and when these national exams were created, this was the background'. From a different perspective, participant [i] states that although the selection and allocation of students is based on national exams, they see the 'structure of these national exams as a serious problem'. Tension between accepting and process whilst questioning its efficacy seems difficult to square with any notion of autonomous action.

Turning to quality assurance and external agencies and the process of programme approval, the group was broadly in agreement with the deans, although participant [i] expressed a view that the process is an overly bureaucratic process that is fundamentally flawed and requires a lot of resources and energy'. The discussion revealed a reality which reflects Oleksiyenko's (2023) analysis of post-Soviet countries' ability when, in concluding his research on Georgian professors' attitudes to de-Sovietisation, noted that '[M]aking academics more empowered to engage in creativity and innovation requires a significant effort to down-play bureaucracy and enhance academic freedom and institutional autonomy' (2023, p. 18).

Students

This group was overwhelmingly concerned with the employment potential of higher education for themselves and the management of the supply and demand for those jobs, and

called for central planning of the process. Participant [iv], for instance, summarised the group position on quotas by offering a view that 'the State policy should be implemented and considered, but the university's autonomous policy should also be considered. The balance must be struck, and this should be done individually for each programme and direction'. Participant [iii], however, suggested that response to labour market demand is a university responsibility, agreeing that 'the university should make the decision, not the ministry. The ministry cannot take into account the wishes of the university. The university should have autonomy in this regard'.

Views of the national exam system itself were divided, with support for them ranging from 'that the system of unified national exams has been so well-organised for years that direct involvement of universities is not necessary in this case' (participant [i]), to participant [iii] supporting the first position but based upon 'past instances of corruption stemming from university participation. Therefore, I am of the opinion that universities should not be involved in this matter' and participant [iv] stating that 'the risks of corruption and other problems are increasing when universities have more autonomy in the student selection process'. Another ([ii]) stated that 'National exams are not enough'.

Discussion and conclusion[7]

The rector interviews were interesting in that they set the tone and the ethos of autonomy in the institution. The subsequent focus groups tended to show this. The ethos is one of acceptance rather than insistence of the recognition and use of the *de jure* autonomy that the institutions have in the constitution. Much seems to be tentative based not on a duty on the institution to pursue academic freedom but on the practicality of achieving success in their *de facto* roles in the economy. The only real call for change was for fuller embracing of the post-Soviet neo-liberal market allowing competition to control the market and not the State. The issue for financial constraints began to emerge through these interventions. A stronger theme in the deans' stakeholder focus group and one which produced accounts of the relationship with the EQE is that the current situation harvests a settled, and perhaps comfortable, assured environment for the sector. No group mentioned the need to request Ministry approval for Research Centres and changes to them as well as for the development of legal entities. However, it encourages acquiescence to power and creates a framework unlikely to encourage the adoption of autonomy to the full extent of the wording in the Constitution and Law. However, *de jure* protections may be unclear and insufficient in protecting academic freedom in practice. In Georgia, the sector's relationship with government is based on compliance, not critical appraisal concealed through bureaucratic processes, and on levers of financial survival. The acceptance is captured by Kant, who suggests that senior administrators exhibit 'an inability to use one's understanding without guidance from others' (1983, p. 41). It is a structure which is fragile in the face of global competition for students.

For the professor group, the forces of government and the use of bureaucratic systems to retain power is beginning to be challenged but not to any degree of effectiveness. The academic position seems to be, at best, one of acceptance that their role is to teach and not to publicly question the mechanism of control imposed on higher education. Their

passivity reflects an essential problem of actualisation of academic autonomy and the legacy of the post-Soviet centralism, which remain distinct from the academic libertinism of Western Europe although not of other post-Soviet states. Finally, students seem less concerned with the quality of the educational process provided than by its outcome in terms of employability.

The literature on post-Soviet higher education does not suggest that the Georgian experience is distinctive. In a review article of post-Soviet countries' adoption of western higher education policies, Smolentseva, Huisman, and Froumin suggest that 'Bologna transformation of the higher education systems for the post-Soviet states meant another wave of adoption of foreign/Western model of higher education with, for many, unclear purposes and advantages' (2018, p. 18). This is echoed in Shchepetylnykova and Oleksiyenko's (2024) more comprehensive review and analysis of the impact of the Soviet legacy that reveals the systematic difficulties for radical change in post-Soviet higher education which clearly resonates with the situation revealed in Georgia Indeed their comments seem particularly relevant when they state that '[D]ifferentiating between pretensions and genuine manifestations of academic freedom is increasingly difficult amidst the proliferation of post-truth politics' (2024, p. 6) . Our work supports the premise that Shchepetylnykova and Oleksiyenko (2024) offer when concluding that the 'concept of de-Sovietization entails a complex process of deconstruction' (Shchepetylnykova and Oleksiyenko, 2024, p. 6).

We feel that Georgia's development as a higher education regional centre and the internationalisation plans of the government are not based on the reality of trust and freedom deemed a necessity for institutional and individual autonomy. This may be a developmental journey for institutions but it is also one for Government institutions who themselves need to trust institutions which reflect their role in society as both economic and democratic, and indeed whether both state and universities are ready to realise this reality is questioned by this research.

Limitations

This research offers a view of the reality of Bologna-based autonomy in Georgia. The size of the qualitative study is a limiting factor. A more comprehensive study including the inclusion of policy makers and administrators may offer a more nuanced set of findings.

Notes

1. We recognise this is not the only instrument that has been developed and list at least four others, Academic Freedom Index, Freedom in the World Report, *De Jure* Scorecard of Academic Freedom and the Academic Freedom Monitor.
2. It is suggested by Spannagel that just 'over 50% today, still remaining at a remarkably low level compared to many other constitutional rights' (2023).
3. University Autonomy in Europe https://www.university-autonomy.eu/
4. State universities were also chosen as they were in existence in soviet times and the private university were not.
5. Nevertheless, since December 2011 there has been a margin of flexibility, and public universities may set different fees for certain programmes (notably joint programmes), although

the approval of an external authority is mandatory. Private institutions are not subject to the ceiling and may set tuition fees freely (EUA, 2023, p. 28).

6. Programme accreditation is technically voluntary for bachelor's and master's degree programmes.7 However, the law states that only accredited programmes are eligible for the voucher system and thus bring public funding to the university (EUA, 2023, p. 30).
7. The research was conducted on a small number of stakeholders and thus the findings are necessarily tentative although, we believe, insightful.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

References

Barnett, R. (2011). The coming of the ecological university. *Oxford Review of Education*, *37*(4), 439–455. https://doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2011.595550

Campbell, A., & Gorgodze, S. (2016). Internationalization of Georgian higher education: National and international influences. *Hungarian Educational Research Journal*, *6*(1), 21–36. https://doi.org/10.14413/HERJ.2016.01.02

Davids, N. (2021, April 25). Academic freedom and the fallacy of a post truth era. *Education Philosophy and Theory*, 1183–1193.

EUA. (2023). University Autonomy in Europe IV. The Scorecard 2023 EUA autonomy scorecard.pdf, Retrieved January 1, 2024.

Galt & Taggart. (2023, July). *General and higher education in Georgia*. https://galtanstaggart.com

Hammershøj, L. G. (2019). The perfect storm scenario for the university: Diagnosing converging tendencies in higher education. *Futures*, *111*, 159–167. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2018.06.001

Kant, I. (1983). An answer to the question: What is enlightenment. In T. Himmphrey (Ed.), *Perpetual peace and other essays* (pp. 41–48). Hackett Publishing.

Kant, I. (2005). The conflict of the faculties (trans. M. J Gregor and R. Anchor). In A. W. Wood & G. di Giovanni (Eds.), *Religion and rational theology* (pp. 233–327). Cambridge University Press.

Kinzelbach, K., Lindberg, S., & Lott, L. (2023). *Academic freedom index, Institute of political science*. Friedrich-Alander Universtat.

Lott, L. (2023). Academic freedom growth and decline episodes. *Higher Education*, *88*, 999–1017. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-023-01156-z

Manzano, A. (2022). Conducting focus groups in realist evaluation. *Evaluation*, *28*(4), 406–425. https://doi.org/10.1177/13563890221124637

Oleksiyenko, A. V. (2020). Is academic freedom feasible in the post-Soviet space of higher education? *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, *53*(11), 1116–22. https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2020.1773799

Oleksiyenko, A. V. (2023). De-Sovietisation of Georgian higher education: Deconstructing unfreedom. *Quality in Higher Education*, *29*(1), 6–22. https://doi.org/10.1080/13538322.2022.2100599

Oleksiyenko, A. V., & Jackson, L. (2021). Freedom of speech, freedom to teach, freedom to learn: The crisis of higher education in the post-truth era. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, *53*(11), 1057–1062. https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2020.1773800

O'Neill, O. (2013). Intelligent accountability in education. *Oxford Review of Education*, *39*(1), 4–16. https://doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2013.764761

Republic of Georgia. Law of Georgia on Higher Education (unesco.org). Retrieved January 1, 2024.

Saakashvili, M. (2006). 'The way forward': Georgia's democratic vision for the future. *Harvard International Review*, *28*(1), 68–73.

Shchepetylnykova, L., & Oleksiyenko, A. V. (2024). What comes after post-Soviet? Towards a new concept of de-Sovietization in higher education and research. *International Journal of Educational Development*, *106*. https://doi.org/10.1016/hedudev.204.103014

Smolentseva, A., Huisman, J., & Froumin, I. (2018). Transformation of higher education institutional landscape in post-Soviet countries: From Soviet model to where?. In J. Huisman, A. Smolentseva, & I. Froumin (Eds.), *25 years of transformations of higher education systems in post-Soviet countries* (pp. 1–44). Palgrave Studies in Global Higher Education.

Smolentsev, A., & Platonova, D. (2023) The transformations of higher education in 15 post-Soviet countries: The state, the market and institutional diversification. *Higher Education Policy*, 36(2):370–393. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41307-021-00259-5

Spannagel, J. (2023). Introducing academic freedom in constitutions: A new global dataset, 1789–2022. *European Political Science*, *23*, 421–432. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41304-023-00446-5

Appendix

Table A1. Summary of responses to the stimulus questions

EUA Subdivisions of Academic Autonomy	Rectors	Deans	Professors/Academic staff	Students
Capacity to decide on overall student numbers	Concern over administrations ability to judge capacity external evaluation be more objective and adequate, general agreement with quota	These are negotiated and based on the decision of resources not national need. The homogeneity of fees regardless of subject distorts the provision provided away from national need.	An economic rather than a bureaucratic constraint. Should be regulations on numbers of students university can accept. Autonomy is remining within the requirement of the State There must be a verification process.	Autonomy should be given but related to State and society needs. Numbers should be reduced to enhance educational and employment opportunities. State's policy not directed by university's ability but by the State's need. Stronger connection to jobs and market opportunities.
Ability to select students	Universities should be involved in the student selection Care should be taken when defining university's role in the process Lack of involvement can lead to high student mobility	There is no facility resource to have institutional judgement on students. (This was not seen as an issue and even welcomed.) Suggestions that the system is too flexible in favour of the student. More flexibility with post-grads where institutional exams are used as well as State screening.	Nothing wrong with the system as it stands. The fact that they are independent of the university is good, especially considering the Georgian culture. No problem for autonomy if State organised and are responsible for the exams.	No direct involvement of universities is necessary. University selection would not improve anything, (reference to corruption). Risk of corruption increases when universities have more autonomy.
	Study field classifier is an obstacle	Restricted to evaluation by central	System which is bureaucratic and	Should be based on standards and

(*Continued*)

Table A1. Continued.

EUA Subdivisions of Academic Autonomy	Rectors	Deans	Professors/Academic staff	Students
Ability to introduce programmes	No major constraints on the university	quality assurance. There is no institutional authority to do so. It is time consuming and not always objective. The overriding criteria for the curriculum is often financial	flawed. Best way is peer review with limited restrictions. A need to ensure academic integrity in the programme developed and provided by State intervention.	mechanisms of the state.
Ability to choose the language of instruction	No need to change Offers technical oversight	This is not within the university's gift:	Freedom of choice of languages with the university.	Universities should have total independence to decide although some regulations function for the State.
Capacity to select QA mechanisms and providers	Difficult given Georgia's size	There is no option but this is not seen as a problem Such a process is recognised as potentially useful.	Difficult to see the bureaucratic NCEQE's purpose.	Not feasible for a country like Georgia. Current system sufficient more autonomy is not needed
Ability to design content of degree programmes	No restrictions Need for increasing the university's autonomy	Programmes are designed within a fixed framework which is presented to the university.		.