Ensuring Equality and Inclusiveness in Georgian Higher Education Institutions

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Abstract: Our study highlights important evidence on how universities in Georgia can and do promote equal opportunity and inclusion. Recent research shows that groups living in Georgia such as rural residents, women, vulnerable groups, ethnic minorities, internally displaced persons, migrants and people with special educational needs and disabilities face the problem of quality education and development opportunities.

The study shows that the reason for this lies in insufficient coordination between authorities and universities. In addition, higher education institutions do not have clearly defined strategies and approaches to create an equitable and inclusive environment. Derived from a survey and in-depth discussions with university staff, scholars and students about their practices and challenges, it offers a unique picture of how universities in Georgia are tackling the problem with an unprecedented breath and scope.

This work will further help universities develop their more effective strategies and policies. We are sure that it can also inform policy makers and other stakeholders in this field and serve as a basis for a fruitful dialogue to support the development of Georgian society in the years to come.

Key words: Higher education, SDG's, Inclusion, Equality, Quality education

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1. Introduction

Human capital is the most important resource for the country's economic and social development. Therefore, the country's sustainable development depends on the provision of quality education. In order to educate citizens with democratic values, the state must ensure a basic human right — access to quality education for all children and young people, regardless of their physical or mental ability, ethnic, gender, religious or racial affiliation.

However, nowadays there are really many problematic issues related to the provision of equal and inclusive education in Georgia, both in general and higher education. The provision of inclusive and equal educational opportunities aims to improve access to quality higher education for all, which is guaranteed by the Human Rights Convention.

These initiatives focus on providing educational opportunities for vulnerable groups (e.g., ethnic minorities, disabled people, people with special educational needs, people from low socio-economic background, ethnic

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minority representatives, migrants, internally displaced persons from occupied territories, etc.). Access to education under equal and fair conditions is not only the guarantee of basic human rights, but also the basis for improving the country's social and economic conditions. Equity and inclusion initiatives aim to address and eliminate longstanding practices of exclusion and privilege (based primarily on race, ethnicity, sex, gender and socioeconomic class).

2. Literature Review

There is a number of literatures on this topic, the analysis of which allowed us to form a specific direction and vision for the research question. When we talk about inclusive and equitable higher education, we are talking about social issues in education and about people as social beings, because the social environment and relationships have the greatest impact on a person's development, at all stages of life, including the stage of higher education.

Everyone in the world agrees that education is one of the most important sectors of sustainable development of countries. Achieving inclusion and equality is the greatest challenge for quality education. Therefore, the above issue is gaining the status of an actual social problem day by day.

Ensuring inclusive and equitable higher education, which is the government's priority, is one of the visible and significant examples, the Unified National Strategy on Education and Science of Georgia 2022-2030. The strategy document contains a long-term strategic plan for the development of the education and science system, the document was developed under the responsibility of the Government of Georgia and under the direction of the Ministry of Education and Science. This strategy will develop the results achieved within the framework of the reforms already implemented and will also aim to support the comprehensive and sustainable development of the system, ensure universal inclusive and equitable education and lifelong learning opportunities for all.

Part of the strategy's long-term vision is the comprehensive development of children and young people, improving their emotional and social conditions, and it is also important to strengthen support for various vulnerable groups. The strategy emphasizes that the government will invest in the education system to ensure inclusion and equity.

Ensuring inclusive and equitable education is a priority of Sustainable Development Goal 4, which declares that quality education cannot be achieved without universal inclusivity and equality in education, including in higher education, which in turn is represented by universities, which is why given one of the reasons for the relevance of the research topic is the national document of sustainable development. The National Sustainable Development Goals document sets out at the national level the priorities of the United Nations global Sustainable Development Goals, which aim to promote the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals and inform the implementation of evidence-based national strategies by 2030.

The Government of Georgia has prepared a national Sustainable Development Goals document, which in turn is based on UN General Assembly resolutions A/RES/70/1 of 2015 and A/RES/71/313 of 2017. The document is quite large and complex. Working closely with governmental, private, academic, non-governmental and international organizations and GeoStat, each task has been timed and 200 indicators and targets for 2030 have been established.

The National Document on Sustainable Development equally refers to the three dimensions of sustainable development, namely economic, social and environmental, and presents the national definition of the goals and

indicators according to which Georgia will ensure national and sectoral policy planning until 2030. In social terms, caring for the marginalized and vulnerable group of young people so that they have equal access to quality education is remarkable, which is reflected by the fourth Sustainable Development Goal mentioned above.

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in European Higher Institutions — This is a research document reflecting the current situation and recommendations regarding diversity, inclusion and equality in European higher education institutions in 159 European higher education institutions from 36 European countries. The research was conducted in 2018-2019. With the support of the European University Continuing Education Network (eucen) and the European Student Union (ESU), the European University Association EUA conducted this study to build a knowledge base on institutional approaches, success factors and challenges, and support needs. from universities. The results will be used to improve the exchange of experiences through activities such as the Institutional Leadership and Management Face-to-Face Workshop held in June 2019 at University College Dublin (UCD), Ireland, and in particular to feed into policy discussions of the Bologna Process, where the European University Association represents the higher education sector.

The literature and theories given gave us the opportunity to look at the issues from a different perspective, which will help ensure inclusion and equality in higher education. The theoretical and empirical analysis of this topic gives us a clear idea of the importance of creating an equal and inclusive environment in higher education and what is happening in Georgia in this direction. This lays the foundation for more detailed research in the future in relation to the mentioned topic.

3. Research Methods

An empirical study was conducted based on the triangulation approach. The first step was a document analysis, and the second step was quantitative research based on an online survey. The next step was qualitative research based on in-depth interviews with representatives from specialist circles.

A structured questionnaire consisting of 25 questions was developed for the quantitative study, posted online from December 2021 to March 2022. 627 people took part in the survey, university administrators and executives, professors, students and others.

Qualitative research - conducted through in-depth interviews, based on open-ended questions, no preliminary answers were offered and respondents were selected outside of the research objectives. As a selection criterion, we used their competence in relation to the questions of the study topic. The main indicator of relevance was the activity of the respondents and their qualifications. This actually gave us the opportunity to learn more about the research problem. In-depth interviews were conducted with 12 respondents in June and July 2022. The respondents had the opportunity to express their opinion on the questions of the research topic.

For the document analysis, we used the study and analysis of educational documents, which allowed us to analyze the textual material. Relevant legal documents of Georgia, international legal documents to which our country accedes and all other documentary materials determining the formation of the Georgian educational system were examined.

During the quantitative research, we used the following steps for analysis:
1) The data was cleaned and the data checked for accuracy;
2) The database has been created;
3) For descriptive statistics, the information that showed us the data obtained was summarized;

4)   The data obtained for analytical statistics were analyzed and conclusions were drawn.

For the qualitative research, we applied the principle of targeted sampling; the respondents were selected based on their competence in relation to the research topic.

For data analysis we conducted:

1)   Coding — key concepts of the study were extracted;

2)   Categorization — the data has been collected;

3)   Local integration — analyzed the data under each code;

4)   Including integration — individual data were analyzed in relation to each other.

As a result of this research, it became possible to examine the issues of access to inclusive and equitable education in higher education institutions.

4. Study Results and Recommendations

The research aimed to determine the current situation in terms of ensuring equality and inclusion in higher education institutions of Georgia, which consideration of which will help those responsible for inclusion and equality issues in state structures, in higher education and in the NGO sector in order improve their work to ensure an inclusive and equitable environment in higher education.

In the paper, we examined how higher education institutions provide equitable learning environments for such types of students as people with disabilities and special educational needs, ethnic minorities, the socially disadvantaged, rural residents, migrants and women. Is there an equivalent environment in which they can develop and receive quality education?

The research identified to what extent ensuring inclusion and equality is a priority for HEIs and to what extent it is integrated into HEIs' strategy document and action plans, whether initial steps have even been taken to start working in this direction, how well the staff is trained as is the coordination with the state. We examined internal and external monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, barriers that prevent the delivery of an inclusive and equitable environment.

The research has shown us that there is a mixed situation with the HEIs, some of them have not even taken the first steps towards inclusion and equality, while with some of them the discussion has started, there were some HEIs that did have listed inclusion and equality issues in the development strategy document and action plans, and in terms of activities, very few of them carry out quality improvement activities.

It turned out that there is no coordinated work between the relevant national and state structures and educational institutions, no mechanism to control the process was implemented.

It showed that the scientific staff understand the importance of the topic and are willing to work in this direction.

A lack of information and low awareness of how to ensure inclusion and equality were identified as the main challenges, which in turn can become a source of stigma and discrimination.

Based on the analysis of the results in this study, we have come to the conclusion that although there are many very valuable initiatives, programs and projects to make a qualitative step on the issue of equality and inclusion, it is a serious challenge to establish starting points and connections between the university and the state.

The aim should be a comprehensive strategy that ultimately strengthens the inclusion of the Georgian higher education systems. However, half of the respondents state that a lack of public awareness of participation and

inclusion issues is a constant challenge, followed by a lack of funding and other resources and difficulties in identifying target groups. For both administrative staff and teaching and research staff is needed to raise awareness and provide specific tools and approaches to diversity. Ultimately, this promotes an inclusive learning, teaching and research environment.

In the context of providing an inclusive environment for people with disabilities and people with special needs, it has become clear that they are being deprived of the opportunity to receive a quality education, as the majority of higher education institutions are still not fully adapted and accessible for inclusive education purposes and educational resources are less accessible to them.

Part of raising awareness will be to move the discourse on diversity from a challenge to a requirement for real qualitative steps.

A number of universities have already made this position clear, recognizing that by ensuring fair treatment they improve the learning environment and research. If the higher education sector as a whole can fully embrace this concept, it will benefit all stakeholders and society.

Actions planned in this way are likely to be more expedient and have a greater impact than further financial pressure on universities if targets are not met. A holistic approach on a systemic level is important instead of looking at the universities in isolation. The exchange of experiences between universities and at the level of policy makers and administration can be a useful tool to stimulate this dialogue. New policies and strategies need to be adapted. to adapt the system to specific contexts and to respond to challenges.

Recommendations based on research:

- In order to improve access to higher education, financial access is an important aspect. To achieve this, funding sources should be diversified according to the different needs of students.

- A monitoring system should be put in place by the state, which will contribute to increased accountability, which in turn will contribute to the development of an inclusive and equitable learning environment in higher education institutions;

- It is desirable that the professors and teachers of the higher educational institution, both higher and secondary, are involved in the preparation of the university strategy document;

- Universities should show more interest and seek external support through various social projects to ensure equal conditions for all;

- Also, an internal monitoring system of the highest educational institution should be created to evaluate this or that connection and/or the impact of the event;

- In the first phase, higher education institutions should take measures to meet the minimum needs of students, e.g., putting inscriptions in braille and large letters on the doors, installing elevators and ramps, changing the lighting, installing railings in sanitary crossings, etc. Lectures, seminars and practical work on self-selected or compulsory subjects must be carried out in more accessible buildings and/or lecture halls. It must be taken into account that the library, sanitary facilities, buffet and the part of the administration responsible for dealing with students must be accessible to students with disabilities.

- It is necessary to control the fulfillment of the calculation priority requirements by the authorization method. Create a universal design, written for several months or years, and make incremental changes.

- Strengthening of targeted support for different disadvantaged groups, updating the funding system so as not to hamper the provision of equal opportunities in higher education at different levels of study.

- The Department of Education and Science should oversee activities aimed at increasing the number of

students whose inclusion in higher education ensures inclusion and equality in higher education institutions. It is also important to control the production of relevant statistics about them in order to have a complete picture of the country in relation to the subject at hand.

- More attention should be paid and specific steps taken to ensure access to fully adapted learning environments and resources for people with special educational needs and disabilities. The possibility of differentiated teaching should also be introduced and individual training programs developed, which should become mandatory for all universities.

- Develop awareness-raising strategies and approaches to eliminate gender stereotypes and change the sensitivity of academic staff and students to gender equality issues. In this phase media tools should play a big role.

- Developing a unified approach to ensure equality and inclusion under the government's initiative and leadership, establishing coordination between the main strategic directions such as: higher education, improvement of qualifications, health care, social welfare, regional development, migration, employment and other.

- A working group is formed with the participation of the government, target groups and their representatives, stakeholders from the universities and in multilateral dialogue, which develops a strategy at state level and supports its implementation. This will ensure that an evidence-based and target group-oriented strategy is developed and ultimately that respect for diversity, which includes ensuring equality and inclusion, becomes the responsibility and obligation of all higher education institutions.

5. Conclusion

A person who has not received education will not be competitive in the existing society, will not be able to enjoy other kinds of rights and will become an inferior citizen, so higher education is the key to realizing political, cultural and social rights.

Inclusive and equitable education does not imply segregation, it is an opportunity for representatives of marginalized or vulnerable groups to be perceived as a full, integral part of society as a whole.

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