Supporting quality of online/blended higher education in Georgia in post-pandemic world

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CEENQA Bimonthly Meeting
March 17, 2021
Covid-19 as a catalyst and litmus test for higher education system development in Georgia

03 June 2020 | Irine Darchia, Tbilisi State University | Lika Gionti, National Tempus/Erasmus+ Office Georgia

In Georgia, higher education institutions traditionally offered classroom learning and teaching before the Covid-19 crisis. The state of emergency changed this as universities quickly switched to online formats. As Irine Darchia and Lika Gionti discuss, the pandemic has resulted in a positive breakthrough in their country’s higher education system.
COVID-19 positive side effects in Georgia

- COVID-19 accelerating developments in HE
- Push on implementation of online provision
- Adoption of online T&L tools
- HEIs demonstrating greater autonomy and flexibility
- Push to innovate
- Unified academic community
COVID-19 and challenges in Higher Ed

- Concerns in relation to quality of online/blended learning
- Need of flexibility in QA and in HE to reflect on the new context
- Credibility and validity of student assessments in online mode
- Risks to academic integrity
- Widening social gap and challenges in access to HE
In August 2020, the NCEQE announced call for international experts to assist in developing “Evaluation criteria and guidelines on online and/or blended teaching and learning" to guide HEIs in maintaining quality of online and/or blended T&L in post-COVID period.
Project set-up and steps undertaken

- The methodological details set in two meetings with NCEQE and EMWI representatives
- Review of documentation directly informing the experts on the current context in Georgia
- Wider scanning of the international environment to allow the project to be informed by the European/global perspective
- European documentation as issued by ENQA and the EUA was used as a framework for comparison with other countries in the EHEA
- Collection of data through three 3 groups representing key Georgian stakeholders: students, teaching staff, senior management, and senior QA staff, members of the Internal Quality Assurance Working Group with reps from HEIs
- Notes were collected from the events; the events provided the platform for analysis of priorities and trends in the Georgian Context.
Global context and how HE responds to it

- Immediate impact of COVID-19 on HE
  - forced increase in online and blended T&L
  - impact on the national and institutional criteria and guidance for quality
- International agreement that the principles on which QA of HE is based remain essentially unchanged
  - attention must rather be focused on their application
  - attention on how evidence to support adherence to the principles is sought and provided.
Key themes identified

- Momentum when there is an opportunity for real change: COVID-19 as a catalyst for looking beyond the response to an emergency and considering the national role for higher education and what the role of a higher education should be in the future.
- Opportunity for strategic and transforming the relationship between HEIs, ministries and agencies.
- A clear idea at national level of strategic direction is essential in order to determine the detail of the kind of support and guidance that is necessary to achieve change.
- In Georgia, online learning and its QA is emerging. Being able to offer an education experience in response to a crisis is far from real, planned flexible online or blended learning.
Overarching recommendations

- A forum for discussion amongst the key stakeholders (MoE, institutions and NCEQE) be created with a view to agreeing on the strategic direction of HE in Georgia for the medium and long term. This forum for discussion should set formal timelines for its discussion and decision-making and have, as its goal, an action plan to carry forward its resolutions.
- The outcomes of the discussions of the forum should lead to institutions being able to focus on the kind of support and development that is needed for the future delivery and internal quality assurance of their programmes.
- NCEQE should be in a position to begin to revise and develop its external QA standards and processes in line with the national strategic direction.
Proposed steps for implementation

- A sudden, insufficiently planned shift to online/blended provision will not be productive.
- Ensuring a trusted digital education ecosystem (at both national and institutional level):
  - well-designed and high-quality content
  - user-friendly tools
  - clear added value and secure platforms that maintain privacy and uphold ethical standards.
  - continued level of national and public trust in the higher education system and its outcomes.
- Embracing opportunity of enhancing access to HE (the social dimension is a key theme of the Bologna Process).
Proposed steps for changes in legislation in Georgia

- Legislation currently does not allow fully online HE provision
- Before any legislation is debated or passed in relation to permitting further consideration of online/blended teaching and learning there's need of the following actions to be taken:
  - A risk assessment of the different scenarios (e.g. online, blended etc) across the entire HE sector
  - research or environmental scanning to ensure that there is interest from students and employers for online/blended learning in Georgia
  - Need for the NCEQE should develop and conduct a pilot methodology for the QA of online/blended learning.
  - Probationary period during which online/blended provision at HEIs is monitored by the NCEQE.
  - An initial focus on blended rather than fully online provision to allow for a gradual accumulation of experience could also be beneficial and reduce some of the risk associated exclusively with online education
Thank you

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