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Socio-Political Influence of the Bologna Process on the Georgian Higher Education and Modern Society

Abstract

Education, in particular tertiary education, as the main “tool” in forming a person intellectually, has always been among the scope of interest of the country’s politics. In the old days, universities were considered as the place where one could get accumulated knowledge and graduates were simply “carriers” of that knowledge. In the modern society, universities are seen as having power to influence the socio-political development of a country. A modern educated person is intelligent enough to have an individual outlook on things or events. It is very hard to change an intellectual’s mind about something he/she does not believe. If a person is educated, he/she can and will be engaged in political matters, social life or contribute greatly to the development of the country’s better future. Enquiries proved that a person’s level of intelligence is directly connected with his/her political participation and voting behavior, as well as social interaction. The Bologna Process has helped the Georgian higher education system in its transitional period. Owing to this process, Georgia managed to effectively change the education system from a centralized Soviet system to a modern,

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democratic system. Launching mobility projects, diploma recognition, and quality enhancement projects played a great role in the development of the Georgian modern society and in forming their national as well as pro-European attitude.

Key words:

higher education, socio-political development, changes in Georgian higher education institutions, socially and politically active society

Education, as a form of tailoring spiritual and intellectual potential of the society, has always been in the scope of interest of the country's politics. "The level of education of a nation's population is seen as a key indicator of national development, with a more highly educated population being associated with increased levels of human capital and economic growth. Most nations therefore strive to improve the education level of their population" (Easterbrook, Kuppens & Antony, 2015).

"What" and "how" to teach is determined by the society's needs, structure, and potential. Education is a social science. Dewey's belief that the needs of an individual have meaning only in relation to the needs of the society and vice versa, has a certain value and place in the philosophy of the Soviet system of education. Even Plato considered the state to be an education institution (Udom, 2015).

This article is dedicated to the socio-political influence of the Bologna Process on the Georgian society. As we all know, Georgia has undergone numerous political transformations and these changes have left their trace on the education system politics. It is doubtless that changes in the political direction always cause changes in the education system, as both politics and education are tightly connected to the society.

If we look at Georgia's very recent history, we can see numerous socio-political changes that quickly transformed Georgia's education system and tailored it according to the national values, needs, directions, and world vision of the country's political course. In order to get a clear picture we will start from the Soviet Union period, briefly discuss the Soviet system of education and reforms in the Georgian higher education institutions after the Soviet Union.

As part of the Soviet Union, Georgia had to follow the Soviet system of education. "Although the Soviet Union had been lauded for making progress in education, in fact the level of education opportunity, measured by the percentage of the relevant age cohort enrolled in higher education, was about half that of Western Europe at the time (Heyneman, 2010).

It is noteworthy to acknowledge that during that period everything was centralized and agreed with the Kremlin. Scientific works had to be checked by the Kremlin and they had to be approved by the Russian authorities. The curriculum of higher education institutions included useless subjects, but students had to study them as they carried values and views of the Soviet system. The notion of “national value” of the member countries was not even discussed while making an education policy or curriculum. The Soviet Union was understood as one whole country even though it consisted of many countries with a different history, customs, traditions, views, etc. Russia was dominant and the rest of the Soviet countries had to cope with the Kremlin’s decisions or the Russian lifestyle.

Georgia, like many countries, got used to the Soviet system and after its collapse found it quite challenging to manage living independently. After the Soviet Union period, Georgia was undergoing a transition period from a centrally planned system to a democratic country with a free market economy. “Immediately on independence, labor markets became free and the restrictions on travel lessened. This meant that graduates could work wherever they wanted. Property was privatized and prices were introduced. This meant that companies could not be required to keep unproductive labor or maintain social institutions such as kindergartens and technical schools, which were a handicap to profits. These changes were immediate and they required an immediate response on the part of the education sector” (Heyneman, 2010).

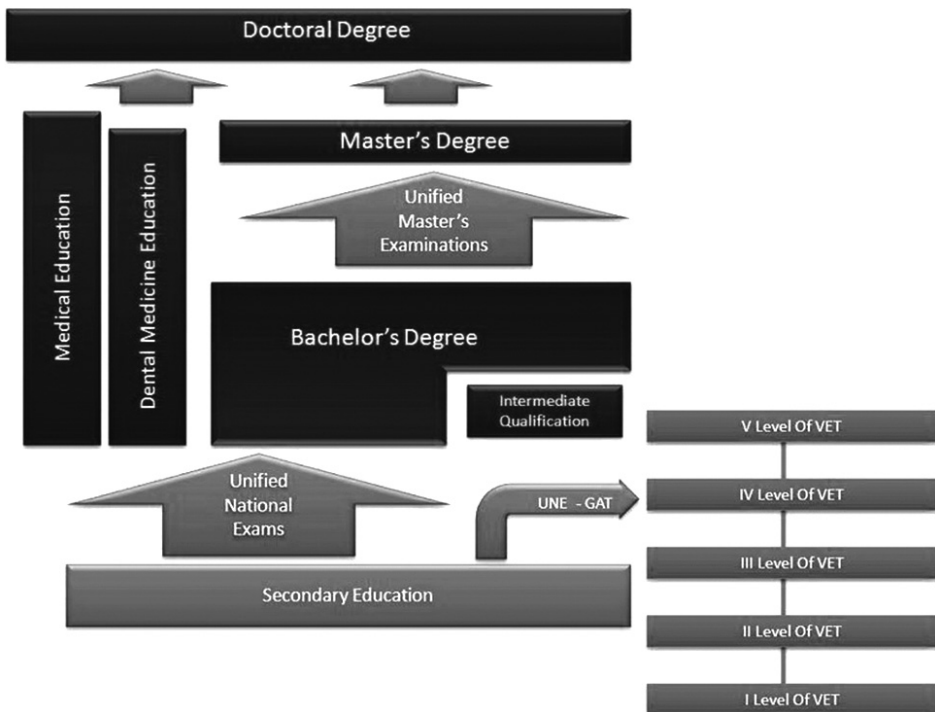
Georgia determined its political way and started to build a pro-European country, with high national values. Education was the first thing to be changed accordingly, as the person is formed as an individual through education. Higher education strived to achieve European standards in quality as well as curriculum. Changes started in 1999, but they were neither drastic nor rapid. Rapid development of the system was essential for the country as Georgia had no time for slow development.

After the Rose Revolution in 2003, Georgia had an extremely pro-European government determined to transform Georgia into a European country in a very short period of time. The government consisted of people having a European education. The President and 12 out of 20 ministers had a European diploma, which meant that they had lived in Europe for some time and had first-hand experience of being a member of the European society. They started reforms and made many of them very quickly, but the lack of professionals having a European world vision remained a huge problem for the country. This preconditioned Georgia’s desire to join the Bologna Process, as this seemed to be the best way to achieve the goal quickly and effectively. After 2 years, in 2005 Georgia became a member country

of the Bologna Process, which caused Georgian higher education institutions to change according to the Bologna requirements.

“The so-called Bologna process belongs to those European policy processes that have attracted considerable public attention. Its intention is to harmonize the diverse European university systems and, thereby, achieve a higher degree of comparability” (Mechtenberg & Strausz, 2007).

The following chart shows the system of education in Georgia. We can clearly see how transparent and organized the modern system is.



Source: Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia.

Besides reforms in higher education system or curriculum changes, universities gained a strong socio-political influence over the modern society. Being the part of the Bologna “family” helped a great deal in creating and adopting appropriate “skills” in order to bring up independent, critically thinking, and creative professionals having the necessary knowledge and abilities in order to contribute to Georgia’s development. A university was no longer an institution where people

obtained accumulated knowledge; modern institutions played an essential role in a person's contribution to the socio-political events of the country.

After having signed the Bologna agreement, Georgian education institutions set new priorities and goals, which are the following:

- a. "To promote the development of Georgian and global cultural values, orientation towards the ideals of democracy and humanism essential for the existence and development of a civil society.
- b. To satisfy the requirements of one's personal interests and capabilities in obtaining proper higher education to raise the level of one's skills and continuous professional development opportunities.
- c. To realize personal potential, develop creative skills, train competent persons capable of satisfying modern requirements, provide for competitiveness of graduates on domestic and international labor markets, and offer to an interested person (persons) high quality education that meets the requirements of the students' community and the general public.
- d. To train and retrain new research personnel in order to ensure sustainability of the country's development and higher education system itself; to create, maintain and develop favorable conditions for research.
- e. To encourage mobility of students and academic personnel of higher education institutions."

Educated people preserve intelligence and have an individual attitude towards things or events. It is very hard to convince a wise man of something that is not true. While taking important decisions, they think well, examine all possible ways, weigh their decisions, and only after that do they make their final choice.

"Perhaps the most robust and well-documented education effect is the association between a person's level of education and political outcomes. Research in the UK has found that education is related to political interest and cynicism and voter turnout, and similar results have been found in Europe, the US, and internationally. Furthermore, a recent meta-analysis of studies conducted in the US and in Europe found that education was among the strongest predictors of voting behavior" (Easterbrook, Kuppens & Antony, 2015). As we can conclude, a person only has interest in politics if he/she is intellectually engaged in political matters. Intelligence also can be considered a strong and reliable predictor of political participation and voting behavior. For example, we all know that a person can be strongly influenced by political media campaigns and it appears to have a close relationship with voting behavior, as political campaigns are generally well-thought-out in order to have a strong influence over citizens. In such case,

social status of a person, his/her intelligence, and his/her attitude to political matters can precondition a voter's decision.

“In their analysis of the 1973–1990 Eurobarometer surveys, Deth and Elff (2001) found a strong and robust positive relationship between length of formal education and interest in politics and political apathy” (Easterbrook, Kuppens & Antony, 2015).

Georgia needs not only good professionals, but also active citizens having a sense of making the right decisions while contributing in elections. On the one hand, wise citizens are the goal of the Georgian government, but they should remember that such citizens would be quite cautious while voting and they will defend their rights and ask the chosen party to fulfil everything they promised. We can consider it as being quite challenging for the governing party, as they have to gain social trust of quite intelligent, well-informed, and demanding citizens. On the other hand, people with a low level of education are more likely to be gullible. Quite often, they cannot make adequate decisions while voting. Certain political parties can easily influence such people and make them their electorate, just by giving them unreal but positive promises.

It is worth to mention the important political dimension of the Bologna Process, its support in solving problems associated with the quality of higher education in different countries, management of the education process with the participation of state and non-state actors. The Bologna Process supported international cooperation in the field of education, it managed to launch special educational and scientific activities, and distribute ideas of academic autonomy and academic freedom among the leading universities of Europe.

After joining the Bologna Process, Georgian higher education institutions distinguished the following priorities:

- Social Dimension
- Lifelong learning
- Employability
- Student-centered learning
- Education, research, and innovation
- Mobility
- Data collection
- Multidimensional transparency tools
- Funding

Let us first focus on one of the priorities – mobility. Mobility can be considered as one of the most important parts of higher education. In order to make mobility

more transparent and understandable for the society, a document called *Sector Benchmark* was put into action. “*Sector Benchmark* is a document, which defines competences of educational programmes with regard to specific directions or field/specialization considering appropriate levels of education. The document is based on the *National Qualifications Framework* and *European Qualifications Framework*. It supports student mobility and development of joint educational programmes. Sector Benchmarks are developed in three directions (*Law, Medicine, and Education*)”².

Mobility serves not only to obtain a European education; it also means having people with high citizen values. Unfortunately, in Georgia, we do not have the right attitude towards elections and great majority of the population do not fully realize their role in the election process, as well as in the development of the country. Not having an appropriate education level or not having a sense of social trust can cause citizens to become passive and have the role of observers in all processes happening in their country.

“Pertinent education effect for our analyses is the association between lower levels of education and greater in-group favoritism. A range of studies analyzing data collected in Europe have found that lower education levels are associated with greater levels of prejudice, ethnic exclusionism, xenophobia, and negative attitudes towards immigration and immigrants, whereas studies in the US and using international data have found that lower levels of education are associated with nationalism, prejudice, and immigration attitudes” (Easterbrook, Kuppens & Antony, 2015).

Concerning social trust, let us define the notion of “social trust” and its importance for us as citizens. “Social trust refers to the extent to which an individual believes they can trust a generalized other. The level of social trust within a nation has been found to be strongly related to inequality, and to civic engagement, economic efficiency, and democratic stability, and it has been argued that it is vital to the successful functioning of and harmony within a nation” (Easterbrook, Kuppens & Antony, 2015).

The understanding of social trust as well as its quality can vary according to social class or layers. We can divide society into social classes according to their education, lifestyle, economic outcomes, and wages or according to their activity as citizens. As we see, there are many aspects, by which we can form social classes. “Several scholars have claimed that members of social classes have different

² See: The web site of the National Center for Educational Quality Enhancement, <http://www.eqe.ge/eng/static/69/education-system/higher-education>.

consumption patterns, political preferences, moral attitudes, social behaviour and lifestyle forms. It is repeatedly shown that social class is related to political preferences and social action. Social class also affects educational outcomes, earnings, housing, and a variety of other lifestyle forms. Scholars use these kinds of outcomes to test the construct validity of the classes. We use socio-political, cultural and economic outcome to test the validity of the newly distinguished social classes” (Guveli, Need & Graaf, 2007).

Mobility serves to “create” a large number of citizens with high moral values who will have their place in the high social class. It is doubtless that mobility has a lot of positive influence on the society.

It is noteworthy to mention that diploma recognition has the same degree of importance for the society. Diploma recognition enabled people to migrate and get jobs wherever they want according to their profession. This is seemingly a very good thing, but diploma recognition causes professional staff migration to European countries, where they reside and work, while Georgia is lacking professionals in almost every field.

Mobility together with diploma recognition can be considered positive achievements of education system development, but, unsurprisingly, they have disadvantages as well.

As I have already mentioned above, diploma recognition made it possible for the professionals to migrate. Many young scientists found jobs abroad and stayed there, while deficiency of professionals remains an insurmountable problem for the modern Georgia.

It is also noteworthy that the Georgian society is addicted to foreign diplomas. Having a foreign diploma or being a foreigner automatically puts a person in a high social class, meaning better working conditions and of course higher earnings. Unfortunately, a foreign diploma is not always a guarantee of professionalism; a person with a Georgian diploma can be as intelligent and professional as a person holding a foreign diploma. Sometimes it may happen that a person who has graduated from a Georgian university is better educated and better suited to the job requirements than others, but not having a foreign diploma prevents her/him from getting the desired job.

In this article, we tried to show the outcomes of the Bologna Process. We attempted to show the effect of education on a person’s political attitude, social life or well-being. Of course, this is not a complete list of effects related to the Bologna Process. “We argue that the outcome variables considered here provide a general picture of the range, strength, and stability of the education effect within key domains that have been examined in previous research on education effects”

(Easterbrook, Kuppens & Antony, 2015). Overall, the Bologna Process can be considered as one of the positive, necessary, and right reforms for the Georgian society. We can conclude that the Bologna Process has a great influence over the Georgian higher education in terms of socio-political, education policy as well as quality enhancement. This process has been very important for the Georgian society so it is essential to raise the awareness of the society concerning this issue and underline the above-mentioned advantages and disadvantages, in order for the Bologna Process to be better understood and analyzed.

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