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GEORGIAN HIGHER EDUCATION POLICY AND E-LEARNING CHALLENGES

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ABSTRACT

Rapid development of science and technology, the acceleration of the process of internationalization and globalization in higher education in the 21st century, increased the demand, perspective and popularity of the wide use of distance and electronic learning model/method.

Nowadays it is clear that in many developed countries, distance and electronic learning, taking into account a number of advantages, has radically changed the teaching process and effectively met the educational activities.

Based on Georgian example and comparative legal analysis, this article presents the modern challenges and main problems of e-learning in the higher education system, offers relevant conclusions and recommendations.

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Introduction.

In general, the industrial revolution develops humanity in all areas, including education. Digital transformation, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, has largely replaced traditional methods of education worldwide. The process of digitization of education in Georgia faced serious challenges and problems, because there was no legal permission and therefore no experience of e-learning in a formal environment. The search for ways to solve the mentioned problems and their realization is mainly an important part of the state policy.

Ensuring the availability of higher education in Georgia is reinforced by the Article 5 and 27(a) of the Constitution of Georgia and the Article 3(2) (a) of the Law of Georgia "On Higher Education", according to which, in order to achieve the goals of higher education, the state ensures the availability and openness of higher education, including for convicted persons, within the limits established by the legislation of Georgia; academic freedom of study, teaching and scientific research, including for a convicted person, within the limits established by the legislation of Georgia. According to the 2007 ruling of the Constitutional Court of Georgia, "the constitutional right to receive education is one of the basic social rights of a person and a recognized value of civilized humanity." (Judgment on the case "Georgian citizen Ivane Petriashvili against the Parliament of Georgia.", 2007) "The state cares for the development of education, science and culture," (Parlament, 1995) which expresses the idea of the state's social responsibility to exercise the right to education, increase its quality and availability, including the introduction of modern e-learning methods in terms of promoting development. Despite the principles recognized by the legislation, the reforms carried out by the state are very slow and lack innovation. According to some authors, it is due to the fact that the obligations of the state in terms of social and financial access to higher education are unfortunately not clear and bold enough (Parlament of Georgia, 1995).

As for the introduction of new teaching methods, including e-learning, as one of the tasks of the global educational policy, it is very important today. Completing this task in different countries is complicated by the different level of economic development, the problems of adequate and timely implementation of reforms of national education systems and modernization of the system, in the context of the spread of information and communication technologies, etc.

In those countries where the level of e-learning in higher education is statistically high, the important role of national governments in financing the strategic directions of higher education, especially in the direction of e-learning, is highlighted; for example: For this purpose, the United Kingdom's government created "The Joint Information Services Committee in the UK", in Switzerland - "Swiss Virtual Campus" and others were established on the initiative of the government. (OECD, E-learning in Tertiary Education, 2005). In the US, state and federal governments are increasing funding for higher education institutions (millions of dollars in grants each year) and offering new opportunities for quality education. This led to the need for more funding, especially for the creation of the appropriate technological infrastructure, without which it would be almost impossible to implement e-learning. (SouthernMarilandCronicleNewsDesk, 2020).

Most of the world's top-ranked successful HEIs believe that e-learning is critical to fulfilling their institution's mission and long-term strategic plan. (Allen & Seaman, 2013). They also recognize the importance of e-learning in terms of institutional development and increasing access to learning.

Main text.

Current Georgian legislation clearly recognizes the involvement of the state in the direction of defining, implementing and managing higher education policy. (Law of Georgia "On Higher Education", 2005).

In our country, an entry in the law on the admission of distance learning appeared for the first time in 2016, where the possibility of using the e-learning method was also considered, although its practical use was not carried out. Therefore, it is not surprising that the period of the global pandemic of COVID-19 gave a serious push to the introduction and development of e-learning. The first political step in this direction was the changes made by the Parliament of Georgia to the Law of Georgia "On Higher Education" on June 12, 2020, as a result of which paragraph "o2" was added to Article 2 - definition of distance learning, as well as paragraph t1 - definition of e-learning, paragraph o18 was added to Article 7 ("Authority of the Ministry in the field of higher education"), as well as Article 474 on "electronic learning" was added to the law, according to which, e-learning envisages conducting the learning process using a learning management system. (Law of Georgia "On Higher Education", 2005). The LMS is an internet-based software application that is necessary for organizing and managing the study process based on information and communication technologies, in order to provide students with learning materials, with opportunities to communicate with each-other and/or with teachers, and for ensuring testing, consultations, monitoring of students' progress, etc. (Paul Kwame Butakor, Tamar Kakutia, Syed Mir Muhamad Shah, Elena Hunt, 2023).

In the direction of the research topic, despite the more or less progressive legislative changes implemented by the state in some cases, the social inequality, poverty and institutional crisis remain an important challenge in Georgia, which directly affect the adequate and operational development of the e-learning method. Economic problems still remain as the main issue for the population. (CRRC Georgia 2020: Caucasus Barometer). The above-mentioned problems have significantly affected students, who are one of the most vulnerable groups in terms of economic well-being. It is a fact that there are significant differences when it comes to constitutionally recognized access to higher education, based on various socio-economic and demographic characteristics. (Papiashvili & Bejanidze, 2022).

Considering the advantages of the e-learning method in the higher education system (mode of instruction/assignment delivery, time and flexibility), its scalability clearly requires state support for further development and increasing access to target groups. In this regard, a number of problems and challenges are still unresolved, as noted by the Georgian government in the official document - "The Unified National Strategy of Education and Science of Georgia 2022-2032". The reforms carried out in the higher education system in the country clearly failed to show positive results. According to the government, this is due to the fact that "strategic goals and objectives were not clearly formulated and supported by relevant indicators". (MoESoG, 2021). Despite the above, according to the OECD assessment, Georgia was named among the 98 countries that ensured the effective use of distance and e-learning formats and methods during the pandemic (OECD, A Framework to guide an Education

response to the COVID-19 Pandemic of 2020, 2020) .The analysis of the reality reveals that the main challenge in this regard remains the socio-economic situation in the country, the shortcomings of the legal system and the unpreparedness of the institutions.

1. The socio-economic situation in the country.

As a result of the research of the presented issue, it was revealed that during e-learning, full access to the Internet was the main challenge for students living in the regions of Georgia. The e-learning format was also difficult for those students who live in big families and therefore do not have individual workspaces or individual e-devices for learning in the above-mentioned format.

2. Deficiencies of legal regulation.

In terms of higher education policy reform, Georgia also has important obligations based on the association agreement signed with the European Union. In accordance with Articles 358 and 359 of the Association Agreement, in addition to other important priorities of the country, the relevance, accessibility of all levels of education and promotion of progress in the direction of recognition of qualifications and competence, which is directly correlated with the introduction and development of new methods of teaching and learning, are also highlighted.

Unpreparedness of institutions.

From the point of view of introducing the e-learning method, it is important to assess the material and technical capabilities (Internet, technical devices), the availability of educational resources, the existence of adequate learning spaces. During the pandemic, a large number of higher education institutions found themselves in a particularly difficult situation, as they did not have access to appropriate equipment, the Internet, and appropriate digital skills. (Bendeliani, 2020). Our country is not an exception in this regard, for example, in a study carried out by QQI Ireland to examine the impacts of Covid19, it was noted that about 60% of academic staff in higher education institutions had little or no experience in this direction. "There have been significant changes in the level of support for both staff and students. (QQI, 2020).

Conclusion.

Taking into account the above, it should be said that with the joint work of the Parliament of Georgia, the Government and the Ministry of Education and Science, systemic steps should be taken to develop a comprehensive strategy for the policy of access to higher education. An adequate legal, political, economic and social ways should be found for its realization. It is important that this process should not be fragmented, but it should have a systemic character and should take into account modern requirements and international trends.

Taking into account that e-learning is an inevitable trend in the conditions of modern technology development, the existing voucher model of financing of universities must be revised and the possibilities of direct financing of higher education institutions should be increased, especially in the direction of introduction/realization of modern learning/teaching methods; The socio-economic status of students should be taken into account and appropriate benefits (distribution) should be established in relation to tuition fees; digitization of all educational materials and equal access to all basic educational resources should be ensured; Along with financial support, the digital skills of academic staff should be improved.

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