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### Short bio:

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### Paper

**Title:** Building Cooperation culture with industry in institutional reviews: Case of Georgia

### Abstract

The representatives of the industry (employers) have been involved in the institutional reviews (Authorization) of the Higher Education Institutions in Georgia in the role of evaluators since 2017. This was initiated amidst the reform of the external quality assurance system, aiming to bring it to compliance with ESG 2015. The first 6 years cycle of institutional evaluations with the renewed authorization standards was finalized in 2023. During these years, much experience has been amassed of recruitment, training and developing the long-standing cooperation with the industry representatives within the evaluations, with the industry representatives becoming the integral parts of the evaluations, yet many challenges remain. This paper explores the adopted practices and ongoing challenges of industry representatives' involvement in authorization processes in Georgia. Having the main focus on the experience of industry representatives in the external quality assurance activities, the paper also examines the perceived impact of employer experts' involvement in the authorization processes on the HEIs, as seen by the HEIs. This is especially important, due to the University-industry cooperation being generally weak in Georgia (European Commission 2018; Tabatadze 2023). The research data is based on the key policy documents as well as the interviews with the diverse sets of stakeholders, including the QA Agency representatives, the industry representative evaluators and the HEI representatives. The paper will be structured as follows: 1. Introduction 2. Overview of EQA of Higher Education in Georgia 3. The institutional evaluation cycle 2018-2023 (Including key statistics) 4. Methodology and research questions 5. Results 6. Conclusion.

## 1. Introduction

The participation of the industry representatives as the expert panel members within the institutional evaluation of the higher education institutions (authorization) and accreditation of higher educational programmes in Georgia, has become part of the normative regulations, directing the evaluation processes, since 2017 (Accreditation Charter 2011; Authorization Charter 2010<sup>1</sup>). This change was driven by the objective of the National Center for Educational Quality Enhancement (NCEQE) to bring Georgia's national quality assurance framework in compliance with The Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG 2015). Despite joining Bologna process since 2005 and carrying out the institutional evaluations of HEIs ever since, the Bringing of Georgian higher education QA system in harmony with the Bologna Process was one of the tenets of 2014 association agreement between Georgia and European union (Amashukeli et al. 2020).

Throughout 2017-2018 a wide range of legislative and normative changes were carried out amidst the reform of the Higher education QA system in Georgia, the procedures for external QA mechanisms were renewed and the authorization and accreditation standards were updated, bringing them both into compliance with the ESG 2015 (Darchia et al. 2019; Amashukeli et al. 2020). Some of the major updates concerned the initiation of the involvement of industry representatives and the students within the evaluations as the members of the expert panels, both within the institutional and programme level evaluations. The compliance of the renewed procedures and standards with the ESG 2015 was confirmed upon the ENQA evaluation of the NCEQE, after which the agency became the ENQA member and was registered in the EQAR.

The industry representatives, or employer-experts (the two terms are used interchangeably within this paper), as it is commonly called within the process, have become the inseparable parts of the institutional evaluations ever-since, with their numbers increasing year-by-year, yet no systematic analysis has been undertaken so far, to explore the experiences in regards to their participation in the external QA mechanisms in Georgia.

## 2. The Overview of higher education external QA in Georgia

The external quality assurance has become the part of Georgia's higher education agenda since 2005, when the first wave of institutional evaluations was carried out, amidst the wave of reforms in all spheres of public policy in the country (Chakhaia & Bregvadze, 2018; Macharashvili & Gogadze 2023). At the initial stage, the external QA served more as the means of getting rid of large amount of private HEIs, great number of which were the diploma mills and the number of which mushroomed since the breakup of the Soviet Union, amidst the general chaos and corruption in the country as well as the lack of any effective means for regulation of higher education sector in 1990s (Sharvashidze 2005; Chankseliani, 2014; Jibladze 2013; Macharashvili & Gogadze 2023).

Much has been changed since the initial stages of the QA mechanisms' implementation in Georgia and currently, the Higher education External QA in Georgia consists of two independent mechanisms, Authorization – the mandatory institutional review, carried out once in 6 years and Accreditation – programme review, mandatory for all academic programmes since 2022, and carried out once in every 7 years, for the programme groups or clusters, as it is called within the legislation (Law of Georgia on Higher Education 2005).

The authorization evaluation in Georgia is done against the set of 7 standards, developed in accordance with the ESG 2015 and covering various aspects of the institutional life, namely: 1) Mission and Strategic Development of the HEI; 2) Organizational Structure and Management of the HEI; 3) Educational Programmes; 4) Staff of the HEI; 5) Students and their Support Services; 6) Research, Development or/and Other Creative Activities; 7) Material, Information and Financial Resources.

Through the harmonization of the QA standards with the ESG, the connections with the industry have also acquired larger role within the both, authorization and accreditation standards and the direct requirements for involving the employers in various aspects of institutional lives, particularly in curriculum development, have appeared (Authorization Standards 2018).

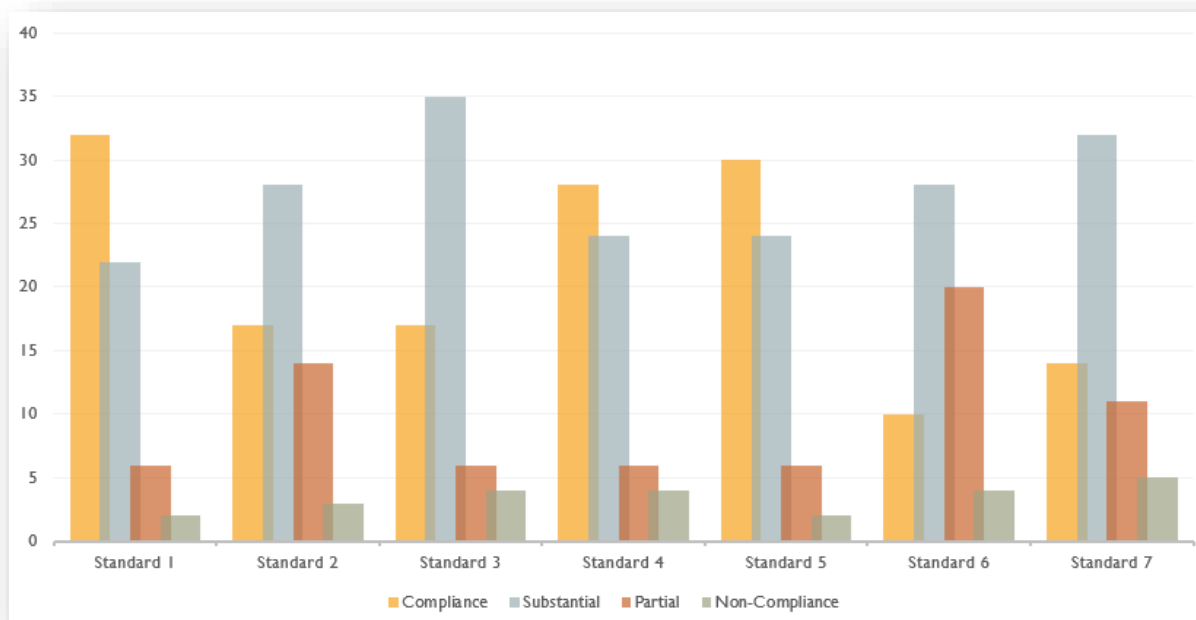
The adoption of the novel evaluation mechanisms did not only introduce the industry representatives and students into the process, but the involvement of international experts was also institutionalized. In authorization process, the involvement of the international expert as the chair of the expert panel has become mandatory, while in case of the HEIs that carry out the medical studies, additional international expert was added to the panels, specializing in the field of medicine (Authorization Chart 2011).

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<sup>1</sup> Normative acts in Georgia undergo the periodic amendments after their issue, while the original year of issue, indicated in the documents remains.

### 3. Authorization cycle 2018-2023

The first authorization cycle using the renewed authorization standards and procedures took place within the years 2018 and 2023. According to the NCEQE website, where the authorization reports are publicly available, 61 HEIs underwent the evaluation within these years, with 19 of them being public and 42 private institutions. Throughout the cycle, the HEIs struggled the most to comply with the standard 6, which is focused on research activities. The detailed statistics of the HEIs' compliance levels with each standard through the last authorization cycle is given on Figure 1.



**Figure 1:** Compliance levels of Georgian HEIs to each authorization standard in the Authorization cycle 2018-2023.

While all of the authorization evaluations included the students as the members of the expert panel, which is mandatory according to the normative regulations, the vast majority of the evaluations also included the industry representatives as well, in spite of their participation not being mandatory. Currently there are more than 50 industry representative experts within the authorization expert pool, representing wide variety of fields and spheres and their number is gradually growing.

### 4. Methodology

As the study strived to explore the experiences and attitudes of key stakeholders involved in the authorization cycle 2018-2023, qualitative methodology was employed and 10 in-depth interviews were conducted for the purposes of the study, with the representatives of three key stakeholders' groups, listed below in detail:

- 4 Employer experts – with extensive experience of participation in institutional reviews, purposefully representing different sectors of industry;
- 3 QA agency representatives – with an experience of facilitating and leading the authorization processes throughout the last cycle;
- 3 HEI representatives – the heads of the QA departments of both private and public institutions, with the experience of undergoing the authorization evaluation within the reporting period.

The main purpose of the interviews was to analyze the individual experiences amassed by the key stakeholders as well as the comparison of their views, in regards to the similar issues, to construct the clear and complex picture.

The study focused on the following research questions:

- How has the QA agency's cooperation culture with the industry in institutional reviews evolved in Georgia over the last authorization cycle?
- How impactful is the involvement of employer experts in the authorization processes, from the perspectives of the different stakeholders, involved in the process?

## 5. Key Findings

### The goal of the involvement of Employer experts in the evaluation

Most of the interviewees agreed that the idea behind the involvement of the employers in the expert panels within the authorization process in Georgia, was to enhance the university-industry relations at large and to integrate stronger market-oriented perspective within the evaluations. As the NCEQE and HEI representatives mentioned, alongside to the stronger focus on market needs within the authorization standards, although indirectly, the initiative also strived to nudge the HEIs to form stronger ties with the industries. This is particularly important, considering the existent evidence of the lack of cooperation between the two in Georgia (European Commission 2018; Tabatadze 2023); Additionally, the focus on employers as key stakeholders within the ESG 2015 was also outlined as a considerable factor in the decision-making over the involvement of industry representatives in the evaluations, with the external legitimacy of the QA mechanisms in the shape of being in line with the ESG becoming ever-more important for the policymakers.

### Building Cooperation

The respondents from employer side and the NCEQE were asked about the initial stages of cooperation between the Agency and employer experts and the gradual development of these relationships. The NCEQE representatives outsourced that in the beginning, in 2017-2018, when the policy was still fresh for all sides involved, they publicized the initiative but also strived to involve such employers in the process, that already cooperated with the academia and used the informal communications and suggestions from the HEIs to achieve this goal. While also launching the public calls for involving more employers in the institutional reviews, the NCEQE representatives as well as the employer experts themselves outsourced that the snowballing method of employer experts selection remained the most potent way to recruit new industry representatives in the pool.

All stakeholders outlined that it would have been beneficial, if the NCEQE had more cooperation with the professional associations and similar organizations as well as better marketing strategies, which could have enabled the higher level of interest from the industries to get involved in the evaluations and the NCEQE representatives themselves noted that this could still be done in the future.

When discussing the beginning of the cooperation, the employer experts mentioned the initiation stage, where they had the opportunities to undergo the trainings about the authorization standards and procedures as well as the purpose and practicalities of the evaluations and some outlined the periodic opportunities of undergoing additional trainings. It was clear though, that no training sessions or other types of developmental efforts exclusively centered on the industry representatives have been carried out throughout the cycle. As some of the employers discussed the list of challenges at the initial stage, mainly connected to the navigation of their perspectives within the institutional evaluations as well as the practicality of their role within the actual evaluation, some of them outlined that it would have been desirable if they had the opportunity to undergo some specific trainings, focused on their needs, with one of the employers mentioning that the ideal type of the trainer in such endeavor could have been a more experienced industry representatives, which could have trained the newcomers, in order to assure that they spoke the 'common language' and encourage the peer learning.

### Industry-representatives' Motivation for Cooperation

The main motivation for participation in the institutional evaluations in the role of employer-expert was named to be the industry representatives' own desire to get involved in the developments within the field of higher education. While most of the interviewed employers mentioned them being approached by the NCEQE representatives and offered the cooperation, one employer outlined that it was his own initiative to take part in the evaluations, coming from personal interest, after encountering the public call on social media.

The personal interest in higher education and general societal issues, through the willingness to contribute to the common cause, was something outsourced by the NCEQE representatives as well, as the key characteristic for the employers to join the expert pool. This was mentioned to be particularly important amidst the general lack of cooperation between the universities and industries in Georgia, as without the profound synergies, the individual desire to contribute to the common good proved to be a prominent factor. In this regard, the actual snowballing, practiced by the NCEQE seems to be rather pragmatic approach with it becoming a shortcut of a sort, for recruiting 'right type of people'.

Another factor, that both employers and NCEQE representatives outsourced, was the status of an expert, formally attached to the employers after joining the pool. While some of the interviewees from the employer side outlined the triviality of expert status as such, due to general disregard to the term of an

'expert' in the Georgian society, most of them attached considerably higher importance to this factor, some even outlining the successful usage of the status within their own professional lives, as it apparently gave their expertise in certain fields additional legitimacy.

### **The paradox of fresh blooded inbreeding**

To a certain extent, stakeholders viewed the involvement of employers in institutional evaluations as an opportunity to bring fresh perspectives through industry representatives not embedded within academia and to enhance the unbiased judgment. However, in reality, opinions among stakeholders on this matter were mixed.

While the employers, interviewed within the scope of this study, did agree with the above notion, the HEI representatives were a bit more critical in this regard, with one of the HEI representatives outscoring the existent problem of 'inbreeding' within the employer experts, noting that, some of those individuals actually work with various universities and contrary to bringing the "fresh blood", their involvement in the evaluations of the other institutions, led to the associations with the other HEIs, which are often the competitors.

As the part of employers in the expert pool do work at various universities in varying capacities, often as invited teachers, yet sometimes even serving as professors, a certain paradox can be observed, with some of the same academics with deep roots in the university system themselves becoming the employer experts, however with the gradual diversification of the expert pool and the involvement of more experts without the ties to the academia as it has happened over the course of the last authorization cycle, this challenge may not be as great as expressed by some of the interviewees. Also, considering the above section, the fact that the employers with the ties to the universities may be more prone to get involved as the authorization experts seems rather credible.

### **The perceived impact of Employer Experts' involvement**

The HEI representatives outscored the positive nature of the initiative, in promotion of more profound university-industry relations. The inclusion of employers within the authorization site-visits as the key stakeholders and planning the interview sessions with them, was mentioned as particularly important part of the developments, driving the HEIs towards more cooperation with the industry. Yet it was also mentioned that in practice, this initiative to a certain extent, contributed to the formalization of university-industry relations as the obligatory token for acquiring the external legitimacy with no real achievements. The NCEQE representatives on their behalf, reflecting on the experiences amassed, outlined the importance of institutionalization of employer involvement in the authorization process, and mentioned that this initiative helped to establish the industry representatives, at least formally, as the key stakeholders in the process, which over the course of the last years, went beyond just the results of normative and regulative frameworks and to a degree contributed to a shift in perceptions of the agency and HEIs about the industry's role in higher education.

### **The lessons learned and areas to be improved**

When reflecting upon the lessons learned through the 6 years of experience of cooperation with the employers, the NCEQE representatives outscored the establishment of more and better materials for training and introduction of the employers into the process, as well as the gradual growth of the employers within the expert pool. However, as it was mentioned above in regards to the trainings, it was also noted that the agency did not have any specific measures developed for employers and the materials that existed were for common expert consumption.

It was also outlined that, despite the growth in numbers, the actual involvement of various employers in the evaluations still remained a challenge, mostly due to the unavailability of the industry representatives to spend several days on the authorization site-visits. This therefore led to overdependence on few industry representatives, which tended to be more flexible and subsequently gained more experience in the evaluations, as they participated more often.

The employers gave a considerable value to the opportunities of involvement as the authorization experts, outscoring the better overall understanding of the higher education system as such, as well as better knowledge on the dynamics of university-industry relations in the country as the main assets they gained from participation. Some of them even mentioned that thorough the reflections on the diverse sets of institutions as the external reviewers they were able to enhance their own professional lives with the newly acquired experiences.

One important note that some of the employers made, was that unlike most of the other experts involved in the authorization processes, the industry representatives had little to no opportunity to actually meet other industry representatives involved in the process, due to the involvement of just a single employer

in each evaluation and therefore no opportunities existed for them to actually share their visions and experiences with the fellow employers, which, according to them, could have further enhanced their perspectives and capacities.

## 6. Conclusion

Looking at the experiences amassed in cooperation between the NCEQE and the industry through the wider angle, it becomes apparent, that while some indications have been made about the long-standing cooperation with certain employers, the cultural aspect of the cooperation seems to be largely absent, as there seem to be no systematic structures in place for more consistent ways of cooperation with the industry. The improvements that have been made, particularly in regards to the quantity of employers in the pool, still remain the collection of singular efforts, with no structural bond.

Regarding the overall dynamics of employers' involvement in the evaluations and the perceived impact of the initiative, what becomes apparent is that the experience of industry representatives' involvement in the institutional evaluations during the last evaluation cycle, to its core, bears the resemblance to the dynamics of the larger scope of university-industry relations in Georgia. While approaches from the NCEQE could be altered for better results, those will still struggle to achieve grander impact, as long as there are not more meaningful synergies existent between the universities and industries in Georgia.

The NCEQE's initiative to include the industry representatives as the key stakeholders in its evaluations seems to have influenced many HEIs to break the ice and start the cooperation with the industries at least formally, subsequently leading to the mixed results. This is well in line with the findings of Amashukeli et al. (2020), who outscore the importance of external legitimacy, in shape of ESG compliance, in Georgia's QA reform. While the achievement of stronger connections does not seem likely only through the enactment of coercive measures, it seems also clear that to a certain degree this initiative positively influenced the institutionalization of industry as a key stakeholder in Georgian higher education.

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