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International Students Attraction and Retention Practices at Georgian Higher Education Institutions

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Abstract

The article discusses Georgian universities' strategies and efforts to expand internationalization and especially international student mobility in the country. In many cases, the Georgian context is very much similar to other international cases, especially in terms of cooperation between a popular international university and one of Georgian higher education institutions or applying marketing and digital tools and developing student services at universities. The study discusses international students' attraction and retention practices at five Georgian higher education institutions. Especially interesting are the cases of two regional universities, which are assumed as the best regional state universities in the country. One of the universities (located in Tbilisi) participating in the research has accumulated nearly twenty years of experience recruiting overseas students. The other two are universities with innovative infrastructure oriented to expanding recruiting international students' quota and developing teaching and research activities at the institutions. The study applied qualitative research methodology and heavily relied on the grounded theory approach. The researcher analyzed strategic development and internationalization policy documents of the universities to have a clear understanding of ongoing processes at the targeted institutions.. After analyzing official documents, the researcher started interviews with the leaders and management of the universities under the research. The grounded theory approach gave the researcher the possibility to code the interview results and analyze them.

Keywords: Internationalization, higher education, student mobility, attraction and retention of international students

Introduction

Universities have always been oriented on developing various graduate and undergraduate programmes, expanding teaching and research activities and developing interaction processes between students and teachers. “The pursuit of knowledge,” which is the foundation of the contemporary higher education institution (HEI) at the end of the 20th century, obtained the third dimension, community service. The academic world managed to disseminate accumulated and discovered knowledge, commercialize and find financial incentives as a result of the development of science and technology (Beaulieu & Brousselle, 2018).

Many researchers (Beaulieu & Brousselle, 2018) (Calikoglu & Uslu, 2020) highlighted that research has risen in many countries because of increasing marketization and globalization at universities. As universities started to commercialize accumulated knowledge and disseminate in industry, government or business sectors, they became more formal organizations based on managerial principles and strategies or business-like institutions incorporating marketing principles. “They have, for instance, established firm-like PR (public relations), media departments and strategies. They are also heavily engaged in strategic planning, mission-statement production and implementing marketing procedures” (Wedlin, 2008, p. 147). The transformation has been determined by adopting the third mission activities at HEIs. “Today, universities are involved in increasingly diverse tasks that go beyond teaching and research, including community service, cooperation with industry, technology transfer, and the creation of new companies” (Olo & Rego, 2021, p. 9). As a consequence, higher education activities can no longer be associated with research and teaching only. It is strongly interrelated with social and economic evolution leading adoption to business related activities at universities (ibid).

McChesney (2013) highlights that the implementation of commercial values in higher education has reduced it to a monetary transaction and profit becoming. Moreover, universities are under pressure to develop income streams and compete against other institutions not only on national but mainly on international level. Management and leadership of higher education institutions “consider universities as corporate enterprises similar to other enterprises in the private sector, with both financial factors (revenues and expenses) and market factors (supply and demand)” (Asaad, 2011, p. 10). By establishing sell and purchase in education, the university lost its prior mission, doing just public good and educating society, and moved to do private good but still educating society. Consequently, higher education has been

named one of the twelve service sectors in the General Agreement on Trade in Services (ibid). The fact proves that importing and exporting education programs and services has become a part of business activities.

Students are customers, and any universities' strategy is developed according to the students' (customers) needs. Consequently, supply is delivered according to the demand, and universities proactively seek the demands, needs, and expectations students have toward them. Moreover, massification and worldwide enrollment growth at higher education institutions made universities to be more responsive and open to customer demands. Universities have been competing with each other to attract, on the one hand, more bright-minded students and, on the other hand, accumulate more funding opportunities (Olo & Rego, 2021). The effectiveness and reputation of HEIs largely depend on the international students' impact. Nowadays, when more than five million students cross-national borders for educational purposes, in a competitive HE environment, it is very difficult for educational institutions to attract and retain international students. To increase diversity and financial revenues or gain international status, universities are interested in internationalization and particularly in the recruitment of overseas students. The strength of any Higher Education Institution is very much defined by its internationalization politics, attraction, and retention of foreign students, as well as research activities and active involvement in the social and technological advancement of the region it operates.

A lot of worldwide universities see prestige and development along with financial incentives in the attraction and retention of international students. This trend has pushed a lot of HEIs to develop strategies and approaches to get their share of the global higher education market. In the severe competition, it is very difficult to build specific strategies to attract more overseas students and increase the reputation of the institution. Diverse factors make an influence on the attraction process, like safety of the country, reputation of the institution, quality of teaching and professional academic staff, affordability of tuition fees, innovative facilities, employability opportunities for students, non-academic activities, and friendly student services (Yun, 2017), (Zhvania, 2016). It is essential to identify what marketing strategies universities develop to promote their universities, how they determine which countries are their potential customers, how they support students with academic, employment, social and cultural programming, or how tight cooperation they have with businesses to ensure employability of the students (Ammigan, 2019).

Research Methodology and Methods

The aim of this study is to interview and observe participants in real-life settings (not in research labs or focus group tables) in order to gain more

accurate and in-depth information related to the phenomena, grounded theory seemed more attractive for the researcher. The grounded theory lets the researcher analyze both primary and secondary data. Nevertheless, it heavily relies on primary data analysis. On the one hand, the web-page analysis and thorough investigation of strategic development documents gave the researcher a clear understanding about local universities and how the leadership plan to expand university competitiveness on the international market and thus attract more international students. On the other hand, information gained from the official documents were 'cross checked' by the interviews with selected participants.

Interview as a qualitative research tool was applied to establish meanings and experiences that relate to the phenomena (Hussey, 2014). The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with the representatives of the HEIs in order to gain a clear understanding of happenings at the universities. A semi-structured interview is one of the most appropriate qualitative research tools used by the researchers giving the in-depth information while allowing the respondents to express themselves freely. As a result, face-to-face interviews with the leaders of targeted universities and representatives of students' supporting offices resulted in descriptive and socially constructed nature of the reality.

As the researcher used grounded theory in her qualitative research methodology, in-depth interviews needed to be coded and later analyzed. The researcher applied line-by-line coding in order to get an inductive picture of the interviews. The researcher named the codes according to the words and phrases used by the participants. This is the first step, initial/open coding. The next step is axial coding, and while open labeling breaks interviews into pieces, the axial coding reconstructs data answering the questions when, why, where, who, or how but this reconstruction happens on a conceptual rather than descriptive level (Charmaz, 2006). Finally, the last step is selective coding, where all the categories are grouped around one basic category. The aim of selective coding is to specify relationships between the constructs and define a new theory or modify an existing theory based on the research. Consequently, it is a culmination of our qualitative research. Nevertheless, coding decisions require further investigation on the emerging theory.

Research Sampling

The researcher analyzed web pages and strategic development documents of the targeted universities. Exploring documents relevant to the research paved the way to organize semi-structured interviews at universities and segregate respondents according to their professional experiences. The researcher knew who to interview; thus, sampling was purposeful-convenient. As a consequence, 15 participants from five targeted HEIs out of which two

of them were state and three private institutions, two of them were located in the regions of the country and three of them were located in the capital city of Georgia (Tbilisi). The interviews were categorized into three groups:

1. Leaders (totally five) heads of strategic development departments;
2. Senior-managers (totally five) heads of international departments;
3. Junior-managers (totally five) heads of career development or alumni departments (depending on which unit existed at the university)).

Firstly, the researcher phoned a potential respondent and in case of a positive reply, emailed a list of questions. After responding to the email interview data was set. The interviews were organized in a closed meeting room in case of face-to-face interaction or online via Google. Meet platform. The selection of one of the modes of interview depended on the respondent's wish. As the research was conducted in the COVID-19 pandemic period and most of the universities worked online it was difficult to organize face-to-face meetings. Nevertheless, out of 15 participants, 6 agreed on face-to-face interaction and 9 of them used Google. Meet platforms to be interviewed. The researcher used self-designed, open-ended questions, giving respondents the opportunity to reply freely in their own words. Seven questions were given to leadership and senior managers and five – junior-managers. The open-ended questions were determined as the best chance to identify valuable and unexpected responses from the respondents.

Ethical Issues

The research was conducted at three state and two private universities in Georgia. Measures to ensure the anonymity of the institutions were observed, thus no name was mentioned in the research. Moreover, leadership and management of the universities were informed in advance about the topic of research and the research questions. After receiving feedback and the participants' confirmation the researcher organized interviews. The interviews were conducted in the Georgian language. Participation was voluntary and anonymity and confidentiality was taken into account. According to their permission, all the interviews were recorded and later transcribed. The recordings were deleted as soon as the data was transcribed.

Results

Analyze of Strategic Development and Internationalization Policy Documents of Higher Education Institutions in Georgia

Internationalization is a major component in the strategic planning document of any Georgian HEI. The International Black Sea University (IBSU) strategic plan 2018-2025 document states: "The English language has been the instruction language since the beginning. Therefore,

internationalization, as the university's name suggests, has been an integral part of IBSU's activities" (International Black Sea University, 2018, p. 31). The university management is familiar with diverse attractive mechanisms for international students and uses several of them: participating in international education fairs, bilateral agreements with various international universities for staff and student exchange programs, Erasmus + programs, an online platform – Keystone Academic Solution which is connecting potential students to partner to universities and schools, web of alumni, activities in social media and partnership with the portal "study in Georgia" (ibid). Moreover, the same source states that financial incentives for international students, student support services, and staff fluent in the English language or English-instructed educational programs are one of some attractive tools for the overseas students. "Raising international awareness of the Georgian National University (SEU) and securing a place in the international educational market is part of the university's long-term strategy" (Georgian National University, 2020, p. 2). To achieve this goal, the university promotes not only SEU but Georgian higher education generally in order to attract more international students and scholars to the country (ibid). In regards to recruiting overseas students, the university considers fulfilling the following policy elements:

- Strategic participation in international educational exhibitions;
- Collaboration with international recruitment agencies who in turn not only attract students but also promote the university;
- Regular visits to the countries where international students are coming from, to increase an understanding of the context and as a tool for promotion;
- Provision of tailor-made services to foreign students;
- Ensuring the full integration of foreign students into the university life;
- Organization of extra-curricular activities that are in line with the culture of foreign students;
- Adequate information provision on web and social media both in Georgian and in English;
- Establishment of long-term links with foreign graduates through an appropriate alumni structure (Georgian National University, 2020, p. 5).

SEU leadership considers that each department should be involved in the process of attraction and retention of international students, thus, every unit cooperates in this direction (ibid).

"By 2018 approximately 2300 international students studied at Tbilisi State Medical University from 65 countries worldwide" (Tbilisi State Medical University, 2018, p. 12). The massive inbound of international students started

about 17 years ago and the number has increased since then. Faculties of Medicine, Dentistry, Public Health, and Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation offers programs in English and Russian languages to international students. “In 2009-2011 TSMU became a member of the MEDINE 2 - the thematic project of European Medical Education; the program aimed to develop learning outcomes/competencies for medical graduates in the EU countries” (Tbilisi State Medical University, 2018). Based on the recommendations of the project, the sectoral benchmark of medicine was developed for the first time in Georgia for the accreditation of higher medical institutions.

According to the TSMU strategic development plan (2018) the university cooperates with more than 120 partner universities in 40 various countries. The agreements are regulated within the framework of international projects, and Georgian and international students have opportunities to participate in the international mobility programs. TSMU is also a member of different international associations (AMEE, EUA, EMSA and etc.), established cooperation with WHO, WFME, DAAD, and USAID. Every year the university hosts a lot of international experts and professors, also organizes conferences, and involves students in the activities, thus trying to promote the university not only on local but on the regional and international level and attract foreign students. The Medical Doctor (MD) Program was especially elaborated for attracting international students. The idea of the program was to develop a new, innovative curriculum, which would be fully integrated with the modern requirements for developing a medical curriculum. The program was based on the Emory University School of Medicine (USA) program, which was modified by European and local requirements. The program offers contemporary medical education to students and active involvement in clinical and research activities at the early stages accompanied by opportunities to have an internship at Emory University (Atlanta, US). The program is especially attractive for oversea students and the majority of the classes consist of international learners in Georgia.

Akaki Tsereteli State University (ATSU) leadership mainly focuses on alumni web networks and tries to have constant contact with successful alumni (Akaki Tsereteli State University, 2018). Visits to targeted countries, attending education fairs and brochures about the programmes and extracurricular activities of the university are organized at the International Relations Department which is under the supervision of the Rector of the university. Survival guides for international students are supporting services for retention activities in order to help foreign students' adoption to the university and the city generally (ibid).

Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University (TSU) is the oldest state university in Georgia and has a long tradition of student and staff exchange activities, starting from the 1970s (Gergedava, 2017). The Department of

Foreign Relations (DFR) is the centralized unit at TSU responsible for student and staff exchanges. “The primary source of funding for these mobilities came as a result of bilateral agreements between TSU and its partner universities or through an embassy or a government of a respective host country. In 2007 a new funding scheme was added to support student and staff exchanges at TSU. This was through the ERASMUS Mundus program funded by the European Audiovisual and Cultural Exchange Agency (EACEA) of the European Commission” (Gergedava, 2017, p. 4). San Diego State University plays a crucial role in the development of high-quality higher education at TSU. San Diego State University, funded by the US Government’s Millennium Challenge Corporation along with three Georgian state universities (Tbilisi State University, Iliia State University, and Georgian Technical University) offers leading science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) internationally accredited bachelor’s degree in the heart of the Caucasus (Gurchiani, 2020). In terms of internationalization, Georgian-French collaboration is also worthy to be mentioned. At TSU, Georgian and international students are given the opportunity to study and gain diplomas on bachelor’s and master’s levels in the field of tourism and cultural heritage, food technology, winemaking, informatics, and applied mathematics (ibid). In addition, the International School of Economics at Tbilisi State University (ISET) has obtained the Foundation for International Business Administration Accreditation (FIBAA). International accreditation is a guarantee of high-quality study and the best way to increase the international trust and reputation of Georgian universities.

New Vision University (NVU) is committed to promoting equal access to education for students from around the world. The university offers a merger of local and western educational scientific expertise in order to make competitive alumni nationally and internationally. It aims to reinforce academic and student exchange activities as well as explore new markets to promote the Georgian brand. NVU’s strategic priority is to gain international accreditation for educational programs which gives it the opportunity to make the university internationally recognized. “In 2018 University re-accredited the educational program in Medicine under the participation of foreign experts and was the first amongst Georgian universities to receive accreditation compatible with the requirements of the World Federation of Medical Education (WFME)” (New Vision University, 2020, p. 1). Moreover, New Vision University is the first and the only HEI in Georgia having established its campus abroad. Derby campus (the UK), which is an ancient gothic style building in Derby was purchased by NWU for its ambitious project. The university was reconstructed and transformed into a modern building with contemporary auditoriums and labs in the institution. In 2021 the university received its first medical and dentistry students. Obviously, the Derby campus

is planned to become one of the most attractive study destinations for the UK and other international students. The leadership of NVU is planning to implement all those programs which the university develops in Georgia. Besides, Medicine and other health-related programs, the university has implemented Business Administration and Information Technology, also Political Science and International Relations Programs where local and international students are equally welcome to study.

Batumi Shota Rustaveli State University (BSU) aims to play an important role in the public life of the region by developing a western style of teaching/learning and research activities at the university (Batumi Shota Rustaveli State University, 2017). The BSU internationalization involves academic, administrative staff and students exchange programs as well as attraction and retention of international students (ibid). Moreover, the university is focused on the establishment of joint educational programs with partner universities and the implementation of educational programs in the English language.

To sum up, internationalization and international student mobility at Georgian HEIs goes deeper beyond educational activities and represent part of the strategic planning process. Firstly, incorporating the notion of internationalization into universities' accreditation and authorization process has been a signal to raise teaching and research qualities in order to meet accreditation standards at Georgian HEIs. The university should be oriented on internationalization of teaching, research, and employment of its alumni in order to meet the accreditation standards (Gorgodze, 2016). Secondly, responding to the development of internationalization efforts, establishing connections with international partners, and elaborating joint degree and English-language programs became vital at universities. In addition, student and staff mobility and especially the attraction of international students should be promoted (Gorgodze, 2016). As internationalization is included in the accreditation process, leadership and management of universities find the development of this notion competitive in the local and international market. Attraction and retention of overseas students seemed the best way to the development of international programs, diversify classrooms, raise quality of teaching, attract more overseas academia, and mostly expand financial income for the individual HEI. Obviously, monetary benefits lead to the sustainability of any university enhancing the development of teaching, research, and community services at Georgian universities.

Quotation	Open codes	Axial codes	Selective codes	Theory
Pragmatically, internationalization leads to commercialization	→ Internationalization & commercialization	→ Internationalization & commercialization	→ commercialization & partnership	→ Quality of education and strong student support services lead to increasing commercialization of HEI.
Attraction of international students lead to sustainability of university	→ international student mobility			
Our university has shifted to online mode of communication with potential customers via online Edu fairs	→ education fairs, service of agents, online platforms, alumni network			
Partnership is a component of internationalization. It enhances student mobility and supports joint research projects. Both activities are vital for any university	→ bilateral agreements & partnerships	→ bilateral agreements & partnerships		
Lack of English-language programs and English speaking academic staff is one of the challenges at Georgian HEIs	→ English language programs			
Our goal is to offer quality education and thus ensure not only attraction but retention too	→ quality of education	→ quality of education	→ quality of education & students support services	
Our university support international students' stay in Georgia and offer comfortable and caring environment	→ student services, on and off campus support, career development support, sport and cultural activities	→ student support services		

Discussion

Several open codes appeared while analyzing data: internationalization and commercialization, international student mobility, bilateral agreements and partnerships, English language programs, marketing tools (involving education fairs, online platforms, service of agents), quality of education and student support services. The open codes were narrowed down into axial codes and finally major, selective codes appeared. All the commercial and marketing activities were consolidated in internationalization and partnership selective code, while the quality of education and student support services were united under the selective code quality of education. Analysis of qualitative interviews and detailed in vivo coding directed the researcher to the emerging theory that quality of education and strong student support mechanisms are the best ways to attract and retention of international students.

Internationalization and commercialization

Internationalization as a primary mission of the HEI was mentioned by each representative of the university. “Firstly, no university can survive in the 21st century without internationalization. Secondly, all the HEIs are part of the European Higher Education Area. Thus, each university is regulated by a common guideline. Lastly, internationalization is necessary to operate in the global higher education market”. Furthermore, authorization and accreditation standards evaluate HEIs according to their internationalization policy in teaching, research activities, developing joint projects, etc. This means that students and academic staff exchange programs, partnership and bilateral agreement between universities, expanding research activities, applying innovative teaching methods, and attracting and retention international students are tools for universities to increase their competitiveness in international markets. Most importantly, a university that is not able to produce internationally competitive graduates will not manage to survive even in the local market. As a consequence, internationalization can be assumed as a tool to improve the quality of teaching and learning process at universities, diversify academic life, cooperate in research with partner institutions, recruit foreign students and make universities competitive in the international market. One of the leaders of the universities (under the research) stated: “Pragmatically, internationalization leads to commercialization. This means Georgian universities have started elaborate programs corresponding to the needs of the labor market. Moreover, young leaders with entrepreneurial mindsets have started to commercialize research and expand fundraising activities” The other university's top manager even highlighted “Besides teaching, the core goal of our university is to expand research activities. We are constantly seeking international partners focusing on enhancing Research & Development units and trying to establish collaboration with them”

Undoubtedly, this is a new era in the Georgian higher education system when universities try to merge academic life and commercial activities. Entrepreneurial generation on the one hand, increases financial incomes at universities and on the other hand, promotes and disseminates useful research activities in society.

International student mobility

International student mobility was assumed as a major goal, Georgian HEIs have been striving to increase in recent years. Recruitment of overseas students develops teaching and research activities at universities, diversify classrooms, makes students' life more interesting, and improves student services. But most importantly, it ensures financial sustainability and thus future development opportunities of the institution. One of the targeted universities has been having a 20 years tradition of attraction and retention of international students. The leadership of the institution is proud of the quality of education delivered at their institution and the success of their alumni, as "95% of our alumni are employed at state hospitals and clinics. This means the diploma obtained at our university and quality of education delivered at the institution is recognized and popular in nearly 72 countries around the world". One of the university representatives noted, that the primary mission of the institution was to operate on the international market and 84% of total students are international, from 82 countries. Although most international students at other Georgian universities (those who participated in the research) are from India, Nigeria, Sri Lanka, Turkey, Azerbaijan, Iraq, etc. This HEI highlighted that recruitment from the UK, Israel, Jordania and even Australia and Ireland has increased in recent years. One of the regional HEIs noted that international students' recruitment started more than ten years ago and the number has been increasing since then. Nowadays, the university is able to admit nearly 70 foreign students each academic year. Moreover, about 120 alumni have already graduated from the university and created a global alumni network, representing the university on the global higher education market. The second regional university representative noted that although they do not have alumni yet, the attraction process has been developing for five years and students from Nigeria, Iraq, and India choose their university and city for study destination purposes. Most importantly, one of the university leaders highlighted that two years ago only 40 international students studied at the university and this number has increased to 250 as a result of marketing tools they have applied to recruit oversea students from the targeted countries. The leadership of five targeted HEIs highlighted that they are eagerly working on searching for new regional and international markets, identifying and analyzing which markets are their potential clients, evaluating and discussing the advantages and disadvantages to launch in that potential country with

leadership, plan visits and communicate with potential partner universities or agencies at the targeted countries and most importantly work on recognition of diploma in order to make alumni competitive in the regional and international employment market. The process is quite overwhelming and time-consuming but as a consequence, the universities so far have been managing to expand their recognition in various countries and attract more international students from different parts of the world.

Student services

Good student services are one of the best factors international students are attracted to and especially retained by the HEIs. It is also part of the marketing tools universities apply to make students' life interesting, diverse, and memorable. Communication is essential when a potential customer has not yet made a decision on which university to choose for his/her study destinations. Careful and positive communication, the introduction of all those opportunities universities intend to offer them, competitive academic programs, and diverse student support services make influence a student's choice. "When our university started international student recruitment, university management had no previous experience on how to support them or what external services they might need. Step by step, from semester to semester we managed to identify and analyze their needs. Thus, the necessity to develop a mess of new services and recruitment of English-speaking human resources became visible. Fortunately, the leadership of our university managed to move to the new era of development and recruit more international students every year" noted one of the regional university managers. As two universities (understudy) operating in the region of Georgia, it was especially interesting to identify what measures they take to retain oversea students. Both university representatives highlighted that first of all they increased student; supervisor and student; the patient ratio in order to facilitate their learning and adoption process in the city. The overseas students are given all necessary legal, social, cultural, and supportive services from the very beginning of their study semester. They are given instructions, brochures about sightseeing in the city and all the academic-related issues that they may encounter. Furthermore, they are informed about all the sports, cultural and other social clubs where they are welcome to join. International students' integration at universities is pushed by the cultural and religious events, festivals, and concerts dedicated to their national or religious celebrations. "About two months ago a cricket club was established by the Indian and Georgian students. Cricket is less popular in Georgia but as Indians like it very much the university administration financially supported and equipped the club with all the necessary cricket equipment" stated one of the university sport and youth development department coordinators. Obviously, all the HEIs organize

training, workshops, and projects to involve local and international students and develop their professional skills. Moreover, career development departments assist them to be temporarily employed at Georgian companies, and “although it is not easy because most organizations are seeking permanent staff, still we do our best to increase their employment opportunities” as one of the university managers reported

Bilateral agreements and partnerships

Bilateral agreements and partnerships are activities highly promoted and supported by the government of Georgia. It is a reciprocal process each Georgian university tries to achieve. All five universities (under the research) have various bilateral agreements with international partners. “Partnership is a component of internationalization. It enhances student mobility and supports joint research projects. Both activities are vital for any university” stated one of the university representatives. For years Georgian HE system has been developing financially and intellectually supported by the bilateral agreements. A lot of Georgian students and staff have been given opportunities to study abroad or be part of research activities and vice versa partners from different developed or developing countries have been visiting Georgia to share their experiences and skills. Universities have established partnerships in developing educational programs and local or international students are offered to have internship opportunities abroad. Workshops, conferences, research projects, and training are part of partnerships and a lot of international students are involved in the activities. As a result, each university highly promotes bilateral agreements and partnerships at universities in order to expand internationalization activities at HEIs.

English language programs

In Georgia most international students study on medical and other health related programs. Nevertheless, the respondents from each university stated that Georgia has a potential to attract international students on various academic programs, especially on business administration, information technologies, international relations, etc. The hindering factor is lack of English speaking academic staff. “The fact that Georgian universities are attractive for oversea students because of medical programs means that medical academia, universities, clinics, medical and dentistry or other health related programs’ implementers and developers are able to deliver theoretical and practical knowledge to international students in English language. If not suitable human resources no educational program will have been developed and implemented at any HEI”. Unfortunately, lack of on the one hand English language professionals and on the other hand, IT or business management program developers lead to less diverse educational programs at Georgian

HEIs. Nevertheless, one of the leading universities (involved in the research) has developed English language programs in business and IT management and has recruited overseas students from the region where it generally operates.

“Georgia has potential to become a higher education hub in the region. The country has obtained a strategic tool that attracts international students from Asian, Indian, Arabian countries. Georgia is involved in the Bologna Process and each educational program is managed according to the guidelines elaborated in Europe. Thus, the Georgian higher education system grants diplomas which are recognized in Europe. As a consequence, our graduates are welcomed and employed in diverse European countries. Nowadays, our main goal is not to stop on medical education and offer diverse educational programs attracting and retaining more international students in the country and thus increase the competitiveness of Georgia on the global educational market” – stated one of the university leaders.

English language proficiency was named as one of the hindering factors for attracting more international students on diverse international programs. “Despite, Georgia is in a good standing in terms of internationalization and competes with other Eastern European countries, still low English language skills are assumed as one of the barriers to not only attract international students but also send Georgian students in various European universities within the framework of exchange programs” stated one of the senior managers of the HEI.

Marketing tools

Literature review has revealed marketing tools, Georgian HEIs apply to attract and retain international students. Most of the tools are similar to those European and the US universities apply to recruit overseas students. Education fairs, partnerships with universities and high schools, service of agents, online platforms, etc. Online education fairs and meetings have become financially and time consuming for the universities in recent years. “Recruitment procedures have shifted to online mode of interaction in recent years, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic. It is not necessary to visit the country which is already your customer but simply contact the recruiter agency, organize online meetings with the potential customers or participate in online Education Fairs” stated one of the university representatives. The same notion was sounded by the other university managers too. One of the university leaders stated “As we have always been oriented on online interaction, the pandemic has not forced us to change the mode of interaction with our partners in the countries our international students are recruited from. We just had to move to an online mode of learning and adopt online teaching tools. Nevertheless, we managed to organize training for academic staff and rapidly shift to online learning”.

Various web platforms, like Moodle or “Study in Georgia” actively cooperate with Georgian HEIs and perform as mediators between potential international students and Georgian universities. Moreover, universities organize online open doors days for international students where not only students but their parents are also given the opportunity to ask any question to the university representative. One of the university managers even stated that foreign students who are planning to study in Georgia are given a chance to schedule online meetings at a convenient time for him/her and communicate with the person from the university answering any questions regarding educational programs, student life or any other issues related to living and studying in Georgia. Most HEIs use agents’ services and only one of them stated that international students are recruited through partners and not agents. This means that in targeted countries the institution has established partnership relations with local institutions or schools. They promote universities locally, seek for high-performance students, organize tests at the testing centers, select best candidates and conduct interviews in order to prepare them for sending in Georgia. “All the departments are working on attracting international students. But it does not mean that any overseas student is welcome at the university. On the contrary, we have established quite a high entry barrier in order to receive those students who are ready for challenges and opportunities the university is giving them. Learning process is not easy at our institution and we want to prepare them for the challenge from the very beginning of their academic life. We are ambitious to have a high quality teaching and learning process”. The strategy has proved as demand to study at this concrete HEI is higher than the supply.

Within the framework of ERASMUS+ and other exchange programs on the one hand a lot of international students visit Georgian universities and on the other hand, a lot of Georgian students are sent to the European universities for a semester or two on diverse academic programs. Besides attracting international students on mainly medicine and dentistry programs, Georgian universities receive foreign students on various English-instructed programs for a semester or an academic year. Every year hundreds of overseas students visit Georgia within the framework of bilateral agreements between European and Georgian universities. All these activities resulted from the development of internationalization activities in the Georgian higher education system.

Quality of education

Internationalization and especially attraction and retention of international students have made Georgian HEIs increase the quality of teaching and learning process, apply innovative teaching tools, diversify learning processes within online platforms and practices, implement various

assessment methods, organize conferences and workshops, etc. As it was already mentioned most universities deliver medical education programs thus, case-based and problem-based teaching tools, portfolios and work-based learning methods were introduced and implemented at various HEIs. Moreover, in order to ensure the quality of education, medical schools have established cooperation with hospitals, laboratories, research centers to give internship opportunities to local and international students. Most importantly, universities have improved infrastructure, established simulation centers and signed memoranda of understanding with clinics. All these activities improve the quality of learning and teaching process at HEIs and let Georgia's higher education system get closer to European standards. Moreover, several universities (under the research) highlighted that they are focused on strengthening research activities at the institution. "We have been constantly searching for research universities for joint scientific research projects from the very beginning. Research is not strong at Georgian HEIs and we think that it is a weakness of our higher education system. "As we are oriented on creating a strong and internationally competitive university it is vital to expand and strengthen research activities" highlighted one of the university leaders. Fact that scientific research needs support and promotion among young researchers was noted by other university senior managers. "Unfortunately, research is weak at Georgian HEIs. As a consequence, we are trying to establish partnership communication with research universities abroad and thus develop our research activities. Young researchers, master's and PhD students' involvement and support in scientific activities is crucial for the development of any university". Although most international students are recruited on bachelor's programs, still enhancing research activities at Georgian HEIs will lead to on the one hand producing strong research-minded alumni and on the other hand attracting international students on various doctoral programs.

To sum up, Georgian universities do their best to make international students' academic and social life in Georgia interesting and fruitful. As most Georgian universities benchmark European experience, the management of HEIs try to identify gaps and work on the improvement. The study revealed strengths and weaknesses of universities making an influence on academic and social life of students, attraction and retention of international students, etc.

Strengths	Weaknesses
<i>Bilateral agreements and partnerships</i>	<i>Lack of English-instructed programs</i>
<i>Internationall accredited programs</i>	<i>Lack of academic staff delivering lectures in English</i>
<i>Internationally recognized diploma</i>	<i>Not strong research activities</i>
<i>English-language programs</i>	
<i>Academic staff</i>	
<i>Quality of education</i>	
<i>Student supporting services</i>	

Table 1.1 strengths and weaknesses of Georgian universities

Georgian HEIs have opportunities to attract and retain more oversea students and on the one hand increase financial income and on the other hand culturally and socially enrich the academic life of Georgian students. Besides all those marketing tools which are widely adopted at European universities, alumni network support is a new phenomenon in Georgian reality. Leadership of three universities under study (the rest two had no alumni yet) declared that they actively use alumni networks to promote their universities and academic programs. “Alumni serve as ambassadors to the alma mater. The university quality assurance office constantly conducts surveys to find out international students’ satisfaction. One of the questions is about how they found out about our university and a lot of students state: “It was a friend’s advice, my cousin brother or neighbor studied here”. Nevertheless, one of the universities having a long tradition of recruiting foreign students is in the process of gathering statistics of alumni and applies only those graduates who are widely promoted and popular.

Conclusion

The study revealed that Georgian universities are actively involved in internationalization activities and strive for increasing international student mobility in the country. The leadership and management of universities clearly understand that financial sustainability and development is largely dependent on the oversea students’ recruitment. Thus, any department, faculty and academic world of the HEI is focused on enriching international students staying in the country. Generally there are several internal and external factors that influence the decision of foreign students to choose Georgia as their study destination. Internal factors which are specific for any institution are:

1. Georgia is a part of Bologna Process and Georgian higher education diploma is recognized;
2. Reputation of HEIs;
3. Strength of academic staff and innovative infrastructure;
4. Not high tuition fees;
5. Academic programs in English language;

6. Good communication and student services (Zhvania, 2016), (Gurchiani, 2020).

External factors:

1. General image and reputation of the country;
2. Low risk of terrorism and criminal threats;
3. Cultural acceptance;
4. Accommodation services (some universities even have dormitories);
5. Simplified residence and visa procedures;
6. Not expensive living and travel costs (Zhvania, 2016).

Five HEIs participated in the study and each of the universities is working on attraction and retention of international students. Out of five universities, all of them develop medicine and other health related academic programs and only two of them recently have implemented other academic programs (business administration, information technologies, etc.). Quality of education and strong English speaking academic staff is one of the most important tools universities are recruiting international students. To develop academic staff, institutions are constantly involved in various international projects, workshops, training and share all those benefits generally internationalization guarantees to higher education. Thus, collaboration and exchange opportunities for the academic staff enriches universities with on the one hand professional local educators and on the other hand invited international professors.

Students with high GPA and graduates employed in various organizations are always promoted among friends and neighbors. Alumni network is a strong tool to attract more international students. Consequently, there are events organized abroad especially dedicated to the loyal graduates, where they are invited with their parents and given the opportunity to share their experience to the potential students. Definitely, such events make an influence on graduates and potential customers too. Moreover, universities try to stay in touch with them via emails, social networks, and other online platforms. As they are scattered around the world online communication seems convenient and time-consuming. Two of the universities (under study) have alumni networks, one of them has produced graduates recently and the other two universities have no graduates yet. But the university administration clearly realizes all those benefits graduates can bring them. As a result, they are planning to apply their endeavor in attracting of foreign students and keep communication with them.

Communication and student services was assumed as one of the greatest motivators for international students to make decisions and choose Georgia for their study aims. Supporting and assisting international students

was highlighted in the strategic development documents of the universities. Obviously, universities spend financial and human resources to make international students' life in Georgia safe, supportive and culturally or religiously accepted. Most universities organize cultural days especially for Indian, Sri-Lanka, Turkish or other oversea students. They also celebrate their religious and traditional holidays and help them to integrate with Georgian students. Moreover, training and academic development activities are welcomed and promoted by career development and student assisting services. Several universities (under the research) even declared that they promote Georgian language among international students and one of the regional universities has even applied for a summer camp project where Georgian students teach foreign students Georgian language and vice versa. Obviously, such interaction enhances international students' integration among local citizens.

Affordable tuition fee and cost of living is also one the most popular determinants, international students choose to study in Georgia. Ease of visa and residence related procedures, cultural and social closeness and positive relations with local people are all those factors foreign students mark as advantages to study at Georgia HEIs. Moreover, a chance to receive a diploma which is recognized in Europe, India, Turkey or other countries makes Georgia higher education even more attractive. A lot of oversea students discuss Georgia as a platform towards Europe, or a chance to receive European education.

English-language academic programs were named as a strength of the Georgian HEIs. Nevertheless, these programs are health related and there are very few diverse English-instructed academic programs. Most university leadership highlighted that the Georgian higher education market has a potential to deliver various English academic programs. Some universities have started working on these issues, some have elaborated and implemented business administration, international relations and economics, informational technologies, etc. programs. To sum up, lack of English-language programs and academic staff can be assumed as a weakness.

To sum up, Georgia is in a good-standing regarding internationalization and foreign student mobility in the country. But the country has a potential to increase it and each HEI works on diverse marketing tools to attract and retain them. The country has nearly twenty years' experience in development of international programs and recruiting oversea students. There is an increasing tendency to cooperate with popular international universities and offer diverse academic (IT, mathematics, business and management, etc.) programs at Georgian HEIs. Collaborating in medicine and technological fields between Georgian and international universities is especially popular. Georgian universities strive for granting

joint diplomas in several fields to graduates and thus increase their competitiveness locally and internationally. Universities are constantly trying to equip laboratories and classrooms with innovative infrastructure, implement contemporary teaching tools and most importantly increase research activities which is assumed as a weakness of the Georgian higher education system.

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