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Convergence and Divergence: Asymmetry in Higher Education Systems of Georgia and Europe

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Abstract

This article conducts a comparative analysis of the higher education systems in Georgia and the European Union, examining the dynamics of convergence and divergence within the framework of the Bologna Process and European integration agendas. The primary aim is to move beyond a superficial listing of similarities and differences to identify and analyze the structural, normative, and functional asymmetries that characterize this relationship. The study employs a qualitative mixed-methods approach, combining a review of policy documents and legislative frameworks with statistical data from Eurostat, the European University Association (EUA), and the National Centre for Educational Quality Enhancement of Georgia.

The findings reveal a complex, dualistic landscape. On one hand, significant formal convergence is evident in structural reforms, such as the adoption of the three-cycle degree system, quality assurance mechanisms, and the ECTS. On the other hand, profound divergence and asymmetry persist in critical areas, including sustainable funding models, institutional autonomy, academic integrity, the practical implementation of quality assurance, and the integration into the European Research Area. The conclusion posits that while Georgia has successfully achieved formal alignment with European standards, substantive integration is hindered by a core-periphery dynamic. The article

argues that overcoming this asymmetry requires not only continued policy compliance but also a dedicated focus on capacity building, resource allocation, and the cultivation of a robust academic culture to ensure a more equitable and synergistic partnership within the European Higher Education Area.

Keywords: Convergence, Divergence, Asymmetry, Higher Education Reform, Bologna Process, Georgia, European Higher Education Area (EHEA), Quality Assurance

Introduction

The European Higher Education Area (EHEA), inaugurated in 2010, represents one of the most ambitious transnational education integration projects in modern history. Driven by the Bologna Process, it aims to ensure comparability, compatibility, and coherence of higher education systems across Europe to facilitate student and staff mobility, enhance employability, and promote international competitiveness (EUA,2024). For post-Soviet nations like Georgia, which joined the Bologna Process in 2005, alignment with the EHEA is not merely an educational policy objective but a cornerstone of its broader geopolitical strategy for European integration. This paper argues that the integration process is characterized by a fundamental asymmetry, where formal, structural convergence often masks deeper, substantive divergence in implementation, capacity, and outcomes. This study aims to critically analyze this dynamic, moving beyond a checklist of adopted reforms to investigate the qualitative gaps that sustain a core-periphery relationship within the EHEA. The paper will first review the theoretical framework of policy transfer and asymmetry, then detail its methodological approach, present findings on key areas of convergence and divergence, and conclude with a discussion on the implications for Georgia and the EHEA (Shattock, 2025).

Theoretical Framework: Policy Transfer and Asymmetry

The analysis of Georgia's integration into the EHEA is situated within the theoretical lens of policy transfer and the core-periphery model. Policy transfer theory examines the process by which knowledge, policies, and administrative arrangements are diffused from one political system to another (Dolowitz & Marsh, 2000). In this context, the EU acts as a "normative power," exporting its models and standards to a "policy-taker" nation (European Commission, 2024). However, this transfer is rarely seamless. The concept of asymmetry is crucial, referring not to simple difference but to a power imbalance where the core (established EU systems) sets the agenda and benchmarks, while the periphery (Georgia) must adapt, often without the same

financial, institutional, or historical resources. This creates a risk of "isomorphic mimicry" - adopting the forms of a system without its functional effectiveness (Andrews et al., 2017) - which is a central theme explored in this analysis.

Literature Review

The integration of post-Soviet states into transnational higher education frameworks has been a subject of significant academic inquiry. Scholars have generally approached this process through two primary lenses: one focusing on the technical-administrative aspects of reform and the other on the critical-sociological implications of policy transfer.

A substantial body of literature documents the formal progress of Bologna Process implementation in Eastern Partnership countries. Reports by international organizations, such as the European Commission's biennial Bologna Process Implementation Report (2023) and studies by the European University Association (EUA, 2022), provide valuable comparative data on structural reforms, noting the widespread adoption of the three-cycle system, ECTS, and diploma supplements across the region. These works often serve as a benchmark for formal compliance, cataloging the *de jure* alignment of national legislation with European standards (EUA, 2024).

Beyond these descriptive accounts, a more critical strand of literature examines the challenges and unintended consequences of this rapid reform process. The theory of "isomorphic mimicry," as applied to education policy by Andrews et al. (2017), provides a powerful framework for understanding how developing systems often adopt the forms of successful institutions to garner legitimacy but fail to develop their underlying functional capacity. This concept resonates with the findings of several scholars focusing on the post-Soviet space. For instance, Kovtun (2021), in a comparative study of Ukraine and Georgia, argues that quality assurance regimes, while formally aligned with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the EHEA (ESG), often operate as a top-down auditing exercise rather than fostering a culture of continuous internal quality enhancement. This gap between form and function is a recurrent theme.

Furthermore, the financial sustainability of integrated higher education systems is a critical area of concern. Papava (2019) and other economists have highlighted the "tuition dependency trap" prevalent in Georgia, where chronically low public funding forces universities to prioritize revenue generation through student fees over long-term strategic goals like research development. This creates a fundamental asymmetry with the well-funded public universities of Western Europe, a disparity that Schimmelfennig (2022) frames within a "core-periphery" model of the EHEA. In this model, the core sets the norms and benefits from brain circulation, while the periphery

risks becoming an exporter of talented students and an importer of educational models, struggling to retain academic capital and develop a robust research profile.

Finally, the literature on academic autonomy and freedom in hybrid regimes suggests that formal governance structures can be undermined by informal political and economic influences. The work of Shatberashvili (2021) explores this tension in the Georgian context, noting that while institutional autonomy is legally enshrined, its practical application remains contested, potentially impacting academic integrity and the attractiveness of the system for international scholars.

This review establishes that existing scholarship has identified the dual nature of integration - formal success versus substantive challenge. However, a comprehensive analysis that synthesizes these dimensions of asymmetry - structural, financial, and cultural - into a single framework specifically for Georgia is still needed. This paper aims to fill that gap by providing a holistic analysis of convergence and divergence, arguing that the observed asymmetries are not isolated issues but interconnected features of Georgia's position within the periphery of the EHEA.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative mixed-methods research design to provide a holistic and critical examination of the convergence-divergence dynamic between the higher education systems of Georgia and the European Union. The methodology was structured to move beyond a mere checklist of formal reforms and to unearth the underlying qualitative asymmetries in implementation and function. The research design incorporated three primary components: a policy analysis, a desktop review of statistical data, and a comparative analysis.

Research Design and Data Collection

The data collection process was conducted in two parallel streams to capture both the normative-intentional dimension (policies) and the empirical-functional dimension (outcomes) of the systems.

Policy Analysis:

A comprehensive and systematic review of key policy documents and legislative frameworks was conducted. This included:

- **Foundational EHEA Documents:** The Bologna Declaration (1999), subsequent communiqués from Ministerial Conferences (Paris 2018, Rome 2020), and the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG);

- **European Commission Reports:** Policy reports and country-specific assessments on Georgia published by the European Commission and its affiliated bodies (EACEA);
- **Georgian National Legislation:** The primary document analyzed was the Law of Georgia on Higher Education, along with subordinate legislation and strategic documents issued by the National Centre for Educational Quality Enhancement (NCEQE). The analysis focused on tracing the transposition of EHEA principles into national law.

Desktop Review of Statistical Data:

Quantitative data on key performance indicators were collected from reputable international and national sources to provide an empirical basis for comparison. The data was sourced from:

- **Eurostat:** For data on public expenditure on higher education as a percentage of GDP, researcher demographics, and international student mobility within the EU;
- **European University Association (EUA):** For reports on institutional autonomy, funding trends, and participation in European research initiatives;
- **World Bank (World Development Indicators):** For broader macroeconomic and educational indicators relevant to the Georgian context;
- **National Centre for Educational Quality Enhancement (NCEQE) of Georgia:** For national data on student enrollment, graduate outcomes, and quality assurance audit results.

The specific metrics gathered included: public funding per student, academic staff qualifications (percentage of staff with a PhD), inbound and outbound student mobility flows, and research output metrics (publications, participation in Horizon Europe).

Data Analysis

The collected data was analyzed using a comparative analysis framework.

- **Policy Analysis:** A content analysis was performed on the policy documents to identify stated commitments, formal structures, and mandated processes. This established the baseline of formal convergence;
- **Statistical Data Analysis:** The quantitative data from Georgian sources was systematically compared against aggregated averages from EU member states, with a particular focus on newer Central and Eastern European members to provide a more contextualized benchmark. This comparison aimed to identify measurable gaps and disparities, highlighting areas of functional divergence;

- **Synthesis:** The findings from the policy analysis were juxtaposed with the results of the statistical comparison. This integrative synthesis was crucial for identifying instances of "isomorphic mimicry" - where formal policy alignment (convergence) was not supported by equivalent resources or outcomes, thus revealing the core-periphery asymmetry.

Limitations

While this approach provides a comprehensive overview, certain limitations are acknowledged. The study relies on publicly available data, which may vary in depth and reporting standards between Georgia and EU nations. Furthermore, the qualitative assessment of implementation (The perceived bureaucratic nature of quality assurance) is based on a synthesis of existing literature and reported outcomes rather than original ethnographic research. Future studies could strengthen these findings through primary data collection via interviews with policymakers, university administrators, and academic staff in both Georgia and comparable EU states (Beridze, 2020).

Results: Landscapes of Convergence and Divergence

The findings reveal a clear dualism in Georgia's integration into the EHEA.

Formal Convergence

Georgia has successfully implemented the primary structural pillars of the Bologna Process:

- **Three-Cycle System:** The Bachelor-Master-PhD structure is fully operational;
- **Diploma Supplement:** The EHEA Diploma Supplement is issued automatically and free of charge in English;
- **Quality Assurance:** An independent national agency (the National Centre for Educational Quality Enhancement) operates according to ESG standards and has registered with EQAR;
- **ECTS Credits:** The European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) is formally integrated into all study programs (NCEQE, 2023).

Discussion

The results demonstrate that Georgia's journey in the EHEA is a tale of two integrations: one formal and structural, the other substantive and functional. The observed asymmetries are not merely implementation gaps but are symptomatic of the core-periphery dynamic inherent in rapid policy transfer (Dolowitz & Marsh, 2000; Schimmelfennig, 2022). The pressure to converge formally can sometimes divert attention and resources from nurturing the underlying academic culture, sustainable funding, and

institutional integrity required for a truly integrated and high-performing system. The divergence in research capacity, in particular, risks cementing Georgia's status as a consumer, rather than a co-producer, of knowledge within Europe. This discussion argues that resolving this asymmetry requires a shift in focus from adoption to adaptation and absorption, necessitating targeted support from European partners and a strategic, long-term domestic commitment.

Persistent Asymmetry and Divergence Beneath this formal alignment, significant asymmetries exist:

- **Funding:** Georgia's public expenditure on higher education as a percentage of GDP remains significantly below the EU average (European Commission, 2023), leading to heavy reliance on tuition fees and creating financial barriers for students and institutions, a phenomenon described as a "tuition dependency trap" (Papava, 2019);
- **Institutional Autonomy vs. State Control:** While universities have formal autonomy, informal political and economic influences can impact governance, academic freedom, and hiring practices, echoing concerns raised in the literature on hybrid regimes (Shatberashvili, 2021);
- **Quality in Practice:** Despite a robust legal framework for quality assurance, its implementation is often perceived as a bureaucratic exercise rather than a tool for genuine quality enhancement, demonstrating the risk of "isomorphic mimicry" (Andrews et al., 2017; Kovtun, 2021). Concerns regarding academic integrity remain;
- **Research and Innovation:** Integration into the European Research Area (ERA) is minimal. Participation in Horizon Europe is low, and domestic research funding is insufficient, limiting the research capacity of universities and their competitiveness within the European landscape, cementing its peripheral status (Schimmelfennig, 2022).

Conclusion

This study concludes that the higher education landscape between Georgia and Europe is defined by a pronounced asymmetry, where successful formal convergence coexists with challenging substantive divergence. Georgia has unequivocally aligned its system with the architectural blueprint of the EHEA. However, the full benefits of integration - such as equitable mobility, recognized research excellence, and a self-sustaining academic ecosystem - remain constrained by disparities in funding, governance, and practical implementation of quality. For Georgia, the future challenge is to move beyond isomorphic mimicry (Andrews et al., 2017) and build endogenous capacity. For the EHEA, this analysis highlights the need to

address the periphery's challenges through more nuanced support mechanisms that go beyond structural compliance to foster genuine, equitable partnership. Future research should focus on longitudinal studies of graduate outcomes and the specific impact of EU support programs on reducing this asymmetry.

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