Introduction of the American-Style Graduate School System to Georgia

[Policy paper]

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Introduction

The present paper is a part of the policy paper series prepared by the Center for Social Sciences in 2019-2021 with the financial support of the US Embassy in Georgia. The project focused on introducing the concept of an American-style graduate school to the Georgian universities, generating a discussion around the benefits of this system and advocating for developing similar structural units in Georgian research universities. For this purpose, a series of roundtable discussions have been conducted in 2019 with the involvement of the leading research universities in Georgia, as well as with the participation of the local and international educational experts and consultants. Due to Covid-19 pandemic, the project moved to an online mode and organized a series of webinars on different aspects of doctoral education, such as PhD supervision, participation in international projects, PhD funding, benefits of publishing academic articles as an alternative to PhD thesis, and quality assurance. Five policy documents on respective topics were also prepared in English and Georgian. The current paper is a continuation, or more precisely, an introduction to the mentioned policy papers and overarches those key points that were identified and repeated across the different policy papers. Namely, the current policy paper discusses the option of introducing Graduate Schools within universities that would combine post-graduate (Master and PhD) education, funding schemes and other important elements that could help improve the quality of post-graduate education, especially doctoral education, in Georgia.

What is an American-Style Graduate School?

Graduate School (GS) model that is widely spread in American and Canadian (as well as in some of the European universities) educational systems stem in Humboldtian university structure that later on was

developed into a John Hopkins University style closely linking research and teaching to one another (Maheu, 2008) on graduate levels. Considering its focus on integration of research and teaching, the GS only exists in the research universities and has certain benefits over the university structures that are department/faculty based. GS is a structural unit of a university that stands on the level of a faculty in terms its academic functions (and does not solely operate as an administrative office), and most importantly, is a part of a top-level or central administration having a higher degree of authority than faculties or departments. GS unites master and doctoral level programs (no matter the academic discipline or direction) across the universities and is authorized for:

- Admission on graduate level (including paperwork and enrollment, as well as admission decision-making);
- Participation in graduate program development and modification (in conjunction with the faculty/departments);
- Keeping and maintaining students' academic records;
- Master's and PhD doctoral defense procedures (including nomination of defense committee members, organization of defense, granting degree);
- Quality assurance of graduate education;
- **Post-doctorate studies (including defining specific policies, enrollment, funding, training, etc.);**
- **Graduate student funding schemes;**
- **Providing centralized and vertical structures for graduate training in transferable skills that are not discipline-related and are more universal for the majority of academic directions;**
- **Administering and managing interdisciplinary programs;**
- **Integrating closely Master's and PhD studies.**

Implications for Georgian Higher Education

The list above outlines those major functions that GS combines as one of the key units within the university central administration. As mentioned above, the major role of the GS is to fully and effectively integrate research and teaching and "articulate a vision of excellence for the Graduate community" (Council of Graduate Schools, 2004). Therefore, its functions combine both, administrative and academic components. Majority of these functions are not unknown to the Georgian higher education context, as well as of any higher education system. But its concentration within a single unit provides high level of efficiency and most importantly, it implies the development of the quality of graduate education as its ultimate goal.

Considering the fact that abovementioned functions (such as quality assurance, admission process, students records,) are scattered in different units and faculty obligations in Georgian universities, and are considered to be performing at some level, within this policy document, I will focus on several components that are widely lacked in our local context. Namely, I will briefly discuss these five aspects: post-graduate education, student funding schemes, skills training, interdisciplinary programs and integration of Master and PhD studies.

Post-Doctorate Studies

Post-doctorate studies are not regulated by the Georgian legislation, which only defined who can be considered as a post-doctoral fellow (a person holding PhD or its equivalent that can be elected only once and be part of a scientific personnel of a university, (Law of Georgia on Higher Education, Article 32). Other than that, the legislation does not contain any information on who post-doctoral studies can be administered, how funding can be provided, etc. Therefore, this claw does envisage existence of a post-doctoral fellow at the universities, but does not provide any directions regarding the implementation of post-doctorate studies. Neither the Joint Strategy of Education and Research 2017-2021 or 2022-2032 contain any information on the development of post-doctorate or identify it as one of the priorities for Georgian higher education. On the other hand, post-doctorate education can be considered as a way to draw new generation of scholars to universities and develop academic human resources. However, it is difficult for the Georgian universities under current structures to abide post-doctorate studies to any of their existing structural units – faculties are already overburdened by the management of Bachelor's, Master's and PhD studies, while departments have no legal authority to administer them. Graduate Schools, as being both academic and administrative bodies can be excellent basis for regulating this direction and providing funding, as well as supervision/guidance to the post-doctoral fellows.

Student Funding Schemes

Student funding, as well as funding research is a hot topic in current debate over Georgian higher education system. According to the current policy, BA and MA studies are funded solely by students' fees (either paid by students or through state scholarships), while PhD studies is not funded at all. More detail discussion on PhD funding is provided in another policy paper authored by Marine Chitashvili and developed within the scope of this project. Therefore, I will not discuss it further here. The only thing that I will focus on is the funding schemes that Graduate Schools provide in American (as well as in Canadian and European) system that can also be adopted in our local context. Namely, the funding for graduate students can be ensured through not only research funds, such as fellowships, but also through the so-called teaching assistantships and research assistantships. The

latter two not necessarily provide funding for conducting PhD (or Master's) research by a student, but it is a good way to sustain students through hiring them for conducting certain classes or research projects. Even though, this cannot be discussed as an ideal option for funding students, but at least it is better to avoid student dropouts from universities due to lack of funding for living.

Skills Training

Transferable skill training is among one of the most important and serious flows the current Georgian higher education system has, especially on the doctoral level. According to different studies, including those by the author of the current paper, majority of the university graduates lack certain skills that are necessary for employment market. This also touches upon the graduate education, and most importantly doctoral education. Majority of the doctoral programs that operate currently in Georgian higher education system do not provide sufficient training in different important skills, such as grant proposal writing and fundraising, academic or non-academic writing, translating research outputs/outcomes to policy advocacy, etc. Majority of the academic programs have their own curricula that train students in subject-related topics (on Masters' level), methodology and pedagogy (on PhD level), while the abovementioned skills training is left aside and even if conducted, they are not universal for all PhD (or Master's) programs across the universities. Again, the structure of the Graduate School allows to administer such courses at its premises making it available for students of all academic directions and disciplines.

Interdisciplinary Programs

Interdisciplinary programs are yet another direction that is not well-regulated in Georgian higher education system. Namely, in most universities, such programs are artificially assigned to certain faculties and academic departments, as they should be assigned somewhere, making it ineffective for inter-disciplinary or multi-disciplinary communication between various faculties or departments. Since Graduate Schools are interdisciplinary in nature themselves serving as a bridge between different faculties, it is easier for such units to operate and promote interdisciplinary research and education.

Integrating Master's and PhD studies

And lastly, integration of Master and doctoral studies can be considered as one of the major achievements for American-style graduate education. According to this system, the research-oriented Master's programs are integrated in the GS structures allowing the master's graduate to automatically continue studies on doctoral level. In short, this system allows admission on Master's level with a

provision to continue doctorate without extra admission process. On the other hand, such integration allows PhD student to attend certain master's level courses that are necessary for their education and acquire certain credits. Currently, in Georgian universities, in case a PhD student attends Master's courses, it is performed only informally and is based on an individual will of a respective professor whether or not to allow a student to their classes. While the GS model allows doctoral student to do the same formally, without any necessity to negotiate this on individual level and using personal networking.

To summarize, the current policy paper tried to briefly identify the major benefits American-style graduate school model can suggest to the Georgian higher education institutions. Therefore, the major recommendations that the current paper has towards the universities is **to establish the Graduate School at their premises** that will support the further integration of research and teaching.

References:

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