

Supervision of PhD Studies: Challenges in the Georgian Higher Education System

[Policy paper]

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In the present document I will focus on the main challenges to the supervision of PhD studies at the universities in Georgia. Based on my own experience as a professor at the oldest and largest public university - Tbilisi State University (TSU) running a PhD program in Sociology of Culture and Media, I will address the challenges to supervising PhD students at public universities.

The first and most important challenge to the professors supervising PhD students at public universities of Georgia is that their supervision is not reimbursed (they are neither paid for supervising PhD students nor is it counted in their workload. Even at private universities professors' reimbursement for supervising PhD students is rather formal). Although according to professors' contracts, their workload implies teaching, supervising BA, MA and PhD students, and doing research, in fact, the only component that is paid actual attention is teaching. Recently the situation has changed in respect to the research component and to take an example of TSU, lately professors' research activities are allocated certain scores that will also affect their salaries. Thus, although the research component has been included in the assessment of professors' performance, supervision is still an underestimated activity and is not part of professors' assessment. So, as the supervision of PhD students is neither included in the professors' workload nor paid, it often becomes a formal obligation. As it is a matter of prestige to be called a research (and not just a teaching) university, that is, to operate PhD programs, the existing 32 research universities in Georgia do announce admissions for PhD programs with some regularity accumulating a certain number of PhD students and the professors involved in these programs have to supervise them (no secret, often quite unenthusiastically), which becomes a rather formal activity for professors.

The issue of formality is logically related to the question of quality. Although it is clear that professors cannot supervise an indefinite number of PhD students, in fact, at many public universities they do. Again, to take an example of TSU, although according to official regulations, each professor should supervise no more than five active PhD students at a time, it is hard to find any PhD program in which a professor leading the program supervises only five students. Considering that some programs even accept more than five PhD students per year and the same few professors supervise them without even being paid, as noted above, supervision of PhD students becomes a largely formal process for professors that, no doubt, has a negative impact on the quality of supervision.

This formality is further reinforced by an artificially prolonged process of PhD studies that, according to the official regulations, lasts from 6 to 10 semesters the longest; however, considering the possibility of occasionally inactivating a number of semesters and reactivating a PhD status again, in fact, one can prolong his/her PhD studies for even up to 20 years (if we calculate it based on the acting regulations at TSU). No wonder, if stretched for such a long period, PhD studies become a formal duty for both PhD students and their supervisors. This both affects the quality of PhD studies and makes the latter less appealing to prospecting students, which is also confirmed by the Geostat data (2011-2020) that show a declining trend in the PhD enrollment in Georgia within the last decade. PhD enrollment was especially high for social sciences, business, and law, and hence a declining trend is particularly visible in these fields. That obtaining a PhD degree does not seem very appealing for those involved in higher education is also evident from the recent Geostat data that showed that the number of PhD holders in Georgia was 7277 in 2019 (with almost equal distribution by sex). Presumably, one of the reasons for such an indicator is the abovementioned prolonged process of PhD studies as well.

Another factor that has a negative impact on the quality of PhD studies is the lack of resources that are available for professors and their PhD students. Although universities have access to a number of electronic databases (for instance, TSU provides access to Jstor, Ebsco, Cambridge University Journals) and Shota Rustaveli National Science Foundation of Georgia (SRNSFG) provides them with an access to the Elsevier databases, the actual access to many journals and full articles is still restricted. Therefore, both professors and PhD students have a limited access to important electronic sources, which prevents them from regularly updating their knowledge based on the latest advancements in their fields. Moreover, no inter-university library chains (such as those in the UK, Sweden and other countries) operate at the universities in Georgia, so that professors and students can get access to the library resources at other universities (at least, public ones). This deficiency could have been somewhat compensated if only the practice of systematic sharing of experience among colleagues and PhD students had been common. Unfortunately, there are only rare cases of such an experience

sharing between a few universities, which depends on the goodwill of particular professors and does not have an institutional character. The same is true about PhD students' joint discussions and provision of feedback to one another, which would have been useful in terms of both helping peers to improve their work and reflecting on one's own work and its drawbacks after receiving the feedback from peers. Such a sharing of experience is rare not only among professors and PhD students of different universities but even those within the same university, while it has been long practiced at various international universities.

As noted above, the lack of local inter-university collaboration remains a true challenge for universities in Georgia. It is impossible to understand why the credits brought from foreign universities (say, based on students' participation in the Erasmus+ exchange programs or bilateral programs between particular universities) are recognized by all public universities though the credits that might be accumulated at another public university where particular courses might be offered that are not offered at one's home university are not recognized by any of them. The recognition of credits accumulated at other local universities would encourage PhD students to take only those courses they consider most relevant for their PhD studies and enrich the ones offered by their home universities. On its side, this would enhance the collaboration between thematically related PhD programs and their personnel at different universities. Furthermore, it is important to foster the inter-university collaboration among not only PhD programs within the same disciplines but also those approaching similar topics from different disciplinary perspectives (for instance, PhD programs focusing on culture might represent various disciplines such as cultural sociology, cultural anthropology, cultural psychology, cultural studies, etc.) in order for PhD students to get familiar with the latest developments in the related fields and widen their horizons. Such an inter-university collaboration will be beneficial to not only PhD students but also their supervisors making the supervision process more efficient and positively affecting the quality of PhD programs in Georgia.

The lack of international collaboration adds to the lack of local collaboration and is a true obstacle on the way to achieving a declared mission of internationalization of the universities in Georgia. This lack is especially problematic at the level of PhD studies. Based on the best practices of European universities, professors are usually involved in joint international projects within their research areas together with their PhD students. Such an involvement gives both professors and PhD students an access to the latest updates in their respective fields and the opportunity to apply the up-to-date methods of data collection and analysis. It also affects the duration and quality of PhD studies as the PhD students collect their research data within the framework of such international projects, and hence they do not need to either search for other sources of funding to afford conducting their field

research or have an additional job to pay for their PhD studies. Thus, being involved in international projects both simplifies the process of data collection ensuring the ready-made funding for field research and setting a fixed timeline for its implementation and enhances the quality of data collection and analysis as it is harmonized among several international universities and checked by funding agencies. No doubt, this is the strongest incentive for both professors and their PhD students ensuring a regular and active collaboration between them and enabling to both pursue own research interests and get funding for it. In addition, it becomes a basis for future joint international projects as well as enhances international professional networks of the participating universities, thus truly contributing to the mission of their internationalization. In order to catch up with the contemporary developments, the universities in Georgia need to start implementing the abovementioned practice and supporting (or rather empowering) their professors and PhD students to get involved in international research projects. For this purpose, they need to ensure various trainings for their professors and PhD students in the proposal writing for international funding (such as Horizon Europe, Fulbright, etc.), development of research design, publishing in international peer reviewed journals and so on.

Based on the abovementioned major points, the following recommendations have been formulated aiming at the improvement of the quality of PhD supervision at the universities in Georgia:

- Supervision of PhD students should be actually included in the professors' workload and compensated respectively.
- The number of PhD students supervised by a single professor should be not only formally limited but also strictly regulated.
- Duration of PhD studies should be adequately regulated via limiting the number of inactive semesters as well as the possibility of reactivation of a PhD status.
- Both professors and PhD students should be provided with a better access to important electronic resources and databases to be able to regularly update their knowledge based on the latest advancements in their research fields.
- Local collaboration among universities should be enhanced, so that they are able to share resources and even develop joint PhD programs, including interdisciplinary ones. This will have a positive impact on the improvement of the quality of PhD studies at Georgian universities.
- International collaboration among Georgian and foreign universities should be fostered, so that both professors and their PhD students in Georgia are involved in the joint international projects (especially the EU-funded ones), which will contribute to both professors' catching up with the latest developments in their research areas and PhD students' producing higher quality PhD theses. In order to support this process, the universities in Georgia should provide

respective trainings for their professors and PhD students to ensure their competitiveness at the international level.