

Internal and External Factors Lead to Curriculum Change at Higher Education Institutions in Georgia

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Abstract

Various internal and external factors influence curriculum change and implementation which include but is not limited to the state educational policies, leadership and management, education institutional settings, teachers, technological advancement, resource materials, etc. These internal and external influential factors are closely interconnected. The UN Sustainable Development Goal Four (SDG4) focuses on education and aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education for all; With this purpose it is critical to revise the curriculum based on the feedback obtained from all stakeholders. This article analyzes some internal and external factors which caused curriculum change of the Philology Program, International Black Sea University (IBSU), Tbilisi, in 2022. To get a full picture of the change process, the case study applied qualitative method, interviewing the decision-makers, the program coordinator, the lecturers who are responsible for implementation of a new program, and the recipients – the students. The study used some statistics from IBSU Students' Affair Department for the verification of the results. The article highlights the problem of curriculum change from different perspectives - from policy changes by the Ministry of Education of Georgia to expected outcomes. The arguments and analysis offered by the authors will enable the researchers, policy makers, lecturers and implementers to get first-hand information about the students' and academic staff's recent experiences regarding implementation of curriculum change, sharing necessary knowledge and technique how to deal with persistent issues during teaching/learning process. The article concludes with the considerations on the scale of changes needed in HEIs to keep steady pace with ever-evolving environment over the world.

Keywords: Curriculum Change, Curriculum Enrichment, Curriculum Design/Redesign, Higher-Education Institutions, Internal and External Factors

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Introduction

Curriculum design has always been the most critical part of any learning institution. As Edmond Short stated, there is always a need for newly formulated curriculum models that address contemporary circumstance and valued educational aspirations (Nyame & Setordzi, 2021). It does not matter how well-designed curriculum is, it still requires regular renewal. Major internal and external frame factors should be identified for needs assessment. It is important to support country efforts in dealing with issues within the process of curriculum redesigning and implementation across different levels and settings of education. Curriculum change theory is defined as the substitution which occurs when a new element substitutes another which is already present and alteration exists when new contents, items, materials, or procedures are added up into existing materials and programs (Harbon, 2000).

As Decker F. Walker highlighted the individual and collective curriculum practices of educators can and do have long-lasting implications on the lives of persons and on the society where we live. All professional educators have a responsibility to consider, keep track of and alter those implications (Walker & F.Soltis, 2004). Some feel that local educators, administration staff and students are the only legitimate curriculum decision makers; however, a moment's reflection showcases that other external actors also may have their hands in curriculum decision-making process. For instance, these actors include the Ministry of Education that declares new regulations or decrees concerning education, non-governmental organizations working on education matters and accrediting associations that have an exhaustive list of requirements that HEIs have to meet to be accredited, out of which many concerns with curriculum designing or implementation. Since curriculum represents the bridge between education and employment, it should help students to develop necessary skills essential to lifelong learning and it should also be aligned with current labor market needs.

Method

Statistical data obtained from the Students' Affairs Department, IBSU, has been a valuable source as it provided opportunity to observe the ongoing changes in students' achievements of two academic years in dynamics. Apart from the secondary sources, primary data for the present research has been gathered through interviews and survey analyses from university students and the head of the Teacher Training Educational Program (TTEP) at IBSU (Georgia). We interviewed those particular people because they are directly affected by the changed policy and strategy as we expected to get first-hand information both from the decision-makers and the end-users; therefore, we ensured the credibility and reliability of data collected. Semi-structured Interview (SSI) method was used to obtain both quantitative and qualitative data from the research participants. We could ask to our applicants some follow-up questions leading to an exploration in greater depth on key concepts and the interviewees were more open to express their own ideas in a wider manner. The interviews were followed by group discussions in which the head of the department, education specialists, doctoral students, bachelor level students, and the end-users took part.

The survey was conducted with a total population of 51 students and the selected sample applying the Stratified Random Sampling technique that equals to 38 students in total. Independent and dependent variables have been identified. The reshaped curriculum targeted to the demands of the beneficiaries was selected as an independent variable, while the students who were affected by the changes were considered as a dependent variable in the present research. The following theoretical framework was chosen for the present research. The

curriculum which is now both - content-based and competency-based, focuses on development of learning competencies; Curriculum is elaborated along the lines of four main curriculum approaches, namely: humanistic approach, developmentalist approach, social reconstruction, and social efficiency.

External and Internal Factors

Because of changes into the National Qualifications Framework worked by the National Center for Educational Quality Enhancement the enriched TTEP was integrated into the English Philology BA program, IBSU, to meet Teachers' Professional Standards, National Qualification Framework and the Georgian legislation.

Teacher Training Educational Program, IBSU, has been developed by the head of English Philology Program, IBSU, Prof. M. Chkhotua supported by the academic staff in 2021 to meet new regulations of the Ministry of Education for teachers' preparation and training. Novelty of the TTEP, IBSU is that it is incorporated into the 4-year English Philology BA Program and the second-year students have opportunity to register for this 60-credit program, upon completion of which the student gets a certificate of English Language Teaching. In February 2022, TTEP got the State Accreditation and enrolled the first students. The incorporated program was innovation on Georgian market as it was targeted to the students' needs and offer the them a flexible scheme to avoid additional a two-year training program for the Teachers' Certificate. The program includes Fifteen subjects, out of which three are electives (a student can choose one of them), and plus 10-credits which a student gets for trainings at school.

In academic year 2023, 51 students out of 70, chose TTEP program. It indicates to the increased interest among students who strive to get profound knowledge in the field, as well as enhance employment opportunities to fit to the official requirements.

Though private universities are relatively free from external pressures that would infringe their independence, the Ministry of Education of Georgia still maintains its control over the quality of education. They have to meet the state norms of authorization as well as program accreditation process established for education institutions. Nowadays, because of many external and internal challenges, financial and academic delivery model applied by universities is no longer stable. If permitted to run without apparent direction, higher education will not yield the desired results necessary to achieve national aims (Dickenson, 2023).

Restructuring curriculum and creating a TTEP Program which complies with the requirements of the Ministry is an example how some external factors influence curriculum development and, on the other hand attract students offering them employment opportunities. Ultimately, the enriched curriculum upscales university revenues and enhances its reputation.

The only source of revenue for universities in Georgia - both state and private ones are tuition fees and state scholarship. Increase in the tuition revenues is the major source of funding for private institution like IBSU. In September 2022, the Consumer Price Index increased by 0.8 percent compared to the previous month, while the annual inflation rate amounted to 11.5 percent (Georgia, 2022). With regard to the annual core inflation, the prices increased by 7.5 percent. Inflation rate reflected on the financial stability of the universities. Private universities including IBSU consider it inappropriate to use the standard measures of inflation to evaluate the growth of amount of tuition and fees. IBSU administration has not increased the tuition fees for students in spite of high inflation rate in the country. To rectify this situation, and to

attract more students, the University amended its policy, upgraded curricula of the educational programs, and incorporated some changes in management, e.g., measures for motivating administrative and academic staff.

The universities in Georgia, like in other countries, strive to accomplish four main goals: increase revenues, improve quality of teaching/learning, attract more students, and enhance their reputation. Curriculum enrichment accepted by the majority contains four components: planning, content, implementation and evaluation.

Planning: curriculum enrichment means giving a greater importance to a curriculum by adding values to meet educational needs, which was Primary objective of TTEP and aimed putting emphasis on the overall development of the students, helping them to acquire relevant skills and become competitive at labor market. Therefore, curriculum planning is based on a thorough process of needs assessment.

Content: determining the curriculum content is another key component for enhancing education quality. All parts of content should serve certain goals, but what is more significant, content should be practical for its target audience. Content of TTEP has been designed to be both - content-based and competency-based, which made it more engaging, effective and purposeful based on current needs of teaching/learning. The content of the new program has been enriched, accordingly, the syllabi for some newly-introduced subjects have been set-up.

Implementation: after content development it is essential to ensure proper implementation of curriculum. There are various aspects that influence enriched curriculum implementation including University leadership, trained staff, motivated students, available learning materials, institution environment, class practices, and supervision. Thus, all efforts should be made in order to consider all intervening factors not to hinder enriched curriculum implementation process. IBSU leadership has been supportive, adequate technical equipment has been purchased, and some training sessions for the lecturers have been financed.

Evaluation is a very important component of enriched curriculum implementation. This is the process of measuring and exploring the scope to which the learning programs and learning activities actually produce the expected learning outcomes. Evaluation process lays the foundation for producing curriculum-related decisions. Feedback on curriculum adjustments and lecturers' evaluation were obtained within the framework of research methodology of the present article, the results of which are presented below:

- 38 second-year students of TTEP answered the survey questions.
- 65% answered that they applied for the program because it offered enriched content and innovated curriculum;
- 19% mentioned practical aspects of the course and increased employment opportunities. While 16% of the survey participants supported the opinion that restructured curriculum reflect more social and humanistic approaches.
- Almost 90% acknowledged that new TTEP was engaging and easy to follow.

One open question - what is the most interesting and enjoyable aspect of the TTEP for you - revealed the students' deep interest towards academic subjects among which they named: intercultural education, educational psychology, special education, and education technologies.

Another open question showed the expectations of the students, the analysis of the qualitative answers revealed that they believe the offered program will help them to achieve not only

professional but academic goals as well. It was clearly stated by the majority that they are as much interested in raising their awareness and deepening knowledge in different academic subjects such as psychology and education theories.

Almost all respondents underscored the role of the practice offered by the program which envisages teaching English to school children in different grades.

In the personal interview with the head of the Program, Dr. Prof. Chkhotua, some problems which occurred during planning and implementation process of the TTEP has been discussed. The resistance from the side of the state authorities was a long-standing and serious, because, the program was designed in an original way, and intended to incorporate it into BA English Philology program. Also, she confronted some criticism because of curriculum, which was argued to be more academic content-based, rather than competency-based, and learning skills development. In her interview she also mentioned the support from the IBSU leadership which made her goal achievable. From her perspective, the choice of the majority of the Philology students made for a new program is a main indicator of the success.

Consequences of Curriculum Change

This year 910 students have been enrolled in the International Black Sea University BA programs which is about 10-12% more than in previous years. This is a direct result of university policy focusing on increasing quality, implementing innovations and enriching curriculum which ultimately enhances reputation of the university. In the national rating, in 2023, IBSU has been rated as the second among 53 authorized universities functioning in Georgia.

Based on the results of the present research, it can be concluded that one of the reasons the university has attracted greater number of students is due to its innovations, also modernized and enriched curriculum, like TTEP, which has been successfully incorporated into already existed Program.

Another evidence of students' satisfaction is their high evaluation which indicates to the effectiveness of leadership and management supporting and financing new programs, implementation of curriculum enrichment and innovative approaches in teaching/learning.

Conclusion

When is a Curriculum Change a Change for Better? The academic year 2021 was a right time for change TTEP curriculum to be a change for better for many reasons:

- to better adapt to demands dictated by the Ministry of Education of Georgia,
- to attract students who would be guaranteed to be competitive on a labor market;
- to update and enhance university teaching-learning quality and
- to make the university more challenging and demanded.

There is an increased demand for professional educators especially at HEIs. The shortage of well-qualified teachers hinders endeavors to attain high quality education throughout country. It is important to remember that Georgia, as one of the post-Soviet countries, started to develop the national education policy after it gained independence from the soviet regime, therefore the acute need for professionals in the field of education still remains unmet. The University

leadership tries to fill this gap, considering the needs of the country, one good example of this policy is foundation of a new education program for teachers.

Nowadays, higher education and qualification which responds to current needs is more important than ever, because for rapidly changing environment it is crucial to invest in education as it has tangible results on equity, well-being, personal growth and prosperity of population. However, financial investment is not a sole contribution to quality education; It requires adequate planning and implementation of diverse programs at all levels of education. Moreover, in many cases, there is a frequent need to fully change or alter existing curricula at educational institutions. Fast changing environment forces university leadership to initiate curriculum change, which is considered as inevitable and a basis for progress.

Appendix

Survey Questions

The following questionnaire has been applied for interviews:

1. What is your position or occupation? (Tick more one answers)
 - a. head of the program
 - b. lecturer
 - c. administrative staff member
 - d. researcher
 - e. other
2. How is the new enriched curriculum different from the old one?
3. Teacher Training Educational Program (TTEP):
 - a. has enriched the content of the curriculum
 - b. made it more practical and targeted to our employment needs
 - c. it now reflects more social and humanistic approaches
4. How easy, or complicated has been the process of implementing new curriculum?
 - a. very difficult, had to overcome some obstacles
 - b. somewhat difficult because of management problems
 - c. easy
 - d. actually no big problems
5. How would you evaluate the difficulties in the implementation process of the enriched curriculum?
 - 1-10
6. What is percentage of faculty students who chose this TTEP?
 - a. 1 - 25%
 - b. 26 - 50%
 - c. 51 - 75%
 - d. 76% and more
7. Have you conducted any surveys to identify the students' satisfaction level regarding your institution's modified curriculum?
8. What are the results of the students' survey?
9. How many students completed the program with high grades?
10. What is the employment rate of the graduates?
11. What would you change if you start from the beginning?
12. What are the future perspectives of the Program?
13. What further changes are expected?
14. Does the policy worked out by the Ministry of Education of Georgia in preparing the students for teaching career enhance their qualification and knowledge.
15. What would be your attitude towards the necessary changes imposed by the state policy?

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