



Research Article

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Delving Deeper: Understanding the Complexities of Plagiarism Prevention in Georgian Higher Education

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Abstract

The principles of academic integrity were broadly introduced to the Georgian higher education system in recent decade. After being integrated in the Bologna Process, the harmonization of the procedures and mechanisms made it necessary to implement changes to ensure the quality of education. The aim of this study was to explore the current practices for plagiarism prevention in Georgian higher education institutions. For this reason, recent institutional and study program accreditation reports were analysed, and 32 semi-structured interviews were conducted with academic staff representing different fields of study. The report analysis revealed that most academic integrity practices did not fully comply with existing accreditation standards, leading to specific recommendations for universities. The interviews with the academic staff confirmed that the perception of plagiarism differs among the different groups of professors. It was observed that the link with experiences in the Soviet Union still exists. Moreover, some instructors are only focused on detection. The findings of this research showed that the culture of academic integrity is still in the transition phase in the Georgian higher education system.

Keywords: Academic Integrity; Plagiarism; Higher Education; Georgia

1. Introduction

The In the last three decades, the Georgian (GE) education system went through different reforms and transformations (Chakhaia & Bregvadze, 2018; Glonti & Chitashvili, 2006) One of the major milestones was introducing the Unified National Examinations in 2005 to fight against the corruption in higher education (HE) (Chankseliani, 2013; Gorgodze & Chakhaia, 2021). Later, some significant changes were made with regard to academic integrity in the GE HE system. The institutional accreditation standards were updated in 2017, according to which (substandard 2.3 (Ethics and Integrity)) each institution must have a clearly defined policy and mechanisms for plagiarism detection and prevention (National Centre for Educational Quality Enhancement, 2017). Moreover, the study program accreditation standards also check the students' support services and the method of assessing the learning outcomes on both the course and program levels. This indirectly evaluates whether the principles of academic integrity were met while conducting assessment activities. These accreditation standards are based on Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG), which were first designed in 2005 as a baseline for quality assurance in HE across the European Union (EU) and were updated in 2015 with their current form. The ESG defines

instructions in three dimensions: internal and external quality assurance for Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs), as well as guidelines for quality assurance agencies. Academic integrity, as a key principle, is mentioned several times in the guidelines, and all stakeholders are recommended to consider it (Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG), 2015).

The National Centre for Educational Quality Assessment is responsible for evaluations of HEIs in Georgia. It is mandatory for all HEIs and study programs to go through accreditation. The Centre conducts evaluations based on pre-defined accreditation standards with the help of local and international field experts. According to the Ministry of Education and Science, there are 63 HEIs in Georgia (Ministry of Education, Science and Youth of Georgia, 2023).

1.1 Current Trends in Plagiarism Research

As HEIs mostly aim at knowledge creation, it is extremely important to consider the principles of academic integrity within this process. Plagiarism is a serious problem in many societies, regardless of the geographic location or the level of development of the country (Batane, 2010; Biliae-Zulle et al., 2005; Curtis & Tremayne, 2021). There are many studies on the reasons that lead students to engage in dishonest behaviours. Among them, the most frequently identified reasons are improper time management, stressful environments, increased competition, and the inefficiency of plagiarism prevention mechanisms at their university (Abbasi et al., 2021; Sadruddin, 2021). Studies also indicate that the perception of plagiarism differs between students and academic staff. In particular, what a professor considers serious misconduct is not perceived by students as a violation at this level (Foltýnek et al., 2014). A university's response to this issue should be based on the fact that the academic community includes people with different experiences who may have different ideas and opinions. Mechanisms for responding to plagiarism should be specific but, at the same time, tailored to all possible scenarios (Flint et al., 2006; Jones et al., 2006).

Along with the use of technology for similarity detection, a discussion about their effectiveness has started in academia. Some studies indicated that if students' papers are checked by such programs, they are more likely to be done in accordance with the principles of academic integrity (Baker & Adams, 2008). However, along with the implementing of similarity detection software, it is important to provide the instructions and feedback, as only detection will not help to prevent such cases. When introducing text-matching software in an educational institution, it is important to have the proper communication with the people involved in this process, first of all, with the academic staff. Sometimes there are misconceptions about the specifics of how such programs work. One such misconception is related to the perception among academic staff that this program detects plagiarism rather than similarity (Chao & Wilhelm, 2009). Studies indicate that if the university only aims to detect cases of plagiarism, then the effectiveness of using such programs is less. The opposite occurs when it is used as a prevention mechanism to help students complete their assignments in accordance with the principles of academic integrity (Ali, 2013; Mphahlele & McKenna, 2019; Tulley Pitchford, 2012).

A culture of academic integrity is not viewed in isolation, nor is it confined to one context. Rather, it is part of everyday life in academia and beyond. Some previous studies focus on the role of the local cultural and social aspects in establishing a culture of integrity, more specifically the discussion is on whether there are different perceptions and approaches of this phenomenon. In Australia, there was a need for a holistic approach from universities to make integrity principles equally important to all actors, not just for students (Bretag et al., 2014). Although the majority of universities in New Zealand have developed integrity policies and mechanisms, accessibility remains a challenge (Möller, 2023). The picture is a bit different in Asia and the Middle East region, where the main challenge is not only the lack of effective mechanisms, but also the cultural differences and perceptions that are specific to this region (Macfarlane et al., 2014). West European countries have taken important steps to implement the principles of academic integrity in HE through legislative

changes, but in the Central and Eastern European region, there is still a need to improve those mechanisms (Glendinning, 2020). In the countries of the former Soviet Union, changes are carried out step by step, if the initial task was to eliminate corruption in the education system, at the next stage there was a need to introduce country-wide regulations, some of which were related to the principles of academic integrity (Houdyshellm, 2017). However, one of the biggest challenges in this context is the fact that academic staff often have no desire or do not show initiative to be engaged in building a culture of integrity (Bakradze et al., 2016). Across various institutions, there is a growing reliance on educational programs that focus on academic integrity as a fundamental component of the curriculum. These programs aim to create a deep understanding of ethical academic practices, moving beyond mere detection of plagiarism to fostering a culture that inherently discourages dishonest behaviours (Perkins et al., 2020).

1.2 Plagiarism Research in Georgia

There are not many studies investigating the ongoing tendencies in the GE education system with regards to the principles of academic integrity. The first countrywide research was conducted in 2016, when a group of researchers found that the majority of HEIs were lacking plagiarism prevention mechanisms. Moreover, only two institutions were using text-matching software. In addition, the study confirmed that the awareness of plagiarism among students was at a very low level, while the perception of academic staff toward plagiarism was different (Bakradze et al., 2016). Prior to this research, a study outlined that student from Georgia had the highest number of cases of plagiarism compared to their counterparts from Turkey and Germany (Kayaoğlu et al., 2015). Another group of researchers noted that very often, measures were only taken against plagiarism during Master's studies, leaving the previous levels of education without any guidance. That said, the strategy of the universities was only focused on detection, not prevention (Doghonadze et al., 2018).

Under the Erasmus Plus action of Capacity Building in Higher Education, a Georgian national project was funded in 2017. The consortium gathered fifteen HEIs from Georgia, the Ministry of Education and Sciences, the National Centre for Educational Quality Enhancement, and four EU partner universities. The project, titled "Academic Integrity for Quality Teaching and Learning in Higher Education Institutions in Georgia (INTEGRITY)," aimed to raise awareness about plagiarism, redesign the writing course curriculum at the universities, implement text-matching software, and create effective institutional policies and mechanisms together with effective student support services (Erasmus Plus CBHE Project INTEGRITY, 2017). The project finished in 2020 with a national conference on academic integrity, which was seen as a forum for academics to share expertise on different aspects of academic integrity at the national level. Later, some studies highlighted that awareness of plagiarism among students and academic staff was high at the institutions that participated in the above-mentioned project (Glendinning et al., 2021), and that the majority of the HEIs had policy documents and some mechanisms in place (Chokoraia, 2023). However, the studies showed that the same outcomes were not seen at other HEIs, as the policies and mechanisms did not seem to be working properly, meaning that even if students' papers were identified as plagiarized, they were offered the chance to make corrections and resubmit (Tsertsvadze & Khurtsia, 2020). Due to the shift to Emergency Distance Teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic in Georgia, evaluating students' learning outcomes became a real challenge. Students were confirmed to have a higher likelihood of cheating during this time, which was explained by stress or helping classmates (Reid, 2021).

Almost all the above-mentioned sources reported differences between the HEIs and spoke about practices that are mostly focused on detection rather than prevention. There is no recent study on plagiarism perception among academic staff, nor is there any analysis conducted based on an evaluation of HEIs (and study programs) with the updated accreditation standards.

This research aimed to explore the current practices, focusing on HEIs' external quality evaluations in recent years. In addition, plagiarism perception among GE academic staff was studied

to understand the nature of the existing tendencies and further the discussion. Therefore, the research questions of this study were as follows:

- What do external quality evaluations say about the plagiarism prevention mechanisms at Georgian HEIs?
- What are the plagiarism perceptions of academic staff in Georgia, and to what major concerns are those perceptions linked?

2. Materials and Methods

As this study aimed to explore the current tendencies, the research design was based on a qualitative approach, more specifically document analysis (Bowen, 2009), and in-depth interviews were selected as a means for obtaining data.

Document analysis is broadly used in academic research as a method to collect empirical data in a low-cost way (Bowen, 2009). In order to obtain meaningful information, documents should be examined in a systematic manner. For this study, we selected the institutional and study program accreditation reports of Georgian HEIs prepared in the context of the external quality assurance process. As this study focused on recent years, reports from all institutional accreditations conducted between 2021 and 2023, during which Substandard 2.3 was evaluated, were chosen for analysis. In total, there were 16 documents. In addition, study program evaluation reports from the same years were randomly selected, considering the maximum coverage of the universities, taking one report from small universities (<2000 students) and one report from the bigger universities (>2000 students). In total, 48 documents were added to the sample. For the number of reports, see Table 1.

Table 1: External Quality Assessment Reports (2021-2023 Years)

	2021 Year	2022 Year	2023 Year
Institutional Accreditation Reports	7	4	5
Study Program Accreditation Reports	18	18	12

These reports were drafted after the institutions and/or study programs were evaluated by the group of experts. The local legislation defined the criteria for selecting experts for internal quality assessment. As a rule, there are two-three field experts, one representative of the employers and a student. The chair of the expert team is invited from outside Georgia to further guarantee the credibility of the process. All the reports are freely accessible on the webpage of the National Centre for Educational Quality Enhancement (National Center for Educational Quality Enhancement, 2023). In order to obtain data from the above-mentioned reports, considering the first research question, deductive coding was used. After categorizing the codes, the following themes were created: (a) a formal assessment of substandard 2.3 (Ethics and Integrity) for institutional accreditation in order to see how the group of experts evaluated this particular substandard, (b) the recommendations that were drafted for institutions and study programs related to principles of academic integrity, and (c) the context in which academic integrity and plagiarism are mentioned in the reports. The data were analysed in NVivo software.

In addition, semi-structured interviews (Buys et al., 2022) with academic staff were also used. In total, 32 interviews were conducted with academic staff from different fields of study (16 from soft sciences and 16 from hard sciences) and with different backgrounds (16 with expertise in research and 16 focusing only on teaching/learning). Additionally, in each group, at least two academic staff received their education outside Georgia, either in EU countries or the USA (see Table 2). As for their institutional affiliations, the academic staff were selected from two universities: Ilia State University (a state university based in the capital of Georgia) and Shota Rustaveli Batumi State University (a regional university based in Batumi). These universities were selected based on two criteria: the first was research productivity (Scimago Institutional Ranking and Scopus database), and the second was

that they had implemented text-matching software [30]. These two universities were seen as critical cases at the country level.

Table 2: Academic Staff for Semi Structural Interviews

	Soft Sciences	Hard Science
High Research Performance	8	8
Focusing only on Teaching and Learning	8	8

The interview protocol was designed considering the research questions and was conducted in the Georgian language. The first group of questions addressed current practices that the academic staff use to detect or prevent plagiarism. The second group covered questions related to different aspects of plagiarism perceptions, where the respondents had to express their opinion as well as their colleagues' beliefs. The third group of questions addressed the findings from the previous activity. The interviewers had to comment on the major findings from the analysis of the external quality assurance reports. The data was collected in June–September 2023 via the online conferencing tool Zoom. Informed consent was obtained from all respondents. Academic staff members were invited to the interviews via an email providing detailed information about this research project. Participation was voluntary, and they were informed that the data would only be used for this research without any identification of their names/surnames or any other sensitive information. The interviews were recorded, and then text transcripts were written. The video recordings were saved on the author's computer in a special folder that required an enrolment key to be accessed. The videos were deleted after the transcripts were recorded. The data was saved and treated in accordance with the Law of Georgia on Personal Data Protection.

To identify and interpret different patterns in the collected data, a thematic analysis was used (Joffe & Yardley, 2004), as this afforded the possibility to deeply capture respondents' perceptions. First, the transcribed interviews were read to become familiar with them. A deductive approach was then used to generate initial codes, which were later organized into potential themes. The themes themselves were first reviewed, and finally they were defined and named according to their shared characteristics. In this study, the following themes were identified: (a) the plagiarism perception of the academic staff and (b) concerns and challenges that were identified by the academic staff related to academic misconduct and plagiarism in teaching and learning. NVivo software was used to conduct the analysis.

3. Results

3.1 Formal Assessment of the Academic Integrity Practices

In the process of analysing the reports drafted during institutional accreditation, the first theme was the assessment of substandard 2.3, which observes the principles of ethics and integrity in a specified HE institution. The practice of dealing with ethics and integrity was assessed as compliant with the standard at five universities, while eight institutions had substantial compliance, two had partial compliance, and one university was non-compliant (see Figure 1). The assessment gradation from non-compliance to compliance was originally used in the reports to evaluate the substandard but, at the same time, it was used for codes under this theme.

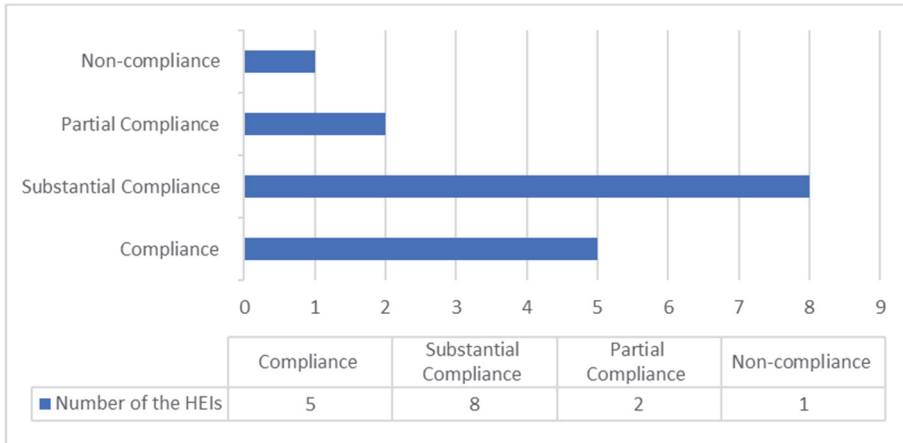


Figure 1: Institutional Accreditation Evaluation in Standard 2.3 -Principles of Ethics and Integrity (2021-2023 Years)

Within the given evaluation, the expert team investigated the current plagiarism prevention and detection policies. By interviewing different stakeholders of the HEIs they get information about the practices at the institution. Together with the evaluation, the expert group also recommended some actions to further enhance the existing practice. The analysis showed that in the specified sample of reports, a total of 39 recommendations were directly related to the principles of academic integrity, while 11 in-directly reflected the same topic.

3.2 Policy and Practice Enhancement: External Evaluation Insights

The majority of the recommendations were related to either software subscription or its usage. Although almost every university had access to the software, its usage was different at each HEI. At the majority of the universities (11 out of 16) in this sample, the similarity detection software was used only in the case of a final thesis. Other writing assignments, such as mid-term exams or finals, were not checked using the software. The expert group also commented on the processes they saw being used. Some universities had an agreement with the local service providers, to whom they sent papers, and they received reports in a few days. The detection of unoriginal content was outsourced. The expert group's recommendations highlighted that HEIs should have these e-tools in place to support their teaching staff in detecting misconduct cases themselves.

The experts also commented on the necessity of changes to the policy documents at the universities. The reason for these changes was either the definition of academic misconduct/plagiarism or defining a certain similarity percentage as a barrier. In some cases, an HEI's policy document mentioned that if more than 10–20% similarity was identified in a paper, sanctions would be applied. The expert teams recommended avoiding having a percentage in the policy document. Moreover, in some cases, the policy and the rules did not clearly describe the procedures, including how academic misconduct/plagiarism would be detected and the measures to prevent these cases.

Relatively few recommendations (only four) highlighted the importance of awareness among students and academic staff, and they recommended that universities should have an effective communication strategy to guarantee all stakeholders are familiar with the existing policies, mechanisms, and rules.

In addition to the recommendations that directly referred to the principles of academic

integrity, some were coded under the category of “other.” Within this group, we might have two subgroups: the first is related to the recommendations about the academic writing course, and the second is related to the need to promote and support publishing in international journals. As the reports indicate, there are institutions where the academic writing course is either not in the curriculum at all, or there is one but the content is focused only on teaching Georgian grammar. In such cases, the expert group recommend designing or updating the course in accordance with the up-to-date international standards for writing courses. In the case of the second subgroup of the recommendations, as it was seen in the reports in the majority of cases, the external evaluation suggested further enhancing the existing practice of publishing research outcomes in international peer-reviewed journals, especially concerning Ph.D. programs and evaluations of teaching staff.

3.3 Cultural and Attitudinal Challenges of Academic Staff creating Barriers to Text-Matching Software Adaptation

The majority of the respondents confirmed that the awareness of plagiarism was high among their colleagues, as well as among students. However, there were some differences in plagiarism perception. The interviewees highlighted the role of Georgia’s past experience in the education system, stating the following:

“Back in Soviet time, it was a good scientific practice to rewrite what was already written. Moreover, one did not bother about the proper citation. In Soviet times, there were pre-defined yearly action plans, and in order to meet the requirements people just rewrote from different texts that had already been published.”

The respondents mentioned that this practice might determine the current perception of plagiarism among some academic staff, even nowadays. According to them, this phenomenon is not directly related to age. They explained that there are some young academic staff with these beliefs (probably influenced by their supervisors), as well as some in their 70s with very strict adherence to the principles of academic integrity.

Almost all respondents highlighted that in addition to research and teaching activities, there are some “other tasks” related to the internal and external quality assurance of the study programs that require additional time and contributions from their side. Thus, quite often, the professors might not have enough time to guarantee that the principles of academic integrity are met in their courses, especially if the number of students is high and the academic staff do not have teaching assistants or Ph.D. students to help them (which is also a common practice). As the interviewees highlighted, due to the mandatory assessment of their activities, they need to equally take care of teaching and research activities, as well as some administrative duties. Young researchers/newly appointed academic staff are seen to be the most overloaded with these responsibilities, and one experienced professor stated the following:

“My colleague, an Assistant Professor, has an obligation to teach 12 hours weekly, to publish in international journals, and to work on the Study Program development. With all these responsibilities, her salary is way too low than a teacher’s salary in the public school. In order to get more income, they are working either at other universities or on a small project that takes 45–50 hours a week. Due to this, they simply do not have time to grade individual students’ papers with considering the prevention and detection of plagiarism.”

The respondents openly discussed the current practice of using text-matching software at their institutions. In all cases, the usage of this kind of tool is mandatory in the case of a thesis, while practice varies for course assignments. Some participants referred to the types of assignments they used as an objective reason not to use any similarity detection software, while others said that although they were familiar with the tools, they were not experienced in using them. All participants

agreed that academic staff need more support from the universities, explaining that only having access to instructions and video tutorials is not enough and that training should be delivered proactively. However, when speaking about the practice among their colleagues, the interviewees suggested that in some cases, the teaching staff are not open to changes, adding that they have already designed a particular teaching method and they feel comfortable with it. Changes might be stressful and time-consuming; thus, they prefer not to make any.

Almost all respondents spoke about the publishing of their research outcomes as a key indicator of teaching and learning with integrity. As they explained, academic staff who publish scientific papers in international peer-reviewed journals are quite familiar with the principles of academic integrity and, therefore, have the same practices in their duties. However, according to the interviews, there might be some universities/fields of study where publishing internationally is not a requirement.

Those respondents in the fields of the hard sciences were stricter about plagiarism and academic misconduct in general compared to those in the soft sciences. The academic staff from the social sciences and humanities field discussed some cases when the sanctions for plagiarism can vary (mentioning the level of study, the quantity of text, and students' awareness), while those from physics and biology fields did not mention this. As the interviews showed, the academic staff who received their education in a foreign country (either in the USA or in one of the EU countries) focused more on the prevention of academic misconduct and plagiarism. Moreover, they all stated that they use all the mechanisms that are available at their universities.

4. Discussion

A recent external quality assessment of the HEIs in Georgia highlighted that the practices related to academic integrity were not in full compliance with the institutional accreditation standards. The recommendations indicated that the universities were only focused on detection, not prevention. Moreover, the implementation of text-matching software was formalized in some cases to meet the existing requirements. In addition, the institutional policy documents were lacking information on prevention mechanisms. Research conducted in Georgia in 2016 listed recommendations for the Ministry of Education to make changes to the regulations in order to effectively audit HEIs and guarantee that the principles of academic integrity are met (Bakradze et al., 2016). Due to the change in the legislation, the majority of universities went through institutional evaluations, and the HEIs began the process of implementing new mechanisms (Council of Europe et al., 2021). Some of the universities participated in the Erasmus Plus capacity project INTEGRITY, managed to make changes in the universities' existing practice (Chokoraia, 2023). As was seen in previous studies, the universities that benefited from the international project adjusted their institutional mechanisms effectively, reviewed their policy documents, and implemented text-matching software (Chokoraia, 2023; Council of Europe et al., 2021; Tsertsvadze & Khurtsia, 2020). However, as this research showed, based on the external institutional accreditation reports, there are some universities in Georgia that only implemented text-matching software to formally meet the criteria outlined in the national standards. This might explain the prevalent practice of only detecting unoriginal content in Master's and Ph.D. theses and ignoring mid-term and final exams. In addition, the policy documents only describe sanctions linked to a certain percentage of similarity, with few words about the prevention of misconduct. These differences might be explained by the number of HEIs in Georgia and their willingness to share practices with each other. Although previous research recommended that collaboration between HEIs would be effective (Bakradze et al., 2016; Chokoraia, 2023), those practices are not seen. To align their practices with accreditation standards, universities should take a series of specific actions that ensure both compliance and continuous improvement in their academic processes. One of the actions might be the designing educational programs that focus on academic integrity as a fundamental component (Perkins et al., 2020), to focus on prevention and formation of the culture as such. In response to the first research question of this study, we can see that the

external auditing process listed concerns (regarding plagiarism prevention, the updating of policy documents, implementing text-matching software, etc.) and urged HEIs to implement changes in order to harmonize their practices with the international standards.

The interviews with academic staff demonstrated that the majority of the professors are familiar with the institutional policies and mechanisms to prevent academic misconduct. However, when reflecting on their colleagues (working at the same HEI), they spoke about different understandings of plagiarism among them. The respondents confirmed that some professors' practices are not in line with the institutional policies. Moreover, for some academic staff, plagiarism is not considered a serious issue. This research confirmed that some of the current practices might be determined by experiences in Soviet times. Although this had already been discovered in previous research (Bakradze et al., 2016; Council of Europe et al., 2021), this study highlighted that this phenomenon still exists. Differences in plagiarism perception are a characteristic of other post-Soviet countries (Foltýnek & Glendinning, 2015; Ison, 2018; Kurambayev, 2020), and Georgia is not an exception. Kobakhidze and Samniashvili found that there is a significant link to the Soviet practice regarding academic freedom, saying:

"With its complicated communist legacy, Georgia is still travelling the long and painful path of HE system reform. Academic freedom as a concept does not yet have its own place in Georgia's HE system, protected de jure but with different de facto realities." (Kobakhidze & Samniashvili, 2022) (p.14)

It might require generation change to fully eliminate the false understanding related to detecting and preventing academic misconduct. That said, extra time is needed for this cultural shift to happen.

As the interviews showed, the use of text-matching software is not mandatory. Thus, some professors avoid implementing it in their teaching. They explained that due to their huge workloads, they are unable to dedicate time to the use of such a tool. Moreover, some respondents said this might be related to the fact that they are not motivated enough to modify their existing practices, and some academic staff are not open to changes. In addition, some teaching staff believe that checking only a final thesis is enough to guarantee that the principles of academic integrity are met. Similar findings were detected in previous studies (Council of Europe et al., 2021; Doghonadze et al., 2018), with the difference that a few years ago, the majority of universities did not have access to similarity detection software (Bakradze et al., 2016), while now almost every HEI has such a tool due to the legislated requirements. Not using the text-matching software might be a result of the universities having a limited license (limited funding). Therefore, not everyone is offered use of the tool. The focus on the detection of plagiarism only in final papers can be explained as a result of the universities' policies, which are focused on detection rather than prevention. This was mentioned in previous studies (Bakradze et al., 2016; Council of Europe et al., 2021; Doghonadze et al., 2018; Tsertsvadze & Khurtsia, 2020), which confirms that change is still in progress, and most likely a few more years are required until prevention will be the idea around which all university policies and mechanisms will be designed. This leads us to the answer to the second research question of this study. When speaking about the perception of plagiarism among Georgian academic staff, some of their beliefs were linked to different definitions/understandings of plagiarism that resulted from past experience, the institutional policy, and in some cases, having an extremely high workload.

As the results of this study indicate, almost every respondent confirmed that the practice of publishing research outcomes in international peer-reviewed journals is a key indicator when speaking about the plagiarism perception of academic staff, as those professors who are actively publishing are quite familiar with the international standards and principles of academic integrity. In addition, it was found that there were some differences in the perceptions of academic staff when grouping them into hard and soft sciences. Those representing physics, biology, chemistry, and astronomy were much stricter regarding plagiarism. Moreover, this research highlighted that those academic staff who received their education in foreign countries (either in EU countries or in the

USA) were more focused on the prevention of plagiarism. Thus, they had implemented all the mechanisms in their courses and promoted the principles of academic integrity among their colleagues. Publishing in international journals was recommended in previous research (Bakradze et al., 2016; Kayaoglu et al., 2015), as it guarantees the research output will go through a mandatory check before it is published. Therefore, the principles of academic integrity will be met. On the contrary, if universities allow publishing in local scientific journals that are not referenced or indexed in any international database (or publishing only in the local language), this might have a negative impact on academia in general.

5. Conclusion

This study aimed to explore the current practices related to the principles of academic integrity in Georgian HEIs. The findings of this research showed that the culture of academic integrity is still in the transition phase in the Georgian HE system. Although major changes were introduced seven years ago, they are still not fully implemented. One significant contribution of this paper is its revelation that some academic staff are resistant to redesigning their current practices, while others' beliefs remain influenced by their experiences from the Soviet era. On the other hand, there is a group of professors who are strictly against plagiarism, have already modified their teaching strategies, and are acting in line with the university policies. This research highlighted that academic staff from the hard sciences and those who received their education abroad are more focused on plagiarism prevention. They consistently and coherently promote the topic of academic integrity in their teaching and use similarity detection software. This study confirmed that a full change in culture might take a few more years.

In terms of study limitations, it is important to note that the institutional evaluation reports analysed were limited to those from 2021-2023. As a result, not every HEI was included, which should be taken into account when interpreting and generalizing the study's findings. However, in order to mitigate this risk, the study program evaluations were also analysed. Again, the years were limited to 2021-2023. For the interviews, as plagiarism is a sensitive topic, some respondents might not have been fully open when reflecting on their experiences. For this reason, the questions were structured in a way that asked interviewees to speak about the practices among their colleagues. To evaluate the effectiveness of the implemented changes and assess the impact of international publishing on perceptions of plagiarism among academic staff, it would be beneficial for future studies to explore these areas further. As this study was oriented on plagiarism only, the other studies might be conducted on a different aspect of Academic Integrity, like the contract cheating and unethical use of Artificial Intelligence tools. It would be beneficial to explore the perceptions of students and academic staff with those types of academic misconduct to further develop the discussion.

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