

International Institute for Education Policy Planning and  
Management (EPPM)

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# Supporting employed students

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Higher Education Policy Challenges and Recommendations

August, 2014

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## Summary

In Georgia approximately one third of students are employed. Some of them (especially in their final year) work full-time while studying full-time in higher education institutions.

The data significantly differs according to educational stages. In 2014 the study conducted by the Tempus Office in Georgia suggests that approximately 20% of bachelor's students, 70% of master's students and 90% of doctoral (PhD) students are employed.

Taking into account the above-mentioned considerations, it is important to have regulations and alternatives regulating issues related to combining work with study in higher education institutions.

The first and the most significant stage of formation of such policy is to study the current practice and challenges.

Despite the fact that for the majority of students (especially at Master's Degree and Doctoral Degree levels) working is an important part of their lives, their impacts on educational process and student participation in university life (especially in case of students who work full-time) are not well-studied.

This report reviews different stakeholders' (students, university administration, education experts and policymakers) opinions regarding this issue.

### **Study goals:**

- Identify procedural and systemic barriers in the higher education system of Georgia to ensure quality education for employed students (effective combination of work and study);
- Identify the best Georgian and international practice of supporting employed students;
- Develop recommendations to develop university and state policy.

## Methodology

The study strategies included three stages: desk-study, a series of in-depth interviews with decision-makers and the so called case study component that covered the analysis of internal practice of regulating issues in some universities.

- a) At the stage of desk-study Georgian and international regulatory laws concerning combination of study and work were reviewed.
- b) Within the case study component interuniversity practice supporting combination of work and study in Georgian public universities was studied.

The so called *critical case selection strategy* was used to select local universities for this component, i.e. to select universities where the lack of effective practice related to study issues indicates presence of such practice in all the rest of the universities.

Namely, three big public universities were selected in Tbilisi:

- Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University
- Ilia State University
- Georgian Technical University

In these universities the most in-demand programs (public administration, law, business administration and engineering programs) with highest student employment rates were studied in details.

Each university/case study included assessment of university practice using the following methods:

- In-depth interviews with representatives of university administration
- Focus groups with university students

Stages of higher education - Bachelor's and Master's Degrees were used as selection criteria for focus group participants. Employed students undergoing prestigious programs (law, public administration, business administration and technical programs) at public universities were involved in discussions.

- c) In-depth interviews with policy-makers and experts aimed at reviewing/applying triangulation of information obtained at different stages and key findings, forming and discussing policy options.

Within this component the representatives of the Ministry of Education and Science, its affiliated agencies – LEPL centers and education experts were interviewed.

## Key Findings

In Georgia every third student combines full-time job with study in higher education institution. Questions arise on increasing the rate of employed students among policy-makers, administrators of higher education institutions, academic staff and education experts: why do students decide to work? What impact does work have on learning practice and outcomes? How can state higher education policy and interuniversity regulations support employed students to achieve academic success?

### Why do students decide to combine work with study?

#### Work as Learning Experience

There is no comprehensive data on interrelation between higher education and the labour market requirements and effects of higher education on employment and incomes, although a number of studies suggest that a) in employers' opinion graduates' qualification does not meet well market demands (Millennium Challenge, 2014). Some students also think that higher education does not develop well professional skills and knowledge (Erasmus + Georgian office, 2014)

Accordingly, working experience is deemed to be the most important tool to acquire professional competences. Students as well as employers agree with this view.

On the other hand, studies conducted in Georgia suggest that people with higher education have tended to have higher incomes and less unemployment than people with secondary education (EPPM, 2013).

Therefore, combination of work and study represents the optimal decision for professional and personal development of young people.

The students involved in the study think that combination of work and study has synergistic effect if study is combined with work in profession. On the one hand, such practice improves learning outcomes and on the other hand, improves effectiveness of work performed by employed students.

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If I had another job I would have problems but I work in my profession and think that it is complimentary experience.

*Student, MA*

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In students' opinion, complimentary experience of combination of work and study means putting theoretical knowledge into practice.

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I think that job related to future profession is very important to study well. Practice improves knowledge. We test and implement all ideas and present outcomes. Jobs help us to be successful students.

*Student, MA*

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The relation between experience and educational process helps students to learn, generalize and make a synthesis of materials.

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I had a job that was not related to my profession. Now I work in my profession. It is much better. I do not have to switch to other issues and do not feel brain fatigue. What I learn is related to my profession and I do not have to shift to other topics.

*Student, BA*

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In this extract one more important issue is highlighted: if working in profession improves the knowledge and educational process, full-time job that is not related to profession makes problems with learning as well as working.

One more bachelor's student who does not work in his/her profession explains more clearly that job that is not related to profession negatively affects learning outcomes.

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Such work { not working in my profession} does not improve my knowledge. Everyday work that does not benefit education is unacceptable for me due to the fact that these 4 years are the best time to get education.

*Student, BA*

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## Work as Income Source

In Georgia private expenditures on higher education are very high and the burden is mainly incurred by households. Private spending as a share of GDP amounts to 0.75% countrywide that is much higher than the average rate of European countries (0.35%). The rate in Georgia is also higher than the ones of post-soviet countries (World Bank, 2014).

TABLE 1: PRIVATE AND PUBLIC EXPENDITURES ON HIGHER EDUCATION

	Public Expenditures GDP %	Year	Private Expenditures GDP%	Year
Georgia	0.47	2013	0.75*	2013
Armenia	0.25	2012		
Tajikistan	0.28	2011		
Kazakhstan	0.40	2010	0.52	2007
Belorussia	0.73	2012	0.40	2012
Kirgizstan	0.87	2010		
The Russian Federation	0.95	2008	0.53	2007
Moldova	1.30	2012		

Ukraine	1.79	2005		
Central and Eastern Europe	0.87	2010	0.29	2010
Other European Countries	0.87	2010	0.35	2010

Source: World Bank

*\*TE private expenditure in Georgia includes only tuition fees paid by students and was estimated based on EQE enrolment and NAEC tuition fee data*

These data indirectly suggest that expenditures on higher education exert heavy burden on students or their families. Due to this fact it is enavitable for many individuals to combine study with work and it is not luxury.

The following quotations prove this opinion:

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“We work to pay tuition fees”, – one of the students mentioned-... “public sector policy should be revised. Students need more support.”

*Student, MA*

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Another MA student perceives this issue to be more topical:

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It is bigger and deeper problem for me. It is a social problem. If I had not found employment program, I would have lost the chance to get education.

*Student, MA*

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The extract shows that due to complicated social situation in the country students have to choose less interesting jobs and make a decision in favor of working when they have to choose between study and work.

Experts agree with this opinion and emphasize strengthening the social component in higher education funding model.

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There is a problem if a person works as a cashier in the bank and is a student of Caucasian Studies. Therefore, students need more support in order “not to be forced” to work to pay tuition fees.

*Expert*

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Many students have to work due to the lack of weak financial support. If we consider that it is important to infuse experience in study students should be supported in order to work in their professions. They must not have irrelevant jobs only due to the fact that they cannot afford tuition fees.

*Expert*

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Experts and students consdider that student loan component should be increased along with social grants. International researches suggest that half of employed BA students take out federal loan in the USA, while in Georgia only 6% of students take out student loan.

According to students, the situation is caused due to the fact that student loan as an alternative opportunity to pay tuition fees is not available in the country.

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That would be great if we could take out concessional student loans after graduation. As far as I know, several private universities follow such practice. I believe there should be more opportunities and support in this direction in the country.

Student, MA

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In Georgia only several private universities are engaged in student loan practice. In the USA more than half of students take out student loan (they also get social benefits) while in Georgia the rate does not exceed 6% according to interviews with students.

While discussing the issue experts emphasize alternative values of higher education and one more important issue – necessity to improve university practice to support employed students.

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If young people are not supported neither by universities nor by employers and we consider work and study as contradictory options, incomes lost by students in the educational process should be added to expenditures related to higher education. Accordingly, expenditures related to higher education increase.

Higher education institutions have to compromise to ensure combination of work and study in order to maintain student flow.

*Expert*

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Not only Georgia but other countries also face similar challenges against the background of the world crisis. The share of employed students in higher education constantly increases in the USA as well as in the Europe (Perna, 2010).

Worldwide more and more universities implement supportive policy in response to the current situation.

## University Practice and Government Policy for Supporting Employed Students in Georgia

According to our respondents, in Georgia laws are quite liberal in relation to student employment, although practice differs according to universities:

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It is not mandatory to attend lectures in universities of Georgia. Students can regulate the amount of credits per semester (within 75 credits per year). Moreover, regulations concerning suspension and restoration of student status are flexible for employed students. Higher education facilities act in accordance with effective laws i.e. “they are forced” to create convenient environment for employed students, although there are some problems: all institutions and programs do not offer students flexible schedules (especially



for MA and Doctoral Programs). In all universities lectures and sessions are not delivered in the evening or on Saturdays. Students complain about it quite often.

Expert

Students' comments prove the opinion expressed by the expert. Students mainly complain about rigid timetable and evaluation mechanisms.

## Study Timetable

Students and experts, who participated in the study, think that study timetable is one of the important factors, which impacts on effectiveness of combination of work and study.

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There are problems related to time. Lectures began at 2:00 p.m., 3:00 p.m. Finally they made a concession and changed it. I would be happy to have lectures in the evening.

*Student, MA*

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It does not hamper me. Lectures begin late at 6:00 p.m. or 8:00 p.m. Students have to choose between them. They can attend lectures three times a week. I have chosen one day –Saturday. I conduct research and read materials on the rest of weekdays.

*Student, MA*

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These are two extracts from interviews with students of different universities. Their quotes show that universities implement completely different policies to ensure flexible study timetables and support employed students. **Lectures delivered in the evening and on Saturdays** significantly eliminate problems related to combination of work and study, although some universities do not follow this practice.

Most of the students mention that they prefer to be at workplaces than to attend daytime lectures.

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If I have to make a choice, I would rather miss lectures than work. In our university we can choose time to attend lectures.

*Student, MA*

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The interviews with students also suggest that flexibility of timetables differs according to educational levels and directions.

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I had more freedom when I was a BA student. Timetables are more rigid in MA program. There are also differences regarding program directions. For example, there are many students in our group, although there are small groups, which have rigid timetables and no choice.

*Student, MA*

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In this extract the student emphasizes the other aspect of flexibility of timetable – **lecture times and choice of days**. More students study in BA program and they can choose desired time and days to attend lectures, while there are less students in MA program who have more limited choice.

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We have a problem related to time. In our group some students prefer to start lectures at 7:00 p.m., some –in the morning and we cannot reach an agreement.

*Student, MA*

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Students think that it is convenient for employed students when **there is no big interval between lectures**:

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One lecture begins at 12:00 p.m., the next one –at 4:00 p.m. It is impossible to combine work with study. I cannot go back and forth.

*Student, BA*

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**Choice of days** represents one more important aspect:

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University teachers have lectures almost every day. If it is not convenient for me to attend lectures on Monday, I can choose Tuesday.

*Student, BA*

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The feedback given by students in relation to this aspect of timetable flexibility shows that there are significant differences between internal policies of higher education institutions.

### **Student Assessment System**

Student assessment system is one more important aspect that should be taken into account while developing policy for supporting employed students at the university level.

As mentioned above, pursuant to the Georgian legislation **attendance** is not an obligatory component of assessment. Accordingly, higher education institutions decide to include the attendance component in the assessment system.

The situation differs according to universities. In some of them attendance is an essential component of assessment and therefore, employed students consider that it is not fair to lose credits for non-attendance.

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Students should not get 20 credits for attendance. They must be able to implement a project or do practical work instead of attending lectures. Every week we are asked questions and get credits at sessions in the Faculty of Economy. It is difficult to combine it with work. Students' knowledge may also be assessed in another way, for example, at a distance.

*Student, BA*

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Students say that based on attendance data they may have to re-attend the course.

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I was lucky. If a student misses a certain amount of lectures he/she has to re-attend the course. I just needed more credits and sacrificed them to my work. On the other hand, they did not made a concession to deliver lectures in the evening.

*Student, MA*

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The students involved in the discussion were divided in their opinion on importance of attendance component. Some of them think that attending lectures is a significant precondition to acquire knowledge:

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When it is mandatory to attend lectures you are always prepared. It also depends on the subject. I think students should have incentives to attend lectures. There is a problem related to restoration. Students lose more credits.

*Student, BA*

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Some of the students consider that lecture attendance is a superficial assessment method that does not provide informaiton about the student's knowledge.

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I do not understand the importance of attendance credits. I may attend lectures but it does not mean that I receive and give anything.

*Student, MA*

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Students consider that based on peculiarities of the course (attendance must be mandatory for some practical courses) lecture attendance may be replaced with other components and distance models for assessment.

In their opinion, it is also important to ensure optimal **assessment frequency**:

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Heads of program have made their efforts to make the assessment system convenient for employed students. It differs from the one for BA program. Students are assessed during intervals between lectures. Students do not have to learn all materials parrot fashion.

*Student, MA*

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## Distance Learning

The experts, representatives of the Ministry of Education and Science and students involved in the study consider that today the distance learning is not well-developed in Georgia, although it is a very important component.

Pursuant to laws of Georgia it is not prohibited to use models of distance learning and online courses in the educational process, although distance learning is not defined in the law. Due to the lack of relevant standards and definition, programs and courses based on the distance learning model cannot be accredited.

Pursuant to laws of Georgia in higher education system students are financed only for accredited programs. Moreover, they will not get credits for distance learning course. Therefore, higher education institutions are not interested in developing such models.

Experts openly mention this problem and emphasize the importance of distance learning development.

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Development of electronic and distance learning may become a part of government strategy for introduction and implementation of IT technologies in the education sphere. The current regulations do not provide opportunities for effective development of distance/e-learning. Accordingly, higher education institutions rarely use such modes of learning.

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Representative of the Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia

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Today there are procedural and legislative barriers to distance learning development, although higher education institutions have more freedom and opportunities to increase intensity and effectiveness of IT technologies in the educational process. For example, IT technologies may be introduced and implemented more effectively in the student assessment process.

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Students, who participated in the study, mention a number of successful examples of the use of IT technologies in the educational process among which video lectures are one of the interesting methods.

Online lectures are great opportunity when you cannot attend the lecture.

*Student, MA*

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I was glad to hear that video lectures would be available. Lectures delivered by practitioners are especially useful. It is very important to have video lectures especially when you cannot attend the lecture.

*Student, BA*

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The opinions expressed by the students show that video lectures enable employed students to listen to the lectures they missed and moreover, they are effective addition to manuals or auxiliary sources due to the fact that this format enables them to get familiar with practitioners' views.

In the students' opinion, video lectures increase availability of education:

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Distance learning is very important. It will increase availability of education in regions. Students have to take 4-5 hour road trip. In Tbilisi it takes one hour to go from one place to another.

*Student, MA*

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Students emphasize some more important aspects in their conversation – video lectures also help students, who regularly attend lectures, to learn materials. It is a different format that ensures diversity in the educational process, provides an additional choice and chance to adapt the educational process to different learning requirements, individual pace and style.

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It is especially good if learning is time-stretched. If you forget anything you can review it.

*Student, MA*

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Online courses are really good. Students should have more choice. A 19-year old individual is not the person who cannot make a choice. There should be more diverse forms of teaching, although it must not affect teaching quality.

*Student BA*

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Experts agree with the students and mention that it is essential to use IT technologies especially for the programs where attendance does not represent a mandatory component:

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Enable employed students to get high-quality education and ensure that their participation is not be limited to attendance.

*Expert*

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Despite positive comments regarding the use of IT technologies made by respondents, experts, representatives of universities and the Ministry agree that IT technologies should be reasonably introduced and implemented in the educational process according to peculiarity of programs.

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We should have careful attitude towards online learning. It should be used to some degree, in parallel to other mode, etc.

*Student, MA*

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We need real and not formal implementation of e-learning system.

*Representative of University Administration*

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Experts and decision-makers consider that common government's vision and quality indicators and assessment system based on this vision are one of the preconditions to increase effectiveness of IT technology use:

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Today one of the requirements of authorization is to use IT technologies in the educational process, although it is assessed very formally and superficially (even only PowerPoint is considered to be the indicator of the use of IT technologies). The practice of assessment of the abovementioned authorization standard must be definitely changed.

*Expert*

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In Georgia there are big risks associated with spontaneous implementation of distance learning (there is danger that it will become a conveyer of fake diplomas). Therefore, government strategy for distance learning development must be elaborated to ensure quality of distance learning and its step-by-step introduction.

*Representative of the Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia*

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### **Credit Accumulation Scheme**

Part-time learning is a worldwide approved method that becomes more and more popular as an element of the policy for supporting employed students.

In Georgia regulations concerning higher education system envisage students' participation only in full-time educational process. Within Bologna Process student's load is calculated according to

European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS). According to experts, pursuant to laws of Georgia the credit accumulation system is flexible, for instance students may accumulate 75 credits instead of 60 credits per year, although this opportunity is not commonly put into practice by higher education institutions.

Development of more flexible schemes for distribution of credits (study load) in time requires amendments to regulations for financing higher education – students are financed per year/semester. According to the credit accumulation scheme, students must accumulate 60 credits per semester.

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Nowadays state grant is allocated for BA students for 4 years. Students have to complete studies within this period of time (240 ECTS) not to lose the grant. Therefore, in case of introduction and implementation of part-time program, financial regulations should be amended.

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*Representative of the Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia*

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Despite this procedural difficulty experts think that it is essential to introduce more flexible credit accumulation system in order to improve adaption of the educational process to students' needs:

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Regulations do not envisage part-time learning and education programs– format that would ensure effective combination of work and study.

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*Expert*

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Students are also eager to have more flexible models of distribution of study load in time:

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I think it is very good. It means that you study for a longer period but distribute load. Sometimes students take academic leave due to the fact that they cannot study five or six subjects in one semester or have to pay additional money. Such model would be real relief.

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*Student, BA*

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Implementation of study concept during lifetime is one of the important components to ensure more flexibility of the credit accumulation system.

Education experts and university management representatives talk about the importance of taking effective steps in this respect:

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Pursuant to the current regulations students have to accumulate credits only within the academic programs. Regulations concerning credit accumulation within continuing education are not clear. Due to the lack of synchronization of continuing education with academic programs employed students can raise their qualification only through academic education programs that may not be effective for students.

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*Representative of Administration of High Education Institution*

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Students offer specific mechanisms to implement this idea:

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. . . offer some additional courses. E.g SPSS course is charged and it is difficult to register. They have very interesting charged offers. It would be great if the university could make various private offers and grant credit for it.

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## Practice Component

The strategic goal of the Georgian higher education system is to strengthen the practice component. Due to fast-growing and dynamic market integration of gained work experience in the educational process facilitates the growth of relevance of higher education.

The most recent surveys conducted in Georgia suggest the necessity of implementation of the aforementioned due to the fact that graduate competences often do not meet market requirements (EPPM, 2014).

It was mentioned in the previous chapters of this report that students give great importance to work experience for improvement of professional skills and knowledge.

Despite the fact that everyone agrees on importance of the practice component, students and experts think that is artificially included in programs, which is evaluated according to irrelevant criteria and is not well connected with other components of the academic program.

The respondents involved in the study think that the model of considering working in profession as student practice is one of the strategies to improve the current situation. Meanwhile evaluation criteria for this component should be revised:

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The next semester we will have to undertake practice to get credits. It is not feasible in case of employment. I think that in fact outcomes are more important. That would be great if the university could consider working (in profession) as student practice.

*Student, MA*

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If I work in my profession why cannot it be considered as practice? It must be transparent. Forms and processes may be revised i.e. study duration will be decreased.

*Expert*

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According to respondents, it is practiced within some programs, although are only some episodic cases that should be studied and promoted.

Experts think that laws do not set restrictions in relation to flexibility of study to universities. Accordingly, higher education institutions can test new models and be more creative to introduce novelties. Decision-makers and policy-makers are responsible to promote and study “successful practice” in details and reflect interesting approaches in relevant standards.

The center does not take into account new circumstances if there is no evidence for it. Universities should take an initiative to make amendments to standards. I do not think that anyone can consider such practice component that will likely be discussed. Accreditation standards are amended on the basis of precedent.

## What impact does work have on learning outcomes?

The issue related to the impact of students' workload made on learning outcomes is not well-studied neither in Georgia nor worldwide, although the most recent surveys suggest that students' workload negatively affect learning outcomes in case of lack of support provided by universities and employers.

Qualitative research results also prove this view.

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The student has to study all day long to get sufficient number of credits. In case of a full-time job, actually s/he does not have enough time to study. Accordingly, quality of educational process decreases due to the lack of flexibility.

*Representative of the Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia*

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Combination of work and study negatively affects the quality of educational process. Universities also want to support students in order not to lose them but as lecturers say, they come to the university tired and unprepared.

*Expert*

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Students also agree with the opinion expressed by this expert:

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Right now I do not have any problem, although I had to refuse the first job due to the fact that it was impossible to work for 7-8 hours and then study.

*Student, MA*

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I worked at the expense of study. I do not know how I will manage my new job. It will be more difficult for me. I will not be able even to take a break.

*Student, BA*

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The respondents involved in the study think that work hinders participation of students in extracurricular activities and university life:

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Open lectures, public lectures are delivered mainly in the first half of the day and due to this fact I am not involved. I have no problem with lectures.

There are less problems in MA program because lectures are delivered in the evening. I have no problem with lectures, although it is impossible to combine additional activities with study.

*Student, MA*

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I spend less time at the university due to the fact that got a new job. I often cannot leave my workplace at 7:00 p.m. and cannot participate in extracurricular activities, although they are very interesting and I would love to participate in them.

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*Student, MA*

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One more important issue was emphasized while talking about interrelation between workload and quality of learning. The respondents think that work negatively affects learning outcomes and student participation in university life without support of universities and employers, although in case of wrong supportive policy not only employed students but also on unemployed ones are harmed.

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The university has to adjust and simplify academic program that is not good. There should be more demand. The university must not simplify the program too much, otherwise tuition fee will not correspond to quality.

*Student, MA*

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This extract shows that **simplified educational process** affects everyone. It also restricts unemployed students' right to quality education. The expert relates this problem to the issue of alternative value of higher education.

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I believe that higher education has high alternative value. If young people had a choice they would prefer to work than study in universities of Georgia. Therefore, universities do their best to support students in order not to discuss work and study as two alternatives that ultimately affects quality of learning and teaching.

*Expert*

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MA students talk about specific facts related to this problem:

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We studied at the Columbia University. There was completely different load. I selected this program due to the fact that it is adapted to employed students. Students have more study load and work at the Columbia University.

It was harder to get scores in BA program there than here. It might be a subjective view. I do not know. It is my opinion. We have enough materials here but get credits more easily.

*Student, MA*

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In experts' opinion it is especially important to regulate the issue of **combination of work and study at the stage of Doctoral program**:

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Working at the stage of Doctoral Program prolongs study/research period that is not good due to the fact that research outcomes become outdated and research validity expires.

*Expert*

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Different approach must be used to solve problems in Doctoral Program. We should not support doctoral candidates to work in parallel to conducting research; on the contrary, it is recommended for them not work for a temporary period and take care of research. It is vitally essential for successful doctoral candidates to be awarded quite high (no less than 1000 GEL) state grants (stipends) in order to spend their time and energy on researches

and apply the knowledge and analytical skills acquired in the Doctoral program for their activities and the society.

*Representative of the Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia*

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One more important issues that would ensure teaching quality while implementing the policy for supporting employed students is **introduction and implementation of effective systems for informing and consulting students**:

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The institution and students, the program and students should have informal relationships and exchange information. IT technologies should be effectively used in this process. Improving flexibility of the educational process means to increase diversity that must be ensured by information campaigns to provide students with information about these opportunities who will be able to choose the best model.

*Student, MA*

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In experts' opinion the situation with regard to this issue significantly differs according to universities. Information about successful practice is not systematized and ineffectively disseminated among universities.

The following models have been approved by some universities that are not popular yet: autonomous electronic systems for educational process management, career development services, consultation service for students, electronic university libraries and their access outside the university.

Experts think that one more important aspect to be taken into consideration while modeling the educational process is **implementation of strategies for supporting students' transferrable skills – first of all learning skills**.

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It is very important to improve learning skills and provide consultations to students and entrants while selecting programs. If they do not learn these techniques, they will not be able to study in BA program. In education programs attention should be paid to transferrable skills: learning, communication and presentation skills.

*Expert*

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Experts believe that **program evaluation standards** need to be revised to shift emphasis from process-oriented evaluation to result-oriented evaluation.

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Higher education institutions shall provide students with high-quality services according to the accreditation standard, although none of the regulatory document specify assessment indicators. Indicators should be specified while modifying the current accreditation model. Regulations supporting employed students may become one of the evaluation indicators for services provided to students. There is another way: regulations that support employed students may become formal/informal recommendation for successful authorization/accreditation.

*Representative of the Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia*

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## International Experience Regarding the Use of Flexible Study Arrangements

In the education sphere worldwide, against the background of increasing non-homogeneous student population, the discussion about flexibility of higher education studies becomes more significant. The concept of higher education studies includes increasing opportunities of the system to cope with changes in the composition of the rapidly changing student body and accommodate it to needs and requirements of diverse groups of students. Accordingly, the necessity of diversification of study modes (for example, part-time, distance and modular learning, continuing education for students in labor market) and the importance of adaptation of relevant financial mechanisms are reflected in the agenda for Modernisation of Higher Education in Europe.

Despite the fact that European countries acknowledge the necessity of introduction and implementation of flexible modes of study and learning, there are diverse forms of using this concept.

The diversity is caused by two main reasons:

First of all, it is noteworthy that the concept of implementation of flexible modes of study and learning is complex. It includes several dimensions – flexibility related to time, content, entry requirements, instructional approach and resources and delivery.

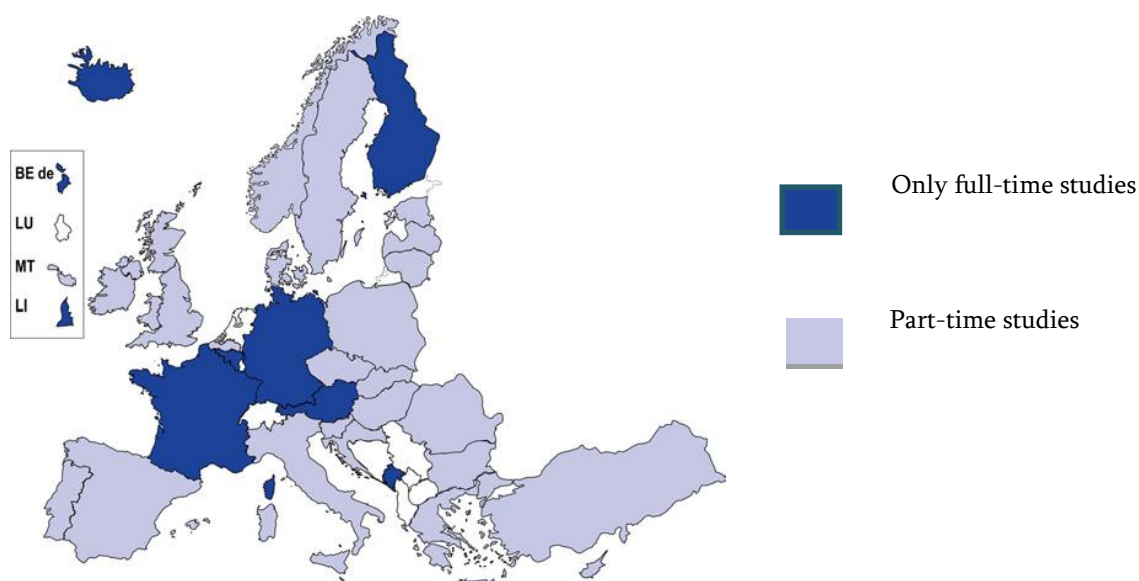
Moreover, among various methods and approaches success of specific strategies is conditioned by local and specific context due to the fact that implementation of flexible modes of study and learning is affected by the factors, such as the level of the use of technologies in the country, teachers' qualification level and specific institutional and infrastructural peculiarities.

Various flexible study and learning modes may be put together as several components among which so called part-time, distance learning and e-learning are the most important tools. Practical examples reviewed in this chapter are based on the European Commission Report 2014 (*European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2014. Modernisation of Higher Education in Europe: Access, Retention and Employability*) that reviews tendencies of modernisation of higher education in Europe.

### **Part-time Studies**

Most European countries offer students different possibilities of part-time studies. However, the concept of part-time studies varies greatly across Europe.

Figure #1. Formal recognition of part-time programs in European countries, 2012/13



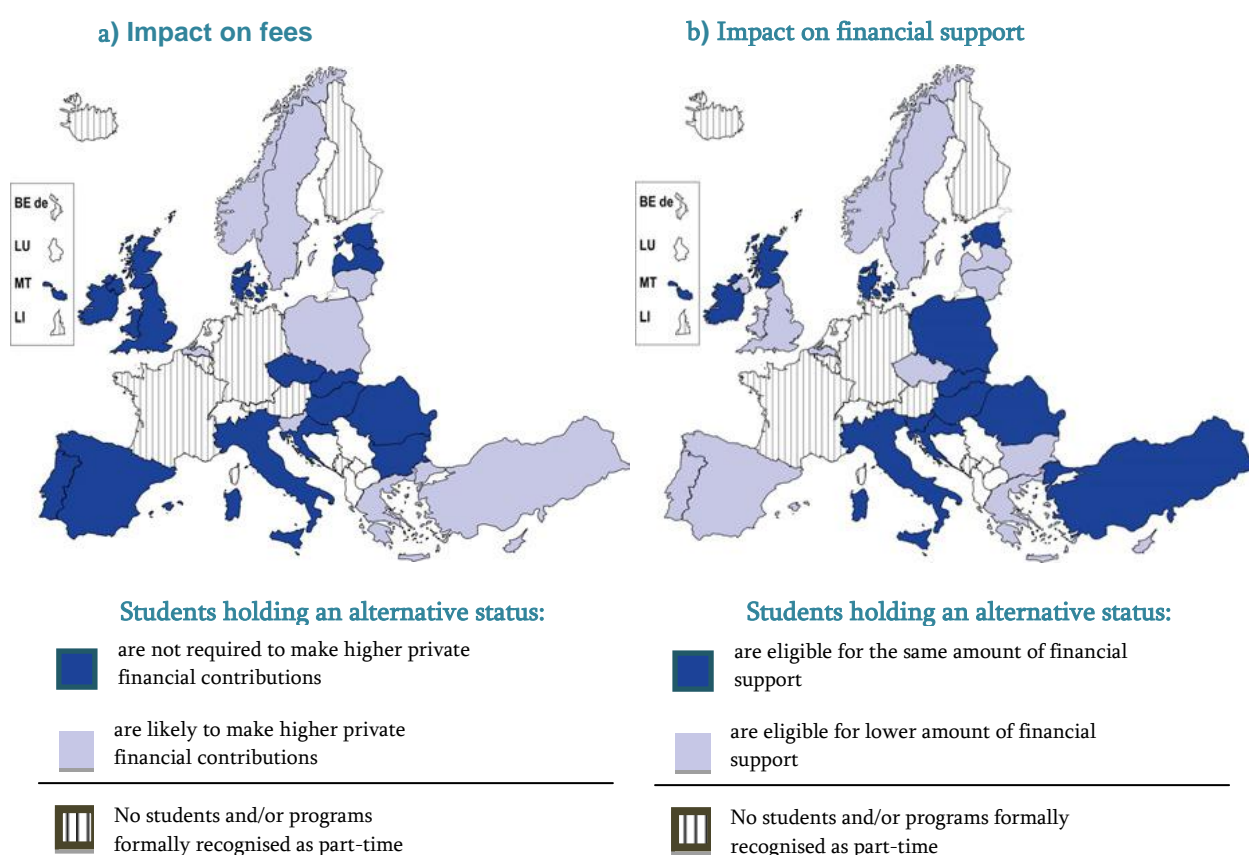
Source: European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2014. Modernisation of Higher Education in Europe: Access, Retention and Employability 2014. Eurydice Report.

Generally part-time study means a less intensive workload compared with full-time studies. Students' workload can be expressed in relevant credits (e.g. Lithuania and Ireland), study hours/weeks (e.g. the United Kingdom – England, Wales and Northern Ireland) or the combination of both (e.g. Latvia, Sweden and Scotland).

In Estonia and Portugal full-time students are required to complete at least 75% of their planned yearly workload and consequently, part-time students must complete less than 75%. In Scotland full-time students are required to attend the institution for at least 24 weeks per year and 21 hours - per week. The students whose course is equivalent to 50% of a full-time course are considered to be part-time students.

In Hungary, for example, part-time students are those who follow a program, which includes at least 30 % and at most 50 % of contact hours of a full-time program. In Bulgaria, Croatia and Romania, part-time students are expected to achieve the same amount of credits, but they are not obliged to attend lectures. In Poland, lectures for part-timers generally take place from Friday to Sunday.

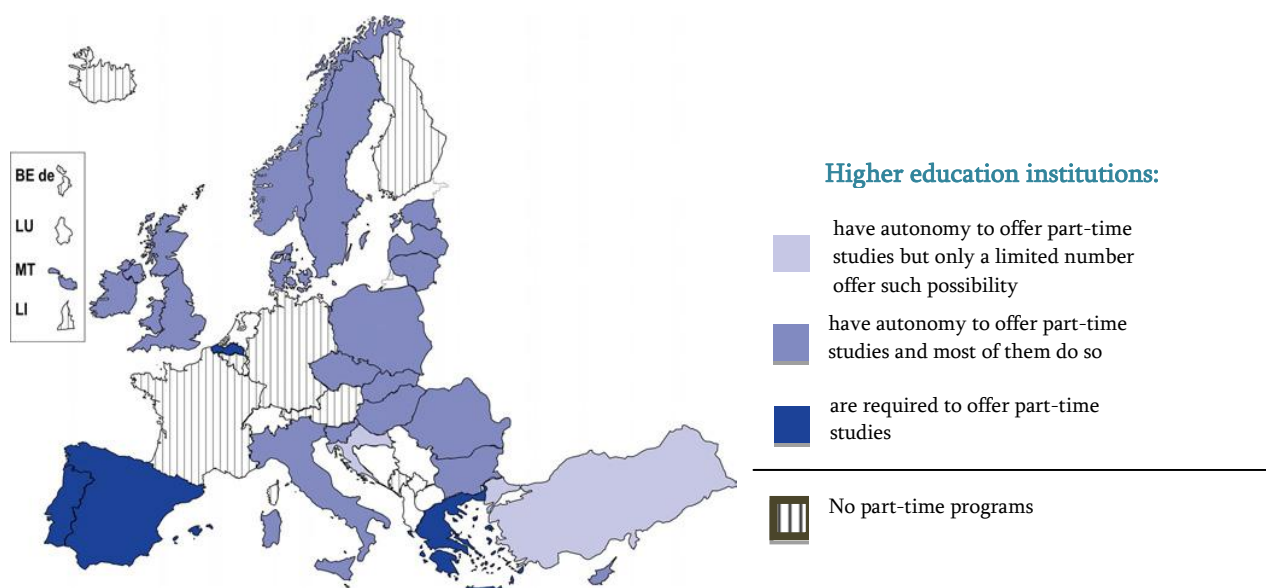
Figure #2. Impact of formal student status on financial arrangements related to higher education studies. 2012/2013



Source: European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2014. Modernisation of Higher Education in Europe: Access, Retention and Employability 2014. Eurydice Report.

In some countries (Spain, Italy and Slovenia) steering documents refer to part-time studies, but they do not provide their exact definition. It means that higher education institutions can autonomously define in their regulations what the part-time study mode will involve. A similar situation can be observed in Norway where students may register on a part-time or full-time basis, but the workload related to each student status is defined individually and stipulated in an individual education plan. The establishment of the plan is obligatory for all programs financed by the Ministry of Education and Science.

Figure #3. Extent of the provision of part-time studies. 2012/2013



Source: European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2014. Modernisation of Higher Education in Europe: Access, Retention and Employability 2014. Eurydice Report.

In Belgium students can choose between three formal student statuses/contracts. They are called: a 'diploma/degree contract' for programs leading to a complete higher education degree, a 'credit contract' for studies leading to a limited number of credits and an 'examination contract' for studies where students participate only in examinations aiming at a limited number of credits. In the Czech Republic and Slovakia steering documents refer to three distinct study modes, namely, 'on-site/presence', 'distance' and 'combined studies'.

In some countries only certain categories of students can study part-time. In Greece, for instance, the law foresees a possibility to study part-time only for students who can justify that they work at least 20 hours a week.

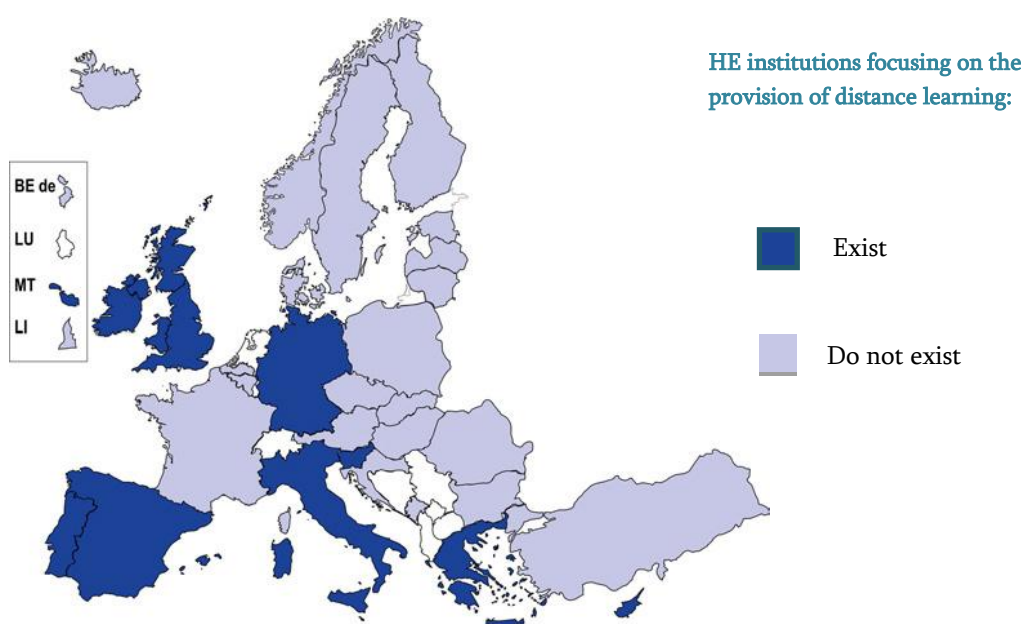
If any country does not offer a possibility for students to formally register as part-timers, it does not mean that students cannot study in a flexible way. For example, in Austria, there is no official part-time student status, but students do not have to study according to the time limit set in the curriculum. There is similar situation in France, where higher education institutions may provide students with an opportunity to adapt their study rhythm to their needs. This is commonly offered to sportsmen, working students, association member students and those involved in more than one higher education program. In Germany flexibility is offered through dual programs combining work experience and higher education studies, as well as individualized programs that are designed taking into consideration personal requirements.

### Distance Learning and E-Learning

Surveys suggest that higher education institutions focusing on distance learning and e-learning are rare across Europe. They exist only in several countries including Germany,

Ireland, Greece, Spain, Italy, Cyprus, Malta, Portugal, Slovenia and the United Kingdom. In majority of them mainly private institutions provide such programs, whereas in others they count among the key players in the system (Germany, Greece, Spain, Cyprus, Portugal and the United Kingdom).

**Figure #4. Existence of higher education institutions focusing on the provision of distance learning and e-learning programs. 2012/13**



Source: European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2014. Modernisation of Higher Education in Europe: Access, Retention and Employability 2014. Eurydice Report.

Southern Europe is characterised by the highest concentration of higher education institutions focusing on the provision of distance learning. The oldest and the biggest institution in this

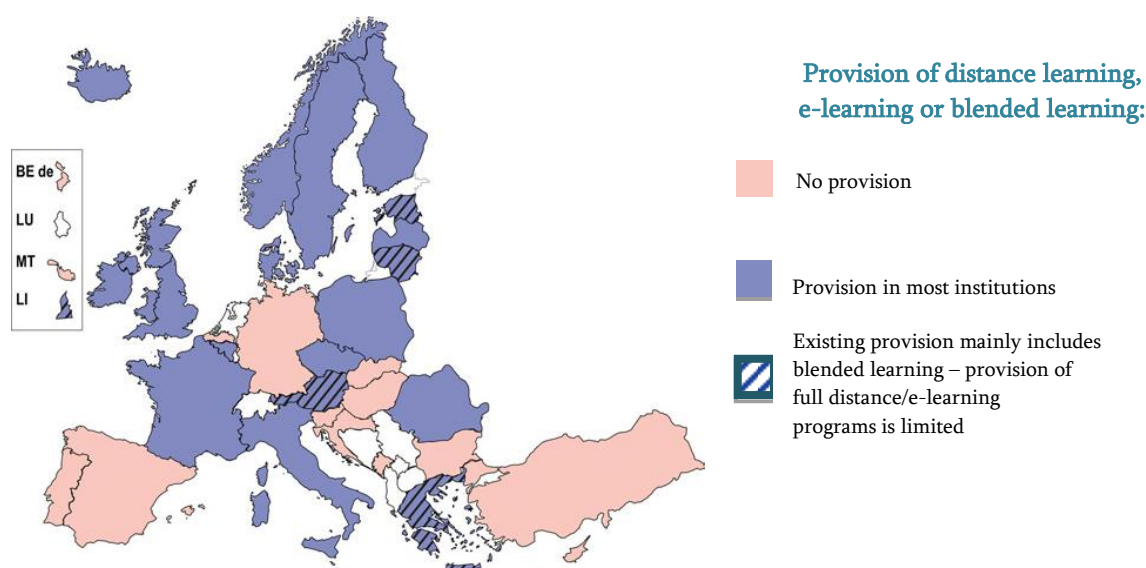
geographical area is the National Open University (UNED) in Spain. The university was created in the early 70's and currently has more than 180 000 students. Publicly funded distance learning higher education institutions are the Universidade Aberta in Portugal, the Hellenic Open University in Greece and the Open University of Cyprus. They were founded in 1988, 1992 and 2006 respectively.

The largest distance learning and e-learning provider in terms of student numbers is the Open University in the United Kingdom that currently has around 240 000 students of whom more than 70 % work.

There is a limited number of institutions providing distance learning and e-learning across Europe, but there is a significant provision of blended learning, i.e. e-learning integrated in traditional higher education courses.



**Figure #5. Provision of distance learning and e-learning in traditional higher education institutions. 2012/13**



Source: European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2014. Modernisation of Higher Education in Europe: Access, Retention and Employability 2014. Eurydice Report.

Diversity of distance learning and e-learning also mirror the fact that institutions have autonomy in this area and generally do not have to report the extent of their distance learning provision to central authorities. Austria and Norway are exceptions due to the fact that they have mechanisms obliging higher education institutions to report on the implementation of distance learning courses. In Norway, the government formulates in its annual budget that flexible provision is one of the objectives of higher education institutions. According to available data, 6 -7 % of all students were enrolled in e-learning courses in 2012.

Despite the fact that the provision of distance learning, e-learning and blended learning mainly falls under the responsibility of higher education institutions, central-level authorities in several countries (Belgium, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Ireland, Estonia, France, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, the United Kingdom and Norway) have provided specific support for the development of these study modes.

The support can take a form of statements in steering documents inviting higher education institutions to use alternative forms study ( Belgium, Ireland, Latvia and Poland) or enabling the accreditation of distance learning programs (the Czech Republic). Moreover, some central authorities have formally stipulated their engagement to enhance the provision of distance learning, e-learning and blended learning in strategic policy documents, for example in the Czech Republic, France and the United Kingdom.

In **the Czech Republic**, the Strategic Plan for the Scholarly, Scientific, Research, Development, Innovation, Artistic and Other Creative Activities of Higher Education Institutions for 2011-2014 includes an objective to diversify the modes of study and educational methods in close connection to



the needs of different categories of students. The Ministry assumes responsibility to support higher education institutions and provide financial support for their programs.

In **France**, the new law on Higher Education and Research (adopted in July 2013) establishes ICT as a primary concern in higher education. In October 2013 the Ministry responsible for higher education and research launched an ICT agenda for higher education, which is composed of 18 distinct actions and the first French platform of online courses (Massive Open Online Courses – MOOC).

In the **United Kingdom** (England), the policy document 'Higher Education: Students at the Heart of the System' (2011) emphasizes the importance of flexible provision methods such as distance and online learning, short-term academic programs and work-based options.

Apart from strategic policy documents stipulating prospective initiatives, central authorities in some countries have recently supported projects aiming to enhance the provision of distance learning, e-learning or blended learning. Bulgaria, Estonia, France, Lithuania and Norway are interesting examples in this respect.

With the help of European funding **Bulgaria** was able to put in place a number of initiatives to support distance learning in higher education including the project 'Raising qualification of academic teachers' (2008-2011). Approximately 250 teachers were trained in the use of e-learning and distance learning. Furthermore 'Development of electronic forms of distance learning in higher education' project is being implemented.

In **Estonia** the Ministry of Education has supported e-learning through the special program that covers 20 higher education institutions. In addition to this initiative, the Innovation Centre for Digital Education Initiatives coordinates activities and developments in the field of ICT-supported learning. Its activities include the facilitation of the Estonian e-University consortium.

In **France** the platform of online courses – 'France – ICT university' (France Université Numérique) was launched in 2014 and serves 200 000 students. This experimental platform aims at pooling the online resources of several higher education institutions in a single place and making them available to the wider public. Public funds will also be mobilized to finance project proposals to involve ICT companies to develop the platform.

In **Lithuania** the so called virtual university program has been implemented since 2007 aimed at promoting e-learning and the development of the necessary infrastructure in higher education institutions. The program is financed from the state budget and the EU Structural Fund.

Overall, the analysis of policy frameworks of the European countries shows an evolution towards a less structured and institutionalised form of higher education that is less constrained by time and space.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

Combination of work and study at the stage of higher education is widely-spread practice in Georgia. The stakeholders who participated in the study explain two main causes of the situation:

First – tuition fees for higher education courses in relation to GDP is higher in Georgia than in many other countries. Due to scanty funds allocated by the government households bear a considerable financial burden. Many students have to combine study with work to pay tuition fees.

Second – independent surveys as well as feedback given by the study participants prove that higher education programs in Georgia do not meet well labor market requirements. The practice component is weak and does not provide an opportunity to acquire certain competences. Due to this fact combination of study with work represents effective compensation of flaws of education programs especially for students employed in their professions.

Implementation of the relevant supportive policy by higher education institutions is an important preconditions to maintain students and make them interested and improve university programs and learning outcomes. In Georgia effective legislative regulations do not set restrictions to higher education institutions to develop and implement the above-mentioned policy, although it is not wide-spread countrywide.

The government and higher education institutions should implement the following recommendations in order to develop and implement effective policy supporting employed students:

### Improvement of Credit Accumulation Scheme

The change of student funding model is the necessary precondition to improve the credit accumulation scheme in order to ensure financing based on credits and not semester.

Based on this scheme part-time programs should be developed in higher education facilities that will enable students to effectively distribute study load in time.

In order to ensure effective credit accumulation scheme it is recommended to grant credit not only for academic education but also synchronize this process within continuing education.

### Adoption of Distance Learning Model

The government must support development of distance/e-learning. This direction should become a part of state policy for implementation of IT technologies in education.

It is recommended to ensure proper distance learning programs and accreditation system by the National Center for Education Quality Enhancement in order to prevent problems related to student funding and acknowledgement of credits.

It is a priority to develop the segment of video lectures especially for the educational courses that do not require special practical activities. Such lectures will facilitate learning process not only for employed students but also the ones with special education needs.

## **Strengthening Social Grant Component, Student Loan and Other Financial Support Mechanisms**

Tuition fees for higher education and ensuring additional income for socially vulnerable families encourage students to work. Accordingly, development and extension of financial support programs will enable students to spend more time on study.

It is recommended to strengthen the social grants component in parallel to knowledge-based grants. Moreover, the student loan component should also be developed.

## **Practice Component Reform**

It is recommended to revise the practice component in authorization and accreditation standard. Working experience of the students who work in their profession should be considered as student practice. Some universities follow this practice although it is not widely spread. It is important to provide universities with specific recommendations and improve evaluation criteria for practice component.

## **Implementation of So Called Executive Programs**

It is recommended to develop so called “executive programs” in parallel to academic programs that means offering flexible (short-term) certification programs to practitioners to improve certain skills and knowledge. The government should support these programs through acknowledgement of accreditation and certification.

Such types of programs are widely spread in successful higher education institutions worldwide, although they are implemented only by a few private universities in Georgia.

On the one hand, implementation of executive programs will increase additional incomes of higher education institutions and on the other hand, support establishment of flexible mechanisms of informal education for employed persons.

## **Collection of Information about Best Practice**

To develop the system supporting employed students, it is recommended to provide informational and practical support to higher education institutions to introduce and implement flexible modes of study and learning – provide information about the current models and practice and effective implementation tools.

Laws of Georgia do not set strict limitations to higher education institutions to implement flexible modes of study and learning. Accordingly, higher education institutions can test new models and be more creative and practical to introduce novelties. Decision-makers and policy-makers are responsible to promote and study “successful practice” in details and reflect interesting approaches in relevant standards.

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