განათლების ხარისხის განვითარების ეროვნული ცენტრი

NATIONAL CENTER FOR EDUCATIONAL QUALITY ENHANCEMENT

Final Report on Sokhumi State University

Expert Panel Members

Chair: Dr David Cairns, Independent Higher Education Consultant, Director, Quality Assurance Research for Higher Education Ltd., UK

Members:

Dr Elena Cherkezia, World Bank FLEG2 National Consultant, MAPOB Tempus project, Academic Coordinator, Tbilisi State University, Georgia

Ms Salome Dzagnidze, Student Expert, Georgia

Professor Dmitry Gegenava, Vice-Rector Associate Professor, Sulkhan-Saba Orbeliani University, Georgia

Professor Avtandil Tavkhelidze, Professor of Physics, Ilia State University, Georgia

Professor Levan Tsagareli, School of Arts and Sciences, Ilia State University, Georgia

Tbilisi

2018

General information on the University

Sokhumi State University (the University, SSU) was first founded in Sokhumi in 1932, as "Sokhumi Pedagogical Institute". In 1979 it was designated "The State University of Abkhazia". After 1989, a Georgian section of the University was established as the "Sokhumi Branch" of Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University, which had been functioning as a University in Tbilisi since 1993. In 2007 this Sokhumi Branch was formally designated "Sokhumi University" by the Government of Georgia. In 2008, the Government of Georgia licensed the University to conduct educational activities for five years and in December 2010 Sokhumi University was designated "Sokhumi State University" by decree of the Government of Georgia. In September 2012 the Government's Educational Institutions Authorization Board conferred the status of a "Higher Education Institution (University)" on Sokhumi State University and capped its enrolment at 2,871 students..

The University's origins in Sokhumi and its commitments to sustaining contacts between Georgians and Abkhazians and to the peaceful resolution of political and ethnic disputes are distinctive features of its Mission, which extends to preparing students to contribute to the material and cultural development of Georgia and its peoples. The University is organised in seven Faculties through which it delivers its educational activities, including research. These comprise the Faculties of Mathematics and Computer Sciences; Natural Sciences and Health; Humanities; Education; Social and Political Sciences; Law; and Economics and Business. The University has also established a Molecular Diagnostics and Biotechnology Research Centre. At its centre, the University has established Services and Centres to provide administrative and professional support for its educational activities

When the University submitted its evidence for the authorization review it was offering 55 bachelors' programmes, 19 Master Level programmes and seven Doctoral programmes, together with other programmes for Teacher Training (1 programme) and Georgian language preparation (1 programme). Altogether the University was offering 41 programmes accredited through NCEQE, with five other programmes undergoing re-accreditation. The University was also offering 10 Exchange Programmes with other institutions in Georgia and internationally. When the University last secured Authorization it was enabled to recruit up to 2,871 students. When it submitted its evidence for the authorization review the University had 2,453 students enrolled and 1,470 students had suspended registration (2453 (1,470)). Of these 2,154 (1,213) were bachelors students; 229 (132) were Master level students; 34 (124) were Doctoral students; 16 (0) were Teacher Training students and 20 (1) were Georgian language students. Seven of the University's students were identified has having special education needs.

Brief overview of the authorization site visit

The Authorization Review was for the purpose of examining the application made by Sokhumi State University (SSU) for the renewal of the Authorization granted in 2012 which is valid until January 2019.

The University's Self-Evaluation Report (SER) was received by the National Centre for Educational Quality Enhancement (NCEQE) on 2 October 2018. The evaluation panel was initially appointed on 27 September 2018. It consisted of six members, including a UK higher education expert as Chair, and five Georgian members: three academic experts, a labour market expert and a student expert.

The evaluation panel received the University's SER on 2 October 2018 together with many supporting documents at further information at various times subsequently, including during the visit. The panel found that the SER was largely descriptive rather than evaluative and that some key matters could only be clarified in the course of the site visit. The panel found the SWOT analysis provided with the SER to be candid and helpful when planning for the visit. The SER was provided in both Georgian and English as were many but not all items in the supporting documents.

The panel's visit to the University took place on 16, 17 and 18 October, following a helpful orientation and briefing by NCEQE officers at the Centre's Headquarters on 15 October. The programme for the visit provided for a welcome and introductory meeting with the Rector and his panel and a Campus tour, followed by 23 further meetings between the panel, staff and student members of the University, alumni and external stakeholders.

In the course of the visit the panel met senior staff of the University on several occasions, full-time and invited academic staff; administrative and student support staff; undergraduate postgraduate and research students; and external stakeholders. Meetings between the panel and University members and stakeholders were conducted in Georgian and English with the support of simultaneous translation (Georgian:English; English:Georgian) by interpreters provided by NCEQE.

At a meeting at NCEQE on 19 October, following the site visit, the panel reviewed the information provided by the University, supplemented by the evidence supplied in meetings during the visit against the criteria for Authorization.

The panel is grateful to the University and all those who took time to meet it and help it to deepen its understanding of the University and its context throughout the site visit. The panel is particularly grateful to those staff, students, alumni, employers and other stakeholders who came to the University specially to meet it.

The panel also wishes to acknowledge the frank and collegial way in which all those who came to meet it responded to its questions, qualities which are exemplified in the University's Argumentation Statement/Evidence-based Statement in response to the panel's draft report. The panel wishes the University well for the future as it engages with the findings of this report

Overview of the HEI's compliance with standards

Summary of Recommendations

That for each of its Action Plans the University should specify concrete performance indicators (PIs) that will enable the Representative Council and Academic Council to assess, on a quarterly basis, whether Action Plans are achieving the objectives stated for them and that the Action Plans should be revised to show the role of the Faculties in delivering the objectives of the Plans.

That the University give greater priority to providing English language tuition for all students and staff including those undertaking research projects.

That the University should introduce means to monitor, analyse, and report on the academic performance of its students, by programme and level, to its Representative Council and its Academic Council at appropriate points throughout each session, as a matter of urgency; the arrangements adopted to include reporting on the academic performance of taught postgraduate and research students; progression and continuation rates by programme and subject area; the incidence of unethical behaviour including plagiarism; formal and informal complaints by students; and appeals by them against academic decisions.

That, as a matter of urgency, the University should develop and implement an intensive training programme for academic and administrative staff in the first instance, and then for all undergraduate and taught postgraduate students, on what constitutes plagiarism and how it can be detected. This should be supplemented by advice to those attending the training courses on how, if unchecked, plagiarism will damage the University's reputation and their future career prospects.

That the University should consult with its staff and students as it develops its own working definition of "academic freedom", with examples of its application, for incorporation in a University Statute to be considered and passed (with any necessary amendments) by the Representative Council and the Academic Council and that when formally adopted this Statute should be published on the University's web site.

That the University should extract from the its three methodology documents for planning designing and developing programmes the general principles that underlie them, in order to produce a policy statement that sets out its approach to designing and developing educational programmes for presentation to the Academic Council and the Representative Council.

That the University reviews the learning and teaching resources that are listed in its syllabi to ensure that the main texts listed are in the Georgian language and that for each syllabus in its programmes it checks how the ECTS credit hours have been calculated and that this is consistent with national and international norms and requirements.

That the University should progressively review the syllabi for its programmes to check that the learning and teaching methodologies that are specified in each syllabus will ensure that students will be able to achieve the stated learning outcomes.

That the University should develop a policy and strategy for the continuing professional development of all members of its academic and administrative staff. This policy should be presented to the Representative Council and Academic Council for their consideration. It should give particular attention the development needs of academic staff and outline how the University intends to promote teaching and assessment skills but particularly training in research skills and methods.

That the University should set its own expectations for what affiliated staff should achieve (benchmarks) in, for example teaching, supervision of dissertations and PhD theses, research, and scholarly activity and how it might encourage academic staff and particularly affiliated professors, to achieve them.

That the University should set out and publish on its web site its policy on the appointment of invited staff, rules for calculating when there is a need to appoint invited staff, procedures for approving financial allocations for appointing invited staff, and its appointments procedures for invited staff.

That the University should monitor whether, and how its academic staff observe the requirements of its affiliation arrangements and report the outcomes of this monitoring periodically to the Representative and Academic Councils.

That the University should check its procedures for students to appeal against academic decisions for fairness and reasonableness and publish its appeals procedures, revised as necessary, on its web site

That in the interests of fairness to all students and transparency, the University should publish the conditions that have to be met if it is to provide financial support for socially and financially disadvantaged students, and that it should also publish on its web site under what conditions it is prepared to provide discretionary funds to support students attending international conferences.

That training in research methods should be provided for all MA level students.

That the University should revise its strategies for increasing the volume and the quality of the research undertaken by its academic and research staff and for providing the facilities and support to make this practicable.

That the University should increase its provision of English language tuition and support for PhD students to enable them to engage more readily in international research projects

That the University should set out performance indicators for the number of research papers and other publications in international refereed journals that it expects each Faculty and research Centre to achieve annually, and use them alongside its existing measures to identify where it should focus its attention to bring about improvements in its research outputs.

That the University should review the work of the Students Practice and Career Management Service in consultation with programme leaders and Deans, and the Student Self-Government, in order to determine what additional staffing and staff training might be needed to enable the Service to have the potential to provide careers support direct to all students.

That the University should identify and report to Academic Council and Representative Council what is needed to enable it provide and support sustainable teaching, learning and research in the natural sciences and implement its findings.

That the University reviews the effectiveness of the tuition it provides for students to enable them to become confident independent users of library and other information and data resources and reports its findings and recommendations for improvements to the Academic and Representative Councils.

That the University should ensure that safety rules and procedures are clearly visible to staff and students working in laboratories managed, leased or loaned to the University for its students.

That if the University is successful in having the number of students it is permitted to recruit increased to 3,500 that it will need to ensure that the space it provides for teaching learning and other educational activities is sufficient to meet the benchmarks it has defined for itself in its "Rule for the Planning of Student Body"

That the University should provide further social circulation space for students, including spaces for group work; that it should ensure that there is an increase in the number of private spaces and offices where lecturers, professors and invited academic staff can meet students for academic consultations without interruption and staff can undertake research; that it should continue to modernize its teaching rooms and lecture spaces, its libraries and washroom facilities, including for those with disabilities; that it should ensure that all rooms and circulation spaces have adequate heating and air conditioning facilities and that for each of its premises it sets aside dedicated parking spaces for disabled persons.∎

That the University should post the minutes and supporting papers of the Representative Council and Academic Council on its web site together with the University's annual financial and internal audit reports, its approach to risk management, and information about the research being carried out at the University and its outcomes to help prospective research students to identify possible research supervisors.

That the University ensures that the financial and other resources that it allocates to scientific research match its ambitions for this area of its work and that they are consistent with the allocations that are appropriate for a higher education institution that engages in research. These resources should include provision for paid leave for academic staff to undertake extended or otherwise substantial programmes of research.

That when each of the reports of the Internal Audit Service is finalised, and after it has been accepted by Representative Council, it should be published on the University's web site in the interests of transparency and as a demonstration of the University's confidence in the robustness of its financial procedures.

Summary of Suggestions

The panel suggests that for the next iteration of its Mission Statement the University should organise its content more clearly and logically so that it provides readers with a clearer understanding of the main strands of the Statement and its priorities, including acting as a bridge between the Georgian and Abkhazian communities, and that when referring to inclusive learning that it mentions its readiness to support students with disabilities to the extent that its resources permit.

That the QA Service should seek advice from NCEQE on how best to develop the University's capacity to undertake self-critical analyses for it to share with other members of the University.

That the central QA Service and Faculty QA Services, and the Learning Process Management Department coordinate the data and information that each gathers to ensure that the University secures the maximum benefit from each survey or other research activity that it conducts into the performance of programmes, staff and students.

That the QA Services assume responsibility for developing a quality culture across the University that is built on an understanding by the Services, and by staff and students, that quality assurance is a process of applied social science, quantitative and qualitative research, the purpose of which is to produce knowledge about the University that will enable it to provide better education and research opportunities for students and staff, to the benefit of the University's reputation.

That the inductions and other dissemination procedures that the Faculty of Education has developed to teach students about ethical practice and research methods should now be extended to all undergraduate, taught postgraduate and research students across the University.

That when the University next reviews its methodologies for programme development it makes it clearer that the term "stakeholder" is to be understood to include students.

That the University might find it helpful to consider the merits of problem-based learning for programmes in the natural sciences and under what circumstances it would be appropriate for the primary assessment component for a programme element not to be a written assignment.

That in the next year the QA Service conducts an audit of programme documents across the University and designs a process to bring all programme documents from the Faculties up to the standards of the best.

That students would find it helpful to have a clear statement by the University on how it uses learning outcomes when designing the curriculum and setting assessment tasks.

That should the number of its student enrolments be lifted, the University should increase the number of full-time academic staff who teach students and reduce its reliance on invited academic staff, and that it should encourage more professors to be involved in delivering its educational programmes.

That University should consider how to encourage more academic staff to accept affiliated status by publishing the advantages that affiliation will offer them, for example in opportunities for continuing professional development and support for their research activities.

That in cooperation with the Student Self-Government, and with the advice of professional experts, the University should design a policy for handling complaints by students and third parties and a procedure for handling and resolving complaints that it can put to its Representative Council for consideration.

That the University should consider how best it might provide dedicated private spaces for academic consultations between staff and students where academic staff do not have offices.

That the University should review the effectiveness of its arrangements overall for academic counselling and providing pastoral support for students and report its findings to the Representative and Academic Councils with recommendations for improvements.

That for the presentation of PhD theses the University should enforce its requirements that thesis submissions should follow a standard house style (font, layout and citation standard).

That as the University works to modernize its teaching and learning spaces, it should take into consideration the diversity of teaching methods used in its various programmes and organize its teaching and learning spaces accordingly.

That the Library should regularly report data on the extent to which the on-line databases to which the University subscribes are being used by academic and research staff to the Academic and Representative Councils

Summary of the Best Practices

The rigorous and collegial way in which the University conducts elections for senior positions, as exemplified in the procedures followed for the interviews and elections for the current Rector.

The way in which the University's International Relations and Intercultural Unions Service is supporting its drive to internationalization through mobility schemes, research exchanges and joint programmes of study and its QA Service is aiding the reintegration of returning mobility students into study at the University.

The induction arrangements the University's Faculty of Education has place for academic staff and for training staff.

The University's willingness to research its students' opinions on the adequacy of their learning spaces and to use the resulting information in planning how to develop its learning and social infrastructure.

That the University has arranged for its core digital learning and administrative services to be hosted by a commercial provider in a secure facility away from its main buildings.

Summary Table

	Standard	Complies with Requirements	Substantially complies with requirements	Partially Complies with Requirements	Does not Comply with Requirements
1.	**Mission and strategic development of HEI**	☒	☐	☐	☐
1.1	Mission of HEI	☒	☐	☐	☐
1.2	Strategic development	☐	☒	☐	☐
2.	**Organizational structure and management of HEI**	☐	☐	☒	☐
2.1	Organizational structure and management	☐	☒	☐	☐
2.2	Internal quality assurance mechanisms	☐	☐	☒	☐
2.3	Observing principles of ethics and integrity	☐	☐	☒	☐
3.	**Educational Programmes**	☐	☒	☐	☐
3.1	Design and development of educational programmes	☐	☒	☐	☐
3.2	Structure and content of educational programmes	☐	☒	☐	☐
3.3	Assessment of learning outcomes	☐	☒	☐	☐
4	**Staff of the HEI**	☒	☐	☐	☐
4.1	Staff management	☐	☒	☐	☐
4.2	Academic/Scientific and invited Staff workload	☒	☐	☐	☐
5	**Students and their support services**	☐	☒	☐	☐
5.1	The Rule for obtaining and changing student status, the recognition of education, and student rights	☐	☒	☐	☐
5.2	Student support services	☐	☒	☐	☐
6	**Research, development and/or other creative work**	☐	☒	☐	☐
6.1	Research activities	☐	☒	☐	☐
6.2	Research support and internationalization	☐	☒	☐	☐
6.3	Evaluation of research activities	☐	☒	☐	☐
7	**Material, information and financial resources**	☐	☒	☐	☐
7.1	Material resources	☐	☒	☐	☐
7.2	Library resources	☐	☒	☐	☐
7.3	Information resources	☐	☒	☐	☐
7.4	Financial resources	☐	☒	☐	☐

Signature of expert panel members

1. David Cairns (Chair)
2. Elena Cherkezia (Member)
3. Salome Dzagnidze (Student Member)
4. Dmitri Gegenava (Member
5. Avtandil Tavkhelidze (Member)
6. Levan Tsagareli (Member)

Compliance of the Authorization Applicant University with the Authorization Standard Components

1. ## Mission and strategic development of the University

Mission statement of a HEI defines its role and place within higher education area and broader society. Strategic development plan of HEI corresponds with the mission of an institution, is based on the goals of the institution and describe means for achieving these goals.

1.1 Mission of HEI
Mission Statement of the HEI corresponds to Georgia's and European higher education goals, defines its role and place within higher education area and society, both locally and internationally.

Descriptive summary and analysis of compliance with the standard component requirements

Throughout this report the terms "the University" and "SSU" are used for brevity to refer to Sokhumi State University, other than where an alternative meaning is expressly stated.

The Mission Statement of Sokhumi State University is aspirational, comprehensive and enabling. The panel analysed the Mission Statement against the "Primary Goals of higher education in Georgia", as stated in the Law of Georgia on Higher Education (the Primary Goals). The panel found that the University's Mission Statement conforms to the Primary Goals and the goals of the European Higher Education Area.

The University's Mission Statement gives prominence to building diplomatic cultural and educational bridges between the Georgian and Abkhazian communities and promoting peaceful co-existence between them, and more generally. The University's Mission Statement also features commitments to the advancement of knowledge; to fostering civic responsibility; to open and inclusive education for all, regardless of ethnicity, social background, political and religious views; and to educating individuals for the labour market. There are also commitments to develop interdisciplinary studies. The Mission Statement does not refer to support for students to enter higher education who have the potential to benefit from it but who have physical or mental disabilities (but see below).

Before its visit the panel analysed the University's Mission Statement, its Statutes and Regulations and the data provided about its educational provision. It noted that the Mission Statement had been most recently adopted by the Academic Council in July 2018. The panel therefore checked to see whether the University Mission existed to comply with the Authorization Standards and how far it served as a statement of the University's ethos, values and its intended path for future developments.

Through its meetings with staff and students the panel explored the salience of the University's Mission for staff and students in their day-to-day work, and whether there had been opportunities for staff and students to contribute to the process of framing the Mission Statement. From these meetings it was clear to the panel that for many staff and students, the University's commitment to promoting dialogue and serving as a bridge between the Georgian and Abkhazian communities and to develop interdisciplinary studies (such as Peace Studies) that would further conflict resolution and reconciliation, was widely shared. Stakeholders who met the panel confirmed that they had been consulted by the University in the course of developing its Mission Statement and that from what they had observed the University held close to the values and principle aims of its Mission Statement.

During its visit to the University the panel was informed that SSU had recently been awarded funding to develop a Centre for Peace Studies and a Bachelors programme in Abkhazian Studies. The panel welcomed these concrete steps by the University to put its Mission Statement into effect.

Likewise, throughout the visit the panel checked whether the University's aspirations in its Mission Statement, to provide inclusive higher education opportunities, that enable students from socially and materially deprived backgrounds to enter higher education, had been translated into practical commitments: for example, through special courses and facilities and financial assistance for students with special or additional needs for support.

The panel was able to see evidence during its site visit that inclusive education was being promoted by SSU, for example, within the Faculty of Education, and to confirm that financial provision was being made for students who had experienced internal displacement since the early 1990s and for other students from deprived backgrounds. The panel heard that although support for students with disabilities was not mentioned in its Mission Statement the University was providing support for

students with special study needs, within the limitations imposed by the physical layout of its present buildings and its material and staff resources (see also Standard 7.1, below, below).

Overall, the panel came to the view that in its breadth and comprehensiveness the University's Mission Statement was admirable but that it could be more clearly and logically expressed to convey the University's priorities and that a reorganised Mission Statement would be helpful for staff, students and those seeking to learn about the University through its web site. The panel also came to the view that when it next revises its Mission Statement the University might wish to clarify that its commitment to inclusive education extends to enabling students with physical and mental special study needs to benefit from the higher education it provides to the extent that the University's resources permit.

Evidences/indicators

SER; Mission Statement; Strategic Development Plan; Meetings with Rector and Chancellor and their staff; with administrative and academic staff (including invited staff); students; alumni and stakeholders; Report on Erasmus + grant project DARE ("Developing programs for Access of disadvantaged groups of people and Regions to higher Education"); Report on Erasmus + grant project "Creation of the Graduate Curricula in Peace Studies in Georgia"

Recommendations:

Suggestions:

The panel suggests that for the next iteration of its Mission Statement the University should organise its content more clearly and logically so that it provides readers with a clearer understanding of the main strands of the Statement and its priorities, including acting as a bridge between the Georgian and Abkhazian communities, and that when referring to inclusive learning that it mentions its readiness to support students with disabilities to the extent that its resources permit.

Best Practices (if applicable):

Evaluation

Please mark the checkbox, which best describes the HEI's compliance with this specific component of the standard

      ☒ Complies with requirements

      ☐ Substantially complies with requirements

      ☐ Partially complies with requirements

      ☐ Does not comply with requirements

1.2 Strategic Development

- o   HEI has a strategic development (7-year) and an action plans (3-year) in place.
- o   HEI contributes to the development of the society, shares with the society the knowledge gathered in the institution, and facilitates lifelong learning
- o   HEI evaluates implementation of strategic and action plans, and duly acts on evaluation results.

Descriptive summary and analysis of compliance with the standard component requirements

The University has a Strategic Development Plan in place that spans seven years (2018-25) from which it has developed six three-year Action Plans (2018-20) to deliver the objectives of the Strategic Plan. The Strategic Development Plan was most recently approved by the Representative Council of the University in July 2018

The panel was told by staff and stakeholders that, as part of the development of its Strategic Plan and three-year Action Plans, the University had held extensive institution-wide consultations including within the Faculties and at meetings of the University's Representative Council and Academic Council.

The University's approach to producing its Strategic Plan included analysing its current situation using the Strengths Weaknesses Opportunities Threats (SWOT) technique. With the benefit of the evidence it accumulated for this Authorization Review the panel was able to appreciate the candour with which the University had assessed its weaknesses and the threats to its continuing development.

The University's Strategic Plan has six strands: Improvement of quality of study, establishment of international standards; Scientific and research activity; Internationalization and expansion of relations; Student services; Further improvement of management; Financial and material security. The panel was able to confirm that the six strands are based on SSU's Mission. As the Strategic Plan unfolds, each of these Strands is treated to further description and analysis to break it down into a series of discrete but linked tasks. These tasks provide the basis for what the University termed a "Logical Framework of Action" in which each of the 26 tasks provides the basis for three year Action Plans (2018-2020), with Tasks further broken down into "Activities". The panel noted that responsibilities for completion of Tasks and Activities had been assigned solely to the central Departments and Services of the University and that its seven Faculties appeared to have been given no role to play in delivering any of the Action Plans.

Overall, the panel found that the planning processes that the University was following were clearly linked to its own priorities, as expressed in its Mission Statement, and that they satisfy the requirements of the Authorization Standard. What was less clear was how the Faculties were intended to contribute to delivering the University's Strategic Plan. Likewise, it was not clear to the panel how it was intended to monitor progress towards meeting the objectives the University had set for itself in its Action Plans, given the very general terms in which Activities within specific Tasks were stated. For example, "Further improvement, constant updating of equipment in training areas.". The panel was told that progress in fulfilling the Action Plans would be monitored on behalf of the University by its Representative Council. The panel is confident that the Representative Council will seek to be rigorous in its monitoring, but that this will require the University to provide the Council with concrete measures to assess the progress being achieved under each Action Plan, and data with which to judge the adequacy of that progress against the requirements of the Strategic Plan.

The panel therefore recommends to the University that for each Action Plan it should specify concrete performance indicators (PIs) that will enable the Representative Council and Academic Council to assess, on a quarterly basis, whether Action Plans are achieving the objectives set out for them, and that the Action Plans should be revised to show the role of the Faculties in delivering the Plans' objectives.

In support of this recommendation the panel also suggests to the University that it should consider seeking a planning officer, with quantitative and qualitative research and analysis skills, to help it to develop its strategic planning.

Evidences/indicators

SER; Mission Statement; Strategic Development Plan 2018-25 and Action Plans; Statutes for Representative Council; Academic Council; Meetings with: Representative Council; Academic Council; Quality Assurance Service; Deans.

Recommendations:

That for each of its Action Plans the University should specify concrete performance indicators (PIs) that will enable the Representative Council and Academic Council to assess, on a quarterly basis, whether Action Plans are achieving the objectives stated for them and that the Action Plans should be revised to show the role of the Faculties in delivering the objectives of the Plans.

Suggestions:

That the University should consider seeking a planning officer with quantitative and qualitative research and analysis skills to help it to develop its strategic planning.

That Action Plans be revised to show clearly the contributions that will be required from academic and support staff in the Faculties.

Best Practices (if applicable):

Evaluation
☐ Complies with requirements ☒ Substantially complies with requirements ☐ Partially complies with requirements ☐ Does not comply with requirements

2. Organizational Structure and Management of HEI

Organizational structure and management of the HEI is based on best practices of the educational sector, meaning effective use of management and quality assurance mechanisms in the management process. This approach ensures implementation of strategic plan, integration of quality assurance function into management process, and promotes principles of integrity and ethics

2.1 Organizational Structure and Management
o Organizational structure of HEI ensures implementation of goals and activities described in its strategic plan o Procedures for election/appointment of the management bodies of HEI are transparent, equitable, and in line with legislation o HEI's Leadership/Management body ensures effective management of the activities of the institution o Considering the mission and goals of HEI, leadership of the HEI supports international cooperation of the institution and the process of internationalization.

Descriptive summary and analysis of compliance with the standard component requirements

The University has a "flat" organizational structure with central Services and Centres to support its administrative activities and seven Faculties through which it delivers its educational activities. Each of the Faculties has some local administrative support. The Faculties comprise the Faculties of Mathematics and Computer Sciences; Natural Sciences and Health; Humanities; Education; Social and Political Sciences; Law; and Economics and Business. The University has also established a Molecular Diagnostics and Biotechnology Research Centre. The University's Strategic Plan and the associated Action Plans showed where responsibilities had been assigned to Services and Centres for the completion of Tasks and Actions but not how the Faculties were to contribute to meeting the objectives set out in the Action Plans (see above).

The University's Strategic Development Plan gives priority to Scientific and research activity and to Internationalization and expansion of relations. It seemed to the panel that making progress with developments in each of these areas would require substantial investment in new facilities and partnerships with existing research centres institutes and facilities in Georgia, such as that already developed with the Institute of Physics. Progress will also depend on the full involvement of academic and administrative units in each of the University's Faculties and energetic promotion by the University of the importance of academic staff engaging in research activities and engaging with international developments in learning, teaching and the development of their specialist subject areas. At the same time, the University will need to encourage staff in learning English and find ways for academic staff to engage with fellow international specialists in research and educational practice.

As part of the information it submitted for the Authorization Review the University provided information on its management practices; how authority is delegated for decision-making; how finances are managed and controlled; and how representative positions and positions of authority are filled through election and appointment. On the latter, the University's papers described how elections for positions on the Academic and Representative Councils, respectively, were held. It noted, however, that the election rule for Deans does not explicitly require that a candidate for the academic position of Dean should be an academic and the level to which they should be qualified. If this is intentional rather than by omission it would be wise to state that intention explicitly.

During the visit, members of the University's Representative and Academic Councils described to the panel the process whereby the present Rector had been appointed to his position as an external candidate by the vote of the Academic Council. The panel also surveyed the evidence for this Standard and concluded that while the arrangements that the University had described were in accordance with the national legislation for higher education there was scope to clarify the election rules for some positions. At the same time, however, the panel considers that the rigorous way in which the University had conducted the interview and election processes for the current Rector had been handled showed a commitment to collegiality in practice which went beyond what law requires and is consistent with best practice for the conduct of such matters.

The panel was told that the management of the University was at several levels, with each of the Deans being responsible for the academic management of their Faculty, for which they are each accountable to the Rector and the Head of Administration/Chancellor managing the work and personnel of the University's central Services and Departments. The Academic Council and the Representative Council share responsibility with the Rector and Chancellor collegially, for overseeing the University's management of its affairs overall. The Rector convenes meetings of the Academic Council and the Representative Council is convened by the Head of its Secretariat. The Speaker of the Representative Council leads its work.

From reading the University's papers and from meetings with staff and students during the site visit, the panel sought to understand more closely where managerial responsibility presently rests in the University for taking initiatives and making decisions. When it asked members of the University about these matters, they confirmed that the Representative Council was ultimately responsible for administrative and financial matters and the Academic Council for educational matters. The panel acknowledges the conscientiousness of each of the two Councils in discharging their respective responsibilities. Nevertheless, the panel considers that there is a need for the University's appointed and elected managers to take a more energetic lead in ensuring that the Faculty organisation that the University has inherited from its predecessor in Sokhumi meets the needs of the present-day Sokhumi State University, and does not waste resources, and that the University is able to respond in a timely way to changes in its circumstances and its external environment.

In the absence of data and performance information on the progress of the Action Plans attached to the University's Strategic Development Plan, the panel found it difficult to judge whether decisions about academic scientific and administrative matters are made in a timely and effective manner. Generally, the University works hard to achieve consensus when making decisions, as confirmed by the members of the Representative and Academic Councils who met the panel, which can encourage procrastination. There is some concrete evidence, however, to suggest that developments in the University's estate that will benefit students and staff, such as new heating systems and facilities for student medical services are being vigorously pursued under the eye of the Rector. What should worry the University, however, is that in the absence of data and Performance Indicators for its educational and financial performance that will enable it to monitor the progress of its Action Plans on (at least) a quarterly basis, the University might only know whether it is succeeding or failing in meeting its own objectives when it is too late to make certain of success or prevent failure.

The panel studied the Statutes for the University's central Services and Departments and discussed their work with their staff in order to assess whether their functions were clearly demarcated and enabled them to work together effectively. In most cases the panel found that services were working together effectively: for example the Public Relations and Media Service and the International Relations and Intercultural Cooperation Service appeared to the panel to be working well together to promote the University and its activities worldwide. Notably, even where the roles assigned by the Statutes of Departments and Services appeared to overlap cooperation and goodwill between Departments and Services and their staff appeared to be able to smooth over potential difficulties and fill gaps in existing arrangements. For example the Statutes that set out the roles and functions of the Quality Assurance Service and the Learning Process Management Department respectively, create overlaps between them. The two bodies work harmoniously together but some of the activities undertaken by the Learning Process Management Department, such as the assessment of the performance of programmes, and undertaking questionnaire surveys of students' views on their experience of their education, would more usually be undertaken in a university by its quality assurance function. Likewise, some of the activities being undertaken by the Quality Assurance Service, such as providing academic counselling to continuing students choosing courses, fall outside the remit of the Service as set out in its Statutes, and would more usually be undertaken by academic support staff, whether based in the Faculties or centrally. See also below, 2.2.

The University is making progress towards using modern digital methods institution-wide and in all its activities. It is in the process of migrating its existing student and other administration systems from its legacy "ELGON" software platform to a new platform "StudLab". As noted above, the University will need to develop means to gather timely data on its performance in order to monitor progress towards meeting the objectives of its Action Plans. The University information systems appeared to the panel to be well managed, secure, and undergoing development to enable the University to manage its affairs effectively.

The University has developed a Business Continuity Plan as part of its Strategy for Risk Management. Copies of the two documents, bundled together, were provided as part of the evidence supporting the University's SER. The panel reviewed the University's Business Continuity Plan and its Risk Management Strategies, which had been approved in July 2018. The panel considers that, taken together, they demonstrate a shrewd capacity to analyse the University's situation and the risks attending on its activities. The panel would have wished for there to have been more time during the site visit for it to explore how the University had arrived at these documents and how it intended to keep them up-to-date.

Additionally, the Department of Financial and Material Provision monitors the University's budget and reports periodically to senior officers, including the Rector and the Chancellor, and the Representative Council on its financial performance. The University's Risk Management Strategies paper describes its approach to managing financial risks as one of "constant monitoring" and "securing alternative sources [of income]" The panel was told that the University's current financial position is stable and that its forward planning function should enable the University to manage future adjustments to its funding.

The University's Strategic Development Plan identifies "internationalization" as a key priority. In its SER it links internationalization to the development of exchange programmes for staff and students with other higher education institutions, attending conferences and undertaking field trips all outside Georgia.

At the time of the Authorization review the University had more than 60 links with universities outside Georgia, supported by memoranda of cooperation and agreement. The University was also actively participating in international staff and student mobility projects under the auspices of the United Nations, and the European Union TEMPUS and ERASMUS+ programmes.. Members of the International Relations and Intercultural Unions Service told the panel that the University had recently committed itself to the development of a joint Master Level programme with a university in Poland for which they were beginning preparations.

The panel is in no doubt that that University is dedicated to the internationalization of its activities and that this work is being ably and energetically taken forward by the University's International Relations and Intercultural Unions Service, in many instances working together. The panel also heard that while students of the University had taken up places through ERASMUS+ to study on programmes delivered in English elsewhere in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) some had found their grasp of English had been insufficient to enable them to benefit. Other staff told the panel that because the University did not at present provide programmes delivered in the English language, students from elsewhere in the EHEA were not keen to study at the University. The panel was surprised that the University did not appear to be offering internationalized versions of the curriculum of some of its mainstream bachelors and Master Level programmes. The panel recommends that the University give greater priority to providing English language tuition for all students and staff including those undertaking research projects.

While the University is aware of the need to extend its current efforts to internationalize its learning, teaching, and research, the work being undertaken by its International Relations and Intercultural Unions Service with students, teaching staff, and researchers to identify mobility and research opportunities, help with grant and other applications, provide support and contacts for mobility students when away from Georgia and – with the Quality Assurance Service – to support the reintegration of returning mobility students into studies at the University is consistent with best practice.

Evidences/indicators

SER; Mission Statement; Charter; Personnel (staff) policy; Strategic Plan - Internationalization; Election Rule of the Dean of the faculty of Sokhumi State University; Strategy for research development; Strategy for internationalization; Business continuity plan; Risk management Strategies Meetings with Speaker and members of the Representative Council; the Rector; Academic Council members; Research and development office; Programme leaders; Heads of central Departments; Deans of Faculty

Recommendations:

That the University give greater priority to providing English language tuition for all students and staff including those undertaking research projects.

Suggestions:

Best Practices (if applicable):

The rigorous and collegial way in which the University conducts elections for senior positions, as exemplified in the procedures followed for the interviews and elections for the current Rector. .

The way in which the University's International Relations and Intercultural Unions Service is supporting its drive to internationalization through mobility schemes, research exchanges and joint programmes of study and its QA Service is aiding the reintegration of returning mobility students into study at the University..

Evaluation

Please mark the checkbox, which best describes the HEI's compliance with this specific component of the standard

    ☐ Complies with requirements

    ☒ Substantially complies with requirements

    ☐ Partially complies with requirements

o   ☐ Does not comply with requirements

2.2 Internal Quality Assurance Mechanisms

- o Institution effectively implements internal quality assurance mechanisms. Leadership of the institution constantly works to strengthen quality assurance function and promotes establishment of quality culture in the institution.
- o HEI has a mechanism for planning student body, which will give each student an opportunity to get a high quality education.

Descriptive summary and analysis of compliance with the standard component requirements

The University has established a central Quality Assurance Service (QA Service), with an elected Head of Service and, in each of the Faculties, a Faculty QA Service led by a Faculty Head of Quality elected by the relevant Faculty Council. The University Statute for the Quality Assurance Service, which sets out is roles and functions, was approved by SSU's Representative Council in March 2018.

The functions assigned to the central QA Service include: improving training and scientific research activities; establishing close links with the quality services of other countries and higher education institutions; developing quality assurance policy and procedures within the University; evaluating teaching and research activities and the quality of professional development of the University staff, and "conducting systematic assessments". The central QA Service is also responsible for organizing the self-evaluation processes for external programme accreditations and institutional authorizations. The panel found that the SER which the central QA Service had organized for the University contained some self-critical assessments but that it was largely descriptive. The panel suggests that it would be worthwhile for the QA Service to seek advice from NCEQE on how best to develop the capacity to undertake self-critical analyses for it to share with other members of the University.

During the visit the panel learned that the QA Service had added to its functions and provides academic counselling to students to help them to choose their next courses and subjects to study. This is a

valuable function and a useful service to students but it was not immediately apparent to the panel why the QA Service should be providing this support.

In the Faculties the roles assigned to the of Faculty QA Services include working with academic staff when they are developing new education and training programmes, checking that programmes are consistent with the requirements of the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) and that newly developed programmes are consistent with the University's regulations and requirements before they are sent to the Faculty Council and ultimately the Academic Council for approval.

As it has been established, the Quality Assurance Service together with the Faculty Quality Assurance Services are capable of working at all levels of the University and across the Faculties. The SER presented some information from surveys of students' opinions, undertaken by the QA Services. During its site visit the panel learned that the QA Services work with the students' representative body, the Student Self-Government, which disseminates survey questionnaires and collects completed questionnaires from students to return to the QA Services. It seemed to the panel that that the survey questionnaires it saw had been poorly designed.

The SER itself provided little analysis of the findings of the surveys that had been conducted by the QA Service or how any findings would be used. Nor was it clear to the panel how the QA Service proposed to monitor the progress of educational programmes. The panel's view is that effectiveness of the central and Faculty QA Services have yet to be fully demonstrated, although the work being undertaken by the Quality Assurance Service for the Faculty of Education and the faculty of Social and Political Sciences seemed promising and would be worth sharing with the other QA Services. Likewise, some of the data and information being gathered by the Learning Process Management Department could be analysed to support quality improvements to the University's educational work.

From the information provided by the University it seemed to the panel that the University had provided sufficient human and material resources for the establishment of the central and Faculty Quality Assurance Services and that the challenge for the central and Faculty Services was now to use the opportunities presented by their establishment to fulfil the roles assigned to them.

The University's Self-Evaluation Report stated that at the time of the review the University had established means to ensure continuous assessment and development of the University's activities. The panel can confirm that some mechanisms to promote improvements in the University's educational activities have been formalised, such as self-evaluation reports and surveys; the roles and functions of the Quality Service have been formalised recently, however, so that there was insufficient evidence available at the time of the site visit for the panel to offer a judgement on the likelihood that the quality assurance arrangements the University has adopted will lead to improvements.

See above. While the University Statute establishing the QA Service requires it to be accountable to the Representative Council and Academic Council it was not clear to the panel how frequently the QA Service proposed to report to each Council, and what information its reports and evaluations for them would contain.

Given the importance attached in the University's Strategic Development Plan to improving the quality of the education it provides, the panel suggests that the QA Service should agree with the Representative Council and the Academic Council an annual schedule for reporting to each on matters such as: the outcomes of external accreditations and authorizations; new programmes added to the University's portfolio of provision and programmes retired from the portfolio; new QA policies and procedures; the analyses the Service has made of, for example, the surveys of students and staff that have been conducted; the character of complaints made by students and third parties (with any common themes and recommendations for improvements); the outcomes of appeals made against academic decisions (again, with any common themes and recommendations for improvements); the assessment outcomes secured by students; the number and nature of instances of plagiarism and unethical conduct detected (and, again, any common themes and recommendations for improvements).

The SER stated that while a performance evaluation system had been in place for academic staff since 2012 the University had yet to develop such a system for its administrative staff (see also below, Standard 4)

The SER stated that the University did not have means to monitor the academic performance of its students' but planned to introduce means for this purpose shortly. The panel recommends that the University introduce means to monitor, analyse, and report on the academic performance of all its students to its Representative Council and its Academic Council at appropriate points throughout each session as a matter of urgency, the arrangements adopted to include reporting on the performance of taught postgraduate and research students.

The SER stated that in 2012 the Academic Council had approved a statement "Mechanisms for Evaluation of Education Quality Development" for educational programmes, training activities, scientific work and personnel assessment and that the mechanisms approved included self-evaluation; surveys; internal and external evaluations, including with alumni and external stakeholders. Other than stating that the means the University had adopted "did not work perfectly" the SER provided little further information. It did, however, mention that in the Faculties the curriculum development groups which manage the process of developing new programmes evaluated programmes and instigated improvements. Students told the panel that the University sought feedback through questionnaires, which were distributed and collected by the Student Self-Government for the University. The University's new StudLab platform will enable students to complete feedback questionnaires digitally.

The SER commented that developments are planned for the near future. In the absence of further information the panel is unable to comment on this sub-element of the Standard.

Overall, the panel found that the QA Services were at an early stage in their development and needed to assess their priorities, centrally and in the Faculties. A first step might be to review the Services current expectation, as shared with the panel, that "quality assurance" in the University needs to wait on the development a "quality culture" among staff and students and consider, rather, that it is the Services' responsibility to work actively to foster the development of such a culture and decide what that will require of them and of the University, staff and students. The panel fears that if the QA Services continue along their present course they and other members of the University will consider that the primary function of quality assurance is to assess the University's procedures against internal and external regulatory requirements, in order to tick boxes. In the panel's view this would be a wrong direction and it urges the QA Services (and the University) to view quality assurance at SSU as a form of applied social-scientific, qualitative and quantitative research, to be conducted at the centre by staff with demonstrable research skills and the tenacity to deploy them – even when their attentions are not welcome.

At SSU, the University itself needs to be the primary subject of research by the QA Services', with the object, overall, being to achieve better understanding and knowledge of the University and its operations in their contexts (and in comparison with other universities and other comparable social and economic organizations); to assess how its performance, as a provider of higher education for students, and as a centre for research, can be improved, and to enhance its reputation. The panel consider that such work needs to be undertaken with a real sense of urgency on the part of all concerned and be actively followed up by the Rector, Deans and the Representative and Academic Councils.

As its Strategic Development Plan shows, the University has many urgent priorities. It is the view of the panel that foremost among them is the need for the QA Services working, where relevant and appropriate, with the Learning Process Management Department and experts from the Faculty of Education, to research the extent and nature of plagiarism and other forms of unethical behaviour across the University and to gather information about good practice in countering plagiarism and unethical behaviour from other universities in Georgia and elsewhere in the EHEA (see below). The findings of that research will enable the QA Services to propose evidence-based procedures for training academic staff to check for and counter plagiarism among its students, using the University's present resources and what disciplinary measures might best be used by the University to discourage unethical practice. This would be preferable to waiting for access to proprietary on-line services (again, see below).

Evidences/indicators
SER; Strategic Plan; Statute for QA Service; Meetings with: Speaker and members of the Representative Council; Academic Council members; Programme Heads; Head and members of the central QA Service and Faculty QA Services; members of the Learning Process Management Service

members of academic staff; members of invited staff; students; alumni and stakeholders; SER team; Deans. annual reports (2017) of the Faculty QA services; QA questionnaires

Recommendations:

That the University should introduce means to monitor, analyse, and report on the academic performance of its students, by programme and level, to its Representative Council and its Academic Council at appropriate points throughout each session, as a matter of urgency; the arrangements adopted to include reporting on the academic performance of taught postgraduate and research students; progression and continuation rates by programme and subject area; the incidence of unethical behaviour including plagiarism; formal and informal complaints by students; and appeals by them against academic decisions.

Suggestions:

That the QA Service should seek advice from NCEQE on how best to develop the University's capacity to undertake self-critical analyses for it to share with other members of the University.

That the central QA Service and Faculty QA Services, and the Learning Process Management Department coordinate the data and information that each gathers to ensure that the University secures the maximum benefit from each survey or other research activity that it conducts into the performance of programmes, staff and students.

That the QA Services assume responsibility for developing a quality culture across the University that is built on an understanding by the Services, and by staff and students, that quality assurance is a process of applied social science, quantitative and qualitative research, the purpose of which is to produce knowledge about the University that will enable it to provide better education and research opportunities for students and staff, to the benefit of the University's reputation.

Best Practices (if applicable):

Evaluation

Please mark the checkbox, which best describes the HEI's compliance with this specific component of the standard

☐ Complies with requirements

☐ Substantially complies with requirements

☒ Partially complies with requirements

☐ Does not comply with requirements

2.3. Observing Principles of Ethics and Integrity

- o   HEI has developed regulations and mechanisms that follow principles of ethics and integrity. Such regulations are publicly accessible.
- o   Institution has implemented mechanisms for detecting plagiarism and its prevention.
- o   HEI follows the principles of academic freedom.

Descriptive summary and analysis of compliance with the standard component requirements

The University has developed an Ethics Code which contains guidance on the University's requirements for ethical behaviour by academic and administrative staff and students. The Code has been approved by the University's Representative Council and the Academic Council. A copy of the Code was provided, in Georgian, as part of the University's supporting evidence for the review, together with statement of the procedures to be followed when ethical behaviour is not observed. The procedures involve an Ethics Committee which has been established to deal with cases of unethical behaviour that are reported to the University. SSU told the panel that at the time of the site visit three violations of the ethics code had been dealt with by the Ethics Committee.

It was not clear to the panel how much was being done in in practice to promote understanding on the part of staff and students of the risks to the University's reputation of unethical behaviour and the importance of countering such activity (see also below).

The University has recently developed and adopted a document describing how to prevent plagiarism and how to detect and deal with instances of plagiarism when they are detected. A copy of the document, a Decree of the University's Academic Council on "Identifying, Eliminating and Responding to Plagiarism" was provided, in Georgian, as part of the University's supporting evidence for the review.

In the course of the site visit the panel was able to discuss academic integrity, ethics and plagiarism and its prevention with staff and students and to review small illustrative samples of students' work selected for the panel by the University. It heard that in the Faculty of Education students received formal instruction in ethical practice and research methods. There was little evidence that other Faculties similarly trained students in these matters. Academic staff and PhD students who spoke to the panel understood the importance of deterring unethical behaviour and plagiarism and some described what could be seen as informal training in these matters. The panel was, however unclear whether, as yet the University had begun to provide systematic briefings and training sessions for all staff and students across the institution on unethical behaviour and plagiarism. The panel suggests that the inductions and other dissemination procedures that the Faculty of Education has developed to teach students about ethical practice and research methods should now be extended to all undergraduate, taught postgraduate and research students across the University.

The panel was alarmed to find two very clear instances of previously undetected plagiarism in the small sample of students' work the University selected for the team to view. That these items had been selected by the University, and had not previously been identified by it as plagiarised, strongly suggests to the panel that the University's attempts to identify and combat plagiarism have to date been ineffectual.

The panel views the egregious instances of plagiarism that it found as a serious matter. It considers that the discouragement of plagiarism requires the University's urgent attention if it is to manage the risk that continuing undetected plagiarism will damage the University's reputation and lessen the value of its qualifications in the eyes of fellow-Georgians, and of universities and employers elsewhere in the EHEA. The panel therefore recommends, as a matter of urgency, that the University should develop and implement an intensive training programme for academic and administrative staff in the first instance and, thereafter, for all undergraduate and taught postgraduate students on what constitutes plagiarism and how it can be detected. This should be supplemented by advice to those attending on how, if unchecked, plagiarism will damage the University's reputation and their future careers. (See also Standard 6.1, below). It should be noted that PhD students are not included in the scope of this recommendation because of the evidence the panel received that they already have training in academic integrity including ethical practice in research.

The University's Charter commits it to protect academic freedom and while the SER states that academic freedom is also mentioned in the University's Mission Statement the panel was unable to find references in that document to this fundamental principle of higher education. The panel discussed the importance of academic freedom with senior members of the University and members of the Representative and Academic Councils, academic staff and students in meetings throughout its visit to the University.

It was clear to the panel from what it was told by the University's students and staff that the principle of academic freedom, as it applies to higher education and research at the University, needs to be carefully and actively considered and defined at all levels of the University, drawing on the arrangements of other universities in Georgia and other jurisdictions across the EHEA. This is necessary so that "academic freedom" ceases to be an abstract concept and becomes part of an understanding, shared by SSU academic and administrative staff and undergraduate, taught postgraduate and research students, of the necessity for academic staff and students in higher education, subject to the Laws of Georgia, to be able to 'question and test received wisdom and knowledge and to put forward new ideas and controversial and unpopular opinions without putting them at risk of losing their position or privileges with the University '.

The panel recommends to the University that it should consult with staff and students as it develops its own working definition of "academic freedom", with examples of its application, for incorporation in a Statute to be considered and passed (with any necessary amendments) by the Representative Council and the Academic Council and that when formally adopted this Statute should be published on the University's web site.
.

Evidences/indicators

Charter/Statute of LEPL Sokhumi State University; Mission Statement; meetings with Representative Council, Academic Council, academic and administrative staff and students.

Recommendations:

That, as a matter of urgency, the University should develop and implement an intensive training programme for academic and administrative staff in the first instance, and then for all undergraduate and taught postgraduate students, on what constitutes plagiarism and how it can be detected. This should be supplemented by advice to those attending the training courses on how, if unchecked, plagiarism will damage the University's reputation and their future career prospects.

That the University should consult with its staff and students as it develops its own working definition of "academic freedom", with examples of its application, for incorporation in a University Statute to be considered and passed (with any necessary amendments) by the Representative Council and the Academic Council and that when formally adopted this Statute should be published on the University's web site.

Suggestions:

That the inductions and other dissemination procedures that the Faculty of Education has developed to teach students about ethical practice and research methods should now be extended to all undergraduate, taught postgraduate and research students across the University.

Best Practices (if applicable):

Evaluation

Please mark the checkbox, which best describes the HEI's compliance with this specific component of the standard

☐ Complies with requirements

☐ Substantially complies with requirements

☒ Partially complies with requirements

☐ Does not comply with requirements

3. **Educational Programmes**

HEI has procedures for planning, designing, approving, developing and annulling educational programmes. Programme learning outcomes are clearly defined and are in line with the National Qualifications Framework. A programme ensures achievement of its objectives and intended learning outcomes

3.1 Design and Development of Educational Programmes
HEI has a policy for planning, designing, implementing and developing educational programmes.
Descriptive summary and analysis of compliance with the standard component requirements
The University does not claim to have a policy for planning designing and developing educational programmes but its approach is implicit in the three methodologies that have been approved for developing undergraduate, Master and Doctoral programmes respectively. These methodologies were approved by the University's Academic Council in 2017 (Undergraduate Programmes and Master Programmes) and 2018 (Doctoral Programmes). The methodologies for developing Master's Programmes and Doctoral Programmes include detailed provisions for the University to work together with other universities and partners to offer joint programmes.   The panel suggests that the University should now review its three programme development methodologies to extract the general principles that underlie them, in order to produce a single policy statement setting out its approach to designing and developing educational programmes, for presentation to the Academic Council and the Representative Council.

Each of the University's methodologies for programme development requires those planning new programmes to consult with stakeholders during the development process. The panel observed that while the University has committed itself to the development of "student-centred" higher education, SSU's recognition of students as its largest stakeholder group, together with employers and professional bodies was not always apparent in the University's documents. See also Authorization Standard 5.

The panel reviewed each of the three methodologies documents and discussed the respective processes with staff, students, alumni and employers. On the basis of the evidence it collected and analysed the panel is satisfied that the University expects programme heads when developing new educational provision to consult with students and other stakeholders, including employers, and that students and other stakeholders participate in the work of programme commissions. Likewise the methodologies for developing undergraduate, Master, and Doctoral Programmes include provisions for improving the quality of the programme through engaging with stakeholders (including students and employers) and for using the results of internal assessments for improvements. See also below, 3.2.

From discussions with members of the University, particularly its academic staff, the panel is satisfied that programmes that are currently operating are monitored locally by the programme heads and the academic and administrative staff working with them, and that improvements are introduced to the curriculum in response to such monitoring and student feedback (often oral). The panel was interested to learn that academic and administrative staff are keen, where possible, to introduce programmes to be delivered in English to support the University's drive to internationalize its curriculum, to introduce their Georgian and other students to internationalization and make it possible for students from outside Georgia to join their programmes.

The SER stated that the University has adopted regulations to protect the interests of students when the contents of a programme are changed or it needs to be withdrawn (annulled). The panel can confirm that this is the case.

Evidences/indicators

SER; Methodologies (3) for developing undergraduate Master level and Doctoral programmes; Regulation of the Education Process of the LEPL Sokhumi State University, May 2014; meetings with academic and administrative staff and Academic Council.

Recommendations:

That the University should extract from the its three methodology documents for planning designing and developing programmes the general principles that underlie them, in order to produce a policy statement that sets out its approach to designing and developing educational programmes for presentation to the Academic Council and the Representative Council.

Suggestions:

That when the University next reviews its methodologies for programme development it makes it clearer that the term "stakeholder" is to be understood to include students.

Best Practices (if applicable):

Evaluation

Please mark the checkbox, which best describes the HEI's compliance with this specific component of the standard

☐ Complies with requirements

☒ Substantially complies with requirements

☐ Partially complies with requirements

☐ Does not comply with requirements

3.2 Structure and Content of Educational Programmes

- o Programme learning outcomes are clearly stated and are in line with higher education level and qualification to be granted

o With the help of individualized education programmes, HEI takes into consideration various requirements, needs and academic readiness of students, and ensures their unhindered involvement into the educational process.

Descriptive summary and analysis of compliance with the standard component requirements

The SER stated that the University's methodologies for programme development and its regulations require learning outcomes to be agreed and set that are consistent with national requirements, including Georgia's Higher Education Qualifications Framework and for statements about the credit to be assigned to programmes and their component parts to conform to the European Credit Transfer System. Such conformity is required before new programmes can be approved by SSU's Academic Council. During the visit the panel checked a sample of accredited science, social science, humanities and education programmes. The panel was surprised to see how much the presentation and detail of programme documents varied between Faculties. It suggests that in the next year the QA Service conducts an audit of programme documents across the University and designs a process to ensure that programme documents from all Faculties meet the University's presentational requirements.

In surveying the sample of programme documents provided by the University the panel noted references to a variety of approaches to teaching and supporting learning, including mooting in Law and case studies in other subject areas. The panel suggests that for the natural sciences, the wider adoption of problem-based learning might be advantageous. As noted in 7.3, below in this that in one subject area, core texts listed for some programmes seemed to be available only in Russian, and to be out-of-date, and that links in some syllabi were to Russian-language web sites. The panel also noted that in several syllabi it was not clear how the number of ECTS credit hours that had been assigned to the relevant learning had been calculated.

The panel recommends that the University reviews the learning and teaching resources that are listed in its syllabi to ensure that the main texts listed are in the Georgian language and that for each syllabus in its programmes it checks how the ECTS credit hours have been calculated and that this is consistent with national and international norms and requirements.

The panel suggests that for laboratory-based programmes the University might find it helpful to consider the merits of problem-based learning.

The University's catalogue of programmes is available to students and other interested parties on its web site. The panel is pleased to be able to confirm that the University makes available individualised programmes for students with special needs and disabilities.
.

Evidences/indicators
SER; web site; Catalogue; meetings with academic staff and students

Recommendations:
That the University reviews the learning and teaching resources that are listed in its syllabi to ensure that the main texts listed are in the Georgian language and that for each syllabus in its programmes it checks how the ECTS credit hours have been calculated and that this is consistent with national and international norms and requirements.

Suggestions:
That the University might find it helpful to consider the merits of problem-based learning for programmes in the natural sciences and under what circumstances it would be appropriate for the primary assessment component for a programme element <u>not</u> to be a written assignment.

Best Practices (if applicable):

Evaluation

Please mark the checkbox, which best describes the HEI's compliance with this specific component of the standard

      ☐ Complies with requirements

      ☒ Substantially complies with requirements

      ☐ Partially complies with requirements

   o ☐ Does not comply with requirements

3.3 Assessment of Learning Outcomes

Descriptive summary and analysis of compliance with the standard component requirements

The University's assessment arrangements are set out in its regulations, which the panel can confirm are available on the University's web site. The SER stated that the essential component of each assessment "is the written assessment" but the panel noted from the University's papers and its discussions with academic staff and students that other forms of assessment (such as practical work and case studies) could inform judgements about the performance of students against the learning outcomes for their programmes. The SER provided little information on how academic staff translate programme learning outcomes into assessment tasks that test whether students have met the programme's learning outcomes. Likewise, the University's "Regulations of Education Process" do not appear to define learning outcomes and the part they play in the educational process and the assessment of students' achievements. The panel suggests that students would find it helpful to have a clear statement by the University on how it uses learning outcomes when designing the curriculum and setting assessment tasks

The panel asked students that it met about the feedback and comments they received on their work to enable them to improve their performance. It heard that students receive written comments on their work amplified by oral feedback if they choose to attend the sessions most lecturers and professors organise. The panel is satisfied that the University's assessment arrangements for students are consistent with the requirements of the Authorization Standard. The panel checked whether programmes enabled students to choose to study elective components in addition to compulsory components and was able to confirm that this is so. This corresponds to the requirements of Authorization Standard 3.2.

The panel reviewed statements of learning outcomes in programme documents against the qualification descriptors in the National Qualifications Framework. The panel found that in most cases there was a proper correspondence between the qualification descriptors on the one hand and the learning outcomes on the other. In some cases, however, it seemed to the panel that the correspondence between the learning outcomes and the qualification descriptors in the National was not as close as it would have expected. The panel suggests to the University that it would be appropriate for the QA Service and the Learning Process Management Department, advised by experts from the Faculty of Education, to check the correspondence between learning outcomes for second-level programmes (including for their dissertations) and the qualification descriptor for that level in the Higher Education Qualifications Framework. The panel also recommends that the University should progressively review the syllabi for its programmes to check that the learning and teaching methodologies that are specified in each syllabus will ensure that students will be able to achieve the stated learning outcomes.

Evidences/indicators

SER; National Qualifications Framework; Regulations of Education; meetings with academic staff; students; Deans.

Recommendations:

That the University should progressively review the syllabi for its programmes to check that the learning and teaching methodologies that are specified in each syllabus will ensure that students will be able to achieve the stated learning outcomes.

Suggestions:

That in the next year the QA Service conducts an audit of programme documents across the University and designs a process to bring all programme documents from the Faculties up to the standards of the best.

That students would find it helpful to have a clear statement by the University on how it uses learning outcomes when designing the curriculum and setting assessment tasks.

Best Practices (if applicable):

Evaluation

Please mark the checkbox, which best describes the HEI's compliance with this specific component of the standard

☐ Complies with requirements

☒ Substantially complies with requirements

☐ Partially complies with requirements

o   ☐ Does not comply with requirements

4. Staff of the HEI

HEI ensures that the staff employed in the institution (academic, scientific, invited, administrative, support) are highly qualified, so that they are able to effectively manage educational, scientific and administrative processes and achieve the goals defined by the strategic plan of the institution. On its hand, the institution constantly provides its staff with professional development opportunities and improved work conditions.

4.1. Staff Management

- o   HEI has staff management policy and procedures that ensure the implementation of educational process and other activities defined in its strategic plan.
- o   HEI ensures the employment of qualified academic/scientific/invited/administrative/ support staff.

Descriptive summary and analysis of compliance with the standard component requirements

The University has adopted and follows principles and rules of staff management that are in accordance with the Law of Georgia. The panel considers that the University's procedures for electing full-time academic staff are transparent and objective. The panel is also confident that administrative and managerial staff are appointed and elected in ways that fully comply with the Law on Higher Education.

The panel found the University's arrangements for the appointment of invited academic staff to be less clear than those for their full-time counterparts. It was unable to identify whether the University had a firm and clearly-stated policy for recruiting and appointing invited staff that defines the conditions that must be met before it is permissible to appoint an invited member of staff. The panel recommends that in the interests of fairness across the University the panel suggests that the University should set out its policy on the appointment of invited staff, rules for calculating when there is a need to appoint invited staff and procedures for approving financial allocations for appointing invited staff and the appointments.

The University has followed Government requirements for the affiliation of academic staff and has set out its own requirements. The panel discussed the University's affiliation procedures and requirements in meetings with members of the University who confirmed that the procedures had been shared with them. They were less clear, however, about how the University's affiliation procedures were to be applied and how compliance with them would be checked. The panel considers that the University should monitor whether, and how, staff observe the requirements of its affiliation arrangements, and report the outcomes of its monitoring periodically to the Representative and Academic Councils. The panel also considers that the University should set its own expectations for what affiliated staff should achieve (benchmarks) in, for example teaching, supervision of dissertations and PhD theses, research, and scholarly activity and how it might encourage academic staff and particularly affiliated professors, to achieve them.

The University does not at present have a formal institution-wide policy for the continuing professional development of academic staff that sets out its expectations and its support for their development as teachers, researchers and scholars. It does not routinely provide sabbatical leave for academic staff. The panel reviewed the information on staffing provided in the SER and supporting evidence. It also discussed the University's arrangements for continuing professional development for academic and administrative staff. It learned that the University has no explicit policy or strategy for improving the teaching and research skills of its academic staff and that until now the University has not systematically provided information for its academic staff (including its invited staff) or its administrative staff on the development and training opportunities that are open to them. The panel did find, however, that the Faculty of Education provides training in pedagogy and research methods for its academic staff. The panel suggests that, drawing on the expertise of the Faculty of Education, the University should develop a policy and strategy for the continuing professional development of all its staff. This policy should be presented to the Representative Council and Academic Council for their consideration. It should give particular attention the development needs of academic staff and outline how the University intends to promote teaching and assessment skills but particularly training in research skills and methods. Likewise, as the University continues to encourage and support its academic staff to undertake research, the panel recommends that it should extend its support to include provision for paid research leave for academic staff to undertake extended or otherwise substantial programmes of research. See also Standard 7.4.

For the authorization review the University provided evidence of the characteristics of its employees including the gender balance and age profile of its staff in which older academic staff greatly outnumber those at the beginning of their careers. The University is fully aware of the difficulties that its current age profile will present for its academic work in the near future but it was not clear to the panel that the University had a policy and strategy to address its need for a more balanced age profile for its academic workforce. It seemed to the panel that the University ought to begin to think more actively about how it might attract post-doctoral researchers to join its teaching and research staff and seek to draw them into existing and newly developing academic areas at the University as well as more established academic areas.

The panel reviewed the data for the ratios of academic staff and invited lecturers to students. It found that the ratio of academic staff to students was adequate for the teaching currently being provided by the University. For the future, however, should the number of student enrolments be lifted, the panel suggests that the University will need to increase the number of full-time academic staff who teach students and reduce its dependence on invited academic staff, and that it should encourage more professors to be involved in delivering its educational programmes.

The University has defined the qualifications it requires academic, invited, administrative, and support staff to hold if they are to be appointed. It has drawn up job descriptions for posts that define the functions the holder is expected to fulfil. The panel found that these arrangements were in accordance with national requirements.

The panel welcomes the fact that the University has recently increased the salary of the academic staff by 18 per cent.

Evidences/indicators
SER p.26; Strategic Plan; Rule of loading; meetings with academic staff; with invited staff

Recommendations:
That the University should develop a policy and strategy for the continuing professional development of all members of its academic and administrative staff. This policy should be presented to the Representative Council and Academic Council for their consideration. It should give particular attention the development needs of academic staff and outline how the University intends to promote teaching and assessment skills but particularly training in research skills and methods.

That the University should set its own expectations for what affiliated staff should achieve (benchmarks) in, for example teaching, supervision of dissertations and PhD theses, research, and scholarly activity and how it might encourage academic staff and particularly affiliated professors, to achieve them.

That the University should set out and publish on its web site its policy on the appointment of invited staff, rules for calculating when there is a need to appoint invited staff, procedures for approving financial allocations for appointing invited staff, and its appointments procedures for invited staff.

That the University should monitor whether, and how its academic staff observe the requirements of its affiliation arrangements and report the outcomes of this monitoring periodically to the Representative and Academic Councils.

Suggestions:

That should the number of its student enrolments be lifted, the University should increase the number of full-time academic staff who teach students and reduce its reliance on invited academic staff, and that it should encourage more professors to be involved in delivering its educational programmes.

Best Practices (if applicable):

The induction arrangements the University's Faculty of Education has place for academic staff and for training staff.

Evaluation

Please mark the checkbox, which best describes the HEI's compliance with this specific component of the standard

☐ Complies with requirements

☒ Substantially complies with requirements

☐ Partially complies with requirements

☐ Does not comply with requirements

4.2. Academic/Scientific and Invited Staff Workload

Number and workload of academic/scientific and invited staff is adequate to the University's educational programmes and scientific-research activities, and also other functions assigned to them

Descriptive summary and analysis of compliance with the standard component requirements

The University has a workload scheme for academic and invited staff which it updates each semester that sets out their functions and duties. The panel noted that the "Rule of loading of the Academic staff" assumes that academic staff will be teaching at other higher education institutions and may need to be amended for University staff who have signed an affiliation agreement. The panel considers from the evidence provided by the University and its discussions with academic and administrative staff and students that, for the present, the number and workload of academic staff and invited staff is adequate to enable the University to implement its educational programmes.

When planning new educational programmes or developments of existing programmes the panel was told ins discussions with academic staff and members of the Representative and academic Councils that careful attention is given to likely future student enrolments and the specific needs of the programme and the specific subject area. From the SER and its discussions with staff, alumni and stakeholders, it seemed to the panel that the University was seeking, where appropriate, to match the programmes it offers to the needs of the market and the national economy while working to achieve a balance between the overall needs of the University, its Mission and the teaching and research strengths of individual academics.

According to the affiliation terms and conditions, the procedure of affiliation, and the data provided by the University for the review, an absolute majority of its academic staff is affiliated to SSU. The terms and conditions of affiliation are set out in the formal agreement that the University makes with each member of its academic staff who accepts affiliation. The panel explored the University's approach to affiliation and the benefits to staff on the one hand, and to the University on the other. The panel could clearly see the benefits to the University of having a member of academic staff declare their affiliation to SSU. It was less clear to the panel what the benefits of affiliating to the University were for individual academic staff. The panel suggests to the University that it might wish to consider how to encourage

more academic staff to accept affiliated status to it by publishing the advantages that affiliation will offer them, for example in terms of opportunities for continuing professional development and support for their research activities.

Evidences/indicators

Rule of loading; SER; meetings with academic and administrative staff, invited staff, programme leaders and students.

Recommendations:

Suggestions:

That University should consider how to encourage more academic staff to accept affiliated status by publishing the advantages that affiliation will offer them, for example in opportunities for continuing professional development and support for their research activities.

Best Practices (if applicable):

Evaluation

Please mark the checkbox, which best describes the HEI's compliance with this specific component of the standard

☒ Complies with requirements

☐ Substantially complies with requirements

☐ Partially complies with requirements

☐ Does not comply with requirements

5. Students and Their Support Services

The University ensures the development of student-centred environment, offers appropriate services, including career support mechanisms; it also ensures maximum awareness of students, implements diverse activities and promotes student involvement in these activities. HEI utilizes student survey results to improve student support services

5.1. The Rule for Obtaining and Changing Student Status, the Recognition of Education, and Student Rights

- o For each of the educational levels, HEI has developed regulations for assignment, suspension and termination of student status, mobility, qualification granting, issuing educational documents as well as recognition of education received during the learning period.
- o HEI ensures the protection of student rights and lawful interests.

Descriptive summary and analysis of compliance with the standard component requirements

The University has established regulations for enrolling and registering students, for putting their status into suspension and for terminating their status as a student. The University has also established regulations governing student mobility, and the provision of award certificates and Europass statements. These are published in the University's "Rules for Regulating Study Process" which are published on the University's web site where they are readily available to students and others. The University also has rules for the recognition of credits for prior learning but has not yet published these on its web site. The panel reviewed the "Rules for Regulating Study Process" and for recognising prior learning and considers them transparent, fair, and in line with current Georgian legislation.

The data provided by the University in the SER showed that the University was carrying forward a substantial number of students whose status was marked as "suspended". The panel explored the number of suspended students in the data in meetings with academic and administrative members of the University during the site visit. It heard that many students requested that their status be suspended

following changes in their financial, employment, and family circumstances but that the status of other students had been suspended after failing assessments. It seemed to the panel that it would be important for the University to be able to know more about the causes for student suspensions in order to identify how best to help students to complete their studies.

In the evidence it provided to support the review the University provided samples of the contracts it uses to formalise its relations with undergraduate, taught postgraduate and doctoral students. In each case, these set out the obligations of the students and the University to each other and state the tuition fee that the University charges. The University normally requires students to pay their study fees in a single instalment and warns them that failure to pay will result in suspension of their studies. The panel heard from students and their elected representatives that at the Rector's discretion the University can allow students to pay their tuition fees in more than one instalment, but that it does not make it generally known that this option is available. The panel was told that students who cannot pay the whole of their tuition fees in one instalment and who do not apply to the Student Self-Government for advice and assistance may be suspended when they might otherwise have been able to continue their studies. The panel heard that once StudLab has been fully implemented, students will be able to view information including about their tuition fees on their "private" page.

The panel asked the University how it informed students about their mutual contractual obligations. It was told that the various central and Faculty administrative offices held briefing meetings with students, through which this information was conveyed. Students who met the panel during the visit could not recall having received briefings about such matters from the University (see also above, appeals). Some told the panel that they had learned about their obligations to the University through experience (including having to negotiate variations in the payment of their tuition fees) and from their representative body, the Student Self-Government.

The University provides information for students and others on its regulations and how it operates via its web site and distributes information to students via SMS messaging and public notice boards. The University has also set up a "Frequently Asked Questions" (FAQs) section on its web site which at the time of the review had only three entries. The panel suggests to the University that it would now be timely for it to work with the Student Self-Government to extend this list of FAQs to cover the matters students most frequently raise with the Student Self-Government and to continue to extend the coverage of FAQs.

The panel was surprised to learn that the University does not publish a "Student Handbook" or "Student Guidebook" for its undergraduates; nor does it publish a "Staff Handbook". The panel suggests that as the University continues to develop its arrangements for sharing information with its students and staff that it should view the development of such handbooks as an urgent necessity.

Elected students' representatives sit and have voting rights on the Council of each Faculty and on the University's Representative Council. From what the panel was told, arrangements to represent the views of students to these bodies are at an early stage in their development. For example, as yet there do not seem to be arrangements for student representatives to share agenda items with those they represent and seek their advice before speaking and voting as a student representative at Council meetings. Students' elected representatives told the panel, however, that they were able to put student-led initiatives to the University to seek its support.

The SER stated that in the event that a student wishes to appeal against an academic decision, an appeal committee will be established to hear the matter. This is in accordance with the University's Charter, but no other information was provided on the procedures followed by the University when hearing an appeal. Members of staff told the panel that when students joined the University, the induction briefings they receive included information on the University's appeals system, in which the student must first make their appeal to the Dean of their Faculty. Students who met the panel, however (including some who had recently joined the University) could not recall having received information about how to make an appeal against an assessment or other academic decision. The panel also heard that making an appeal against an assessment outcome could be difficult and stressful for an individual student, so that when seeking to make the case for an appeal to the Dean of their Faculty, or to the University's Examinations Centre, those who were not supported by a member of the Student Self-Government were said to have had difficulties in getting a hearing (see also below, Standard 5.2). The panel recommends that the University should check its appeal procedures for fairness and reasonableness and publish its appeals procedures, revised as necessary to ensure fairness to all parties, on its web site.

The SER did not describe how a student who had received unsatisfactory teaching or other services from the University would be able to seek a remedy. When the panel asked students how they would get improvements in the case of unsatisfactory teaching or supervision, they told it that they would first approach the member of academic staff in question directly and that if matters did not improve they would take their complaint to the Dean. If the Dean did not resolve the matter the students told the panel that they would begin a campaign of protest meetings. The panel concluded that at present the University does not have a formal procedure through which to resolve complaints by students about poor service whether teaching or administrative service. (Likewise, the panel was unable to identify a University policy or procedure for handling complaints from third parties who had purchased services from the University.)

The panel suggests to the University that it is not in the interests of students, staff or the University collectively, for it to have no formal, rules-based procedure through which students can raise and pursue complaints and gain redress for failure to provide services promised by the University. The panel therefore suggests to the University that in cooperation with the Student Self-Government, and with the advice of professional experts, it should design a policy for handling complaints by students and a procedure for handling and resolving complaints that it can put to its Representative Council for consideration.

Evidences/indicators

SER; "Rules for Regulating Study Process"; University web site; meetings with Student Representation; students; QA Service; Department of Sport, Culture and Youth Affairs..

Recommendations:

That the University should check its procedures for students to appeal against academic decisions for fairness and reasonableness and publish its appeals procedures, revised as necessary, on its web site.

Suggestions:

That in cooperation with the Student Self-Government, and with the advice of professional experts, the University should design a policy for handling complaints by students and third parties and a procedure for handling and resolving complaints that it can put to its Representative Council for consideration.

That as a matter of urgent necessity the University should publish a "Student Handbook" or "Student Guidebook" for its undergraduate students, in the first instance, and a "Staff Handbook" as part of its its arrangements for sharing information with its students and staff. The content of each to be developed in consultation with the Student Self-Government and staff representatives respectively.

Best Practices (if applicable):

Evaluation

☐ Complies with requirements
☒ Substantially complies with requirements
☐ Partially complies with requirements
☐ Does not comply with requirements

5.2 Student Support Services

- o HEI has student consulting services in order to plan educational process and improve academic performance
- o HEI has career support service, which provides students with appropriate counselling and support regarding employment and career development
- o HEI ensures students awareness and involvement in various university-level, local and international projects and events, and supports student initiatives
- o HEI has mechanisms, including financial mechanisms to support low SES students

Descriptive summary and analysis of compliance with the standard component requirements

In its SER the University listed its arrangements for student support as follows: the Department of Sport, Culture and Youth Affairs; Student Self-government; International Relations and Intercultural Relations Service; Student Practice and Career Management Service; Foreign Languages Centre; Quality Assurance Service. It noted the care and attention it pays to the welfare of internally displaced and ethnic minority students and students with disabilities and additional learning needs. The SER also emphasised the financial support that the University provides for vulnerable students, orphans of the 1990s conflicts, and students from internally displaced families (see 5.1, above).

The panel discussed the academic counselling arrangements the University provides for students with staff and students throughout the visit. Where students' assessed work (formative and summative) is returned to them, almost all academic staff provide consultation hours during which students can seek further feedback and academic advice. The University does not provide those members of academic staff who do not have administrative responsibilities with office space. Many academic consultations therefore have to take place in lecture theatres, or other shared spaces, which does not allow students and their academic advisers to have private discussions. This is unhelpful, in that it does not enable students to speak in confidence, when necessary, about their academic progress to their tutors, or any sensitive personal matters affecting their progress. The panel suggests that the University should consider how best it might provide dedicated private spaces for academic consultations between staff and students where academic staff do not have offices.

As noted earlier, students also receive specialist advice and guidance from the QA Service on which courses to follow as they pursue their studies. The QA Service also advises students on how to secure credit for studies they undertake through mobility schemes, such as Erasmus +, and how to integrate such credits into their records when they return to the University. Students spoke appreciatively to the panel about the quality of the advice and support they receive from the QA Service for these matters.

The panel found little information in the SER on the pastoral support the University provides for students to enable those encountering social, financial or other problems, to seek its advice and support. The SER stated that part of the responsibilities of its Department of Sport, Culture and Youth Affairs was to protect students' rights and legitimate interests "to study conflicting and problematic issues arising in students and to solve the same issues". While the Department of Sport, Culture and Youth Affairs makes a valuable contribution to enriching the cultural and sporting opportunities for students attending the University, any pastoral support and counselling that it provides for students is incidental to its main activities; rather, students told the panel that they tended to turn to the Student Self-Government when they needed support.

The panel is pleased to acknowledge the good work being done by the QA Service to support students in making their academic choices, and in helping students to integrate the credits they have gained through mobility schemes into their records when they return to the University. The panel is also pleased to acknowledge the assistance that the Student Self-Government gives to students seeking support. The panel suggests, however, that the present needs of the University's students for support and advice require substantially more of the University than it presently provides – not least to show that it is committed to reduce the current high number of students who have suspended their studies. The panel suggests that the University should review the effectiveness of its arrangements overall for academic counselling, and for providing pastoral support for students, and report its findings to its Representative and Academic Councils with recommendations for improvements.

The University's SER provided little information on the work of its "Students Practice and Career Management Service". The panel noted, however, the results of one of the surveys of student opinion that the University had undertaken to prepare for the review, which suggested that a substantial number of students (60 per cent) did not have information about the Students Practice and Career Management and how it could contribute to their own career development.

The panel met members of the Students Practice and Career Management. It learned that the Service helped to organize placements for students in commercial, industrial and government offices, and other workplaces but that it did not deal direct with students but passes information to them through the programme leaders and the Deans Offices in the Faculties. Members of the Service explained to the panel that it provides several careers briefing sessions for the University's students each year and that it invited Human Resources/employment consultancies to visit the university to meet with students.

Undergraduate, taught postgraduate, and research students told the panel that when seeking information about employment opportunities they were much more likely to turn for advice and employment leads to their programme leaders and Deans' Offices (undergraduates and taught postgraduates) and supervisors (research students) than the Students Practice and Career Management Service. Alumni who spoke to the panel confirmed that when they had been students they too had turned to their programme leaders and supervisors with whom, they often continued to be in touch.

Reviewing the information available to it, the panel considered that the way in which the Students Practice and Career Management Service works with students and staff does not enable the Service to develop a close and direct relationship with students, who should be seen as its primary clients, and that this puts it at a disadvantage when seeking to engage with students and to support their career preparations. The panel recommends to the University that its should review the work of the Students Practice and Career Management Service in consultation with programme leaders and Deans and the Student Self-Government, in order to determine what additional staffing and staff training might be needed to enable the Service to have the potential to provide support direct to all students. This review should compare the work presently undertaken by the Students Practice and Career Management Service with that undertaken by equivalent services in universities in Georgia and other EHEA member states, where similar careers services routinely conduct surveys of recently-graduated students in order to assess how better to support those still studying. Comparable services also provide training for their students in employability skills; researching employment opportunities; CV writing and completing job applications; preparing for employment interviews; making a successful transition from university to employment and how to self-manage career development after graduation. The panel noted that other Services in the University (such as the International Relations and Intercultural Connections Service – see below) offer some of the services listed above and offer briefings and workshops by former students and might be able to help the Students Practice and Career Management Service to move to a more student-centred approach in its work.

The SER briefly described how the University's International Relations and Intercultural Connections Service supported student and staff exchanges through various mobility programmes including Erasmus +. When the panel met members of the Service it learned that since 2013 it had supported 22 University students to participate in Erasmus + exchanges with a range of universities across the EHEA and had supported 21 incoming Erasmus + students. At the time of the visit the Service told the panel that it was working with University colleagues and counterparts in Poland to organise a joint Master Level programme. Members of the Service emphasised how important proficiency in spoken and written English was for all aspects of international academic activity (study and research) and that enabling staff and students to improve their proficiency in English was key to increasing the number of opportunities for staff and students to work with universities outside Georgia.

Students who met the panel spoke warmly of the support they received from the International Relations and Intercultural Connections Service. This included information on exchange programmes; completing mobility applications; and making logistical arrangements. They told the panel that on their return to SSU the QA Service and the International Relations and Intercultural Connections Service worked together to help them to re-commence their studies. The panel noted that the number of both outgoing and incoming exchange students is small and that they receive a high level of individual support from both the International Relations and Intercultural Connections Service and the QA Service.

Students' representatives and members of the Student Self-Government told the panel that when they took proposals to the Rector or the Chancellor/Head of Administration they were confident that they were listened to sympathetically and with respect, citing as an example a recent instance where the University had agreed to give financial support for a student delegation to attend a student conference in Poland. $

Students who met the panel were able to confirm the statement in the SER that the University provides financial support for some socially and economically disadvantaged students. The panel recommends that, in the interests of fairness and to all students and transparency, the University should publish the conditions that have to be met if it is to provide financial support for socially and financially disadvantaged students and that, likewise, it should publish on its web site under what conditions it is prepared to provide discretionary funds to support students attending international conferences.

Evidences/indicators

SER and especially Youth report Annex 5.3 of SER; University Charter/Statute; Statute of the Students Practice and Career Management Service; meetings with staff of the Students Practice and Career Management Service; undergraduate and research students; members of Student Self-Government.

Recommendations:

That the University should review the work of the Students Practice and Career Management Service in consultation with programme leaders and Deans, and the Student Self-Government, in order to determine what additional staffing and staff training might be needed to enable the Service to have the potential to provide careers support direct to all students.

That in the interests of fairness to all students and transparency, the University should publish the conditions that have to be met if it is to provide financial support for socially and financially disadvantaged students, and that it should also publish on its web site under what conditions it is prepared to provide discretionary funds to support students attending international conferences.

Suggestions:

That the University should consider how best it might provide dedicated private spaces for academic consultations between staff and students where academic staff do not have offices.

That the University should review the effectiveness of its arrangements overall for academic counselling and providing pastoral support for students and report its findings to the Representative and Academic Councils with recommendations for improvements.

Best Practices (if applicable):

Evaluation

Please mark the checkbox, which best describes the HEI's compliance with this specific component of the standard

☐ Complies with requirements

☒ Substantially complies with requirements

☐ Partially complies with requirements

☐ Does not comply with requirements

6. Research, development and/or other creative work

Higher Education Institution, considering its type and specifics of field(s), works on the strengthening of its research function, ensures proper conditions to support research activities and improve the quality of research activities

6.1 Research Activities
o   HEI, based on its type and specifics of its fields, carries out research/creative activities.
o   Ensuring the effectiveness of doctoral research supervision
o   HEI has public, transparent and fair procedures for the assessment and defense of dissertations which are relevant to the specifics of the field
Descriptive summary and analysis of compliance with the standard component requirements
In its SER the University briefly referred the panel to the work of its predecessor in Abkhazia as a science research centre with close links with Sokhumi Physical-Technical Institute. These have since been renewed with the Institute, which has now itself re-located to Georgia. The Institute and the University have, together, established a joint doctoral studies programme in physical sciences where research students but not undergraduates benefit from access to the Institute's laboratory.

The University is currently the holder of four project grants from Georgia's Shota Rustaveli National Science Foundation. These are all in the fields of mathematics and computer science. The University has received grant funding for a project to establish a Centre for Molecular Diagnostics and Microbiology from the Volkswagen Foundation.

More recently, research in the natural and applied sciences in the University has taken second place to research in the humanities and social sciences (including Law), where Abkhazian Studies and, for the future, Peace Studies are being promoted, as part of the University's Mission.

Overall the panel considers that while the University certainly promotes research in the fields that are central to its mission, the research publications of its staff in refereed international journals are modest and that in relation to the University's academic staff overall, only small number is active in research, using the University's own definition. Inconsistencies in the way information is presented about the University's intentions for the future development of its research activities in its Strategic Development Plan 2018-25 made it difficult for the panel to assess with confidence where the University places the development of research among its many priorities.

As noted above, judged by the number of publications by the University's academic staff, the proportion of academic staff that is engaged in research of international research is low. Research into the languages and culture of Abkhazia is however ongoing. The University has established *The electronic library of Abkhazeology,* which is a joint initiative of the UN and the EU. There are partnership research projects between the University and the Institute of Archaeology of Germany (Alexander Von Humboldt Foundation) and four grant projects from the Shota Rustaveli National Science Foundation in the field of social and cultural development.

The University's Strategic Development Plan 2018-25, emphasizes the importance of promoting scientific research and research activity, with the creation of additional and independent research centres "a priority for the University". The Plan also provides for the creation of a system of internal University grants to encourage and support research by academic and scientific staff; the establishment of a "post-doctoral system" to bring post-doctoral researchers into teaching and research in the University; cooperation and partnership with international research centres outside Georgia; and the publication of journals, yearbooks and periodicals that are peer reviewed. These aims for enhancing the University's research activities are laudable but the panel observes that University will need to secure substantial and sustainable additional external funding if they are to become reality. The three-year Action Plan, commencing 2018, that has been approved to give effect to this aspect of the Strategic Development Plan does not set out performance indicators to enable the University to judge whether its ambitions for increasing research activity are being met, nor does it state what research outputs it expects each of the Faculties and research centres to achieve.

Overall, the University's "Action Plan for Scientific and research activity" does not convey a sense of urgency. It envisages no concrete actions in 2018 and only tentative actions in 2019 with, for example, the foundation of a research centre for "Abkhazeology" and the establishment of an internal post-doctoral system "in pilot mode". The panel recommends that the University should revise its strategies for increasing the volume and quality of the research undertaken by its academic and research staff and for providing the facilities and support to make this practicable. See also below, 6.3, on the need to introduce performance indicators for research outputs, to enable the University to assess whether its intentions for research are being met.

In March 2018 the University established a Department of Scientific Research and Development, the core purpose of which is to coordinate the University's research and put into practice the University's Action Plan for Scientific and Research Activity. At the time of the review the University has been successful in having seven Doctoral Programmes accredited by NCEQE. These include PhD programmes in: Applied Mathematics; Computer Science; Physics; Kartvelian Linguistics; Modern Georgian Literature; the History of Georgia; and Archaeology.

The panel learned that elements of the University's research into the language culture and history of Abkhazia had been integrated into some strands of its teaching in Abkhazian Studies, and that the laboratory for "Molecular Methods in Biomedical Sciences" that has been established with the support of the Volkswagen Foundation, and partners the Hanover Medical School (MHH) and Leibniz Research Biotechnological and Artificial organs (LEBAO) was available to research students. Likewise, doctoral

research students following the joint PhD between the University and the Sokhumi Physical-Technical Institute have access to research facilities (including laboratories) at the Institute.

The SER provided a substantial description of the University's arrangements for supervising doctoral students and assessing doctoral theses, which brought together information from The University's "Regulation of the Education Process", as first approved by Academic Council in 2014 and successively updated by it in 2015, 2016 and 2018.

The panel met PhD students and (separately) PhD supervisors. Doctoral students told the panel that they were pleased with the quality and frequency of their supervision meetings and that they considered their supervisors worked hard with them on the development of their research topics, to train them in research methods and ethics, and to prepare them for the assessment and defence of their thesis. Supervisors told the panel that they were only allowed to supervise two PhD students concurrently.

The University provided samples of recently completed PhD theses and Master dissertations for the panel to review. The panel found that the calibre of the PhD theses it saw was uniformly good but it noted inconsistencies in the presentation of PhD theses and suggests that the University should enforce its published requirements for a standard house style (font, layout and citation standard) across the institution. By contrast, the panel found an example of egregious plagiarism in the small sample of MA dissertations provided for it to review. In its discussions with members of academic staff and students, the panel learned that, unlike PhD students, taught students (undergraduate and Master Level) did not receive systematic training in research methods and research ethics, other than in the Faculty of Education. The panel has recommended under Standard 2.3 that the University should introduce mandatory training in academic integrity for undergraduate and MA students (including ethical conduct) as part of the training. The panel recommends that, as part of its response to this earlier recommendation, the University should also introduce mandatory training in research methods for MA level students.

The "Regulation of the Education Process" which sets the "minimum standard of doctoral studies" has been approved by the Academic Council (see above). Other documents reviewed by the panel included the "Methodology for planning creating approval and development of Doctoral Programmes". The latter refers to the Higher Education Qualifications Framework and uses the qualification descriptor for third cycle programmes as part of the assessment framework for doctoral awards. The panel noted that for a doctoral thesis to be accepted for presentation to the University's Dissertation Council it was necessary for an expert in the relevant subject area from outside Georgia to have assessed the thesis. This requirement is referred to by the University as "the internationalization of the evaluation process" for doctoral theses.

Evidences/indicators

SER; Strategic Development Plan; "The statute of Scientific Research and Development Department", Statute of Molecular diagnosis and Biotechnology scientific centre, 2018; Regulation of the Education Process of the LEPL Sokhumi State University; Methodology for planning, creating, approval and development of Doctoral Programs; Definitions and assessments of learning components (Annex 3.9); meetings with Deans; Scientific Research and Development Department; PhD supervisors; PhD research students; site visits to laboratories and learning facilities; grant project reports.

Recommendations:

That training in research methods should be provided for all MA level students.

That the University should revise its strategies for increasing the volume and the quality of the research undertaken by its academic and research staff and for providing the facilities and support to make this practicable.

Suggestions:

That for the presentation of PhD theses the University should enforce its requirements that thesis submissions should follow a standard house style (font, layout and citation standard).

Best Practices (if applicable):

Evaluation

Please mark the checkbox, which best describes the HEI's compliance with this specific component of the standard

☐ Complies with requirements

☒ Substantially complies with requirements

☐ Partially complies with requirements

☐ Does not comply with requirements

6.2. Research Support and Internationalization

- o HEI has an effective system in place for supporting research, development and creative activities
- o Attracting new staff and their involvement in research/arts-creative activities.
- o University works on internationalization of research, development and creative activities.

Descriptive summary and analysis of compliance with the standard component requirements

In its SER the University stated that the main purpose of establishing the Department of Scientific Research and Development was to "facilitate the development of the scientific-research potential of the university and the establishment of a modern scientific research centre". As noted above, the Action Plan for Scientific and Research Activity does not envisage making concrete progress towards meeting the objectives of the Plan until 2020. The University's Strategic and Development Plan identified "Seeking new partners and developing cooperation" as one focus of its Action Plan for Internationalization assigned to the Department of Scientific Research and Development working with the International Relations and Intercultural Cooperation Service to achieve joint projects and memoranda of cooperation.

More immediately, however, the University is working to apply for research grants from the Georgian authorities and, with the support of the University's International Relations and Intercultural Unions Service, to secure opportunities for University staff to participate in international projects and to improve the quality of applications made by the University's academic and scientific staff.

The data supplied in the University's SER showed that it had 34 active PhD students and 25 doctoral students working as "assistants". After discussing the participation of PhD students in the University's internationalization activities with staff and students, the panel came to the view that without confidence in using English for academic purposes, PhD students would find it difficult to participate in international projects or to undertake research as members of international teams outside Georgia. The panel recommends to the University that it should increase its provision of English language tuition and support for PhD students to enable them to engage more readily in international research projects.

The University's Strategic Development Plan 2018-25 which defines its intentions to develop as a research institution were approved in early 2018 by its Academic Council and the Representative Council. The University's anticipated funding for scientific research amounts to no more than three per cent of its current budget. The panel was told that to meet the need for further investment in scientific research the University is working to establish business contacts with foreign universities, non-university scientific research centres, state and private investors. The panel considers that the University's aims for the development of its scientific research activities will be at risk if it does not secure additional funding from governmental and other external sources.

The panel noted the University's statements in the SER about attracting young researchers post-doctoral staff and young practitioners in arts and creative activities. Its strategy for involving such individuals in the university's work was provided, in Georgian, as an appendix to the SER. The University has succeeded in gaining three President's Scientific Grants for Young Scientists, one in linguistics and gender; one in fractal matrix structures; and the third in information systems. The University provides practical training in natural sciences laboratory research methods in its "Molecular Methods in Biomedical Sciences" programme.

Evidences/indicators

SER, including Appendix 6.11; Strategic Development Plan 2018-25 and Action Plans; meetings with PhD supervisors; International Relations and Intercultural Cooperation Service; Department of Scientific Research and Development.

Recommendations:

That the University should increase its provision of English language tuition and support for PhD students to enable them to engage more readily in international research projects.

Suggestions:

Best Practices (if applicable):

Evaluation

Please mark the checkbox, which best describes the HEI's compliance with this specific component of the standard

   ☐ Complies with requirements
   ☒ Substantially complies with requirements
   ☐ Partially complies with requirements
   ☐ Does not comply with requirements

6.3. Evaluation of Research Activities

HEI has a system for evaluating and analysing the quality of research/creative-arts activities, and the productivity of scientific-research units and academic/scientific staff.

Descriptive summary and analysis of compliance with the standard component requirements

The SER noted that in approving the University's "Learning Quality Development Evaluation Mechanisms" the Academic Council had given special importance to the assessment of scientific work, where the main criteria include the volume of research output judged in terms of the number of publications, the number of citations of research work undertaken by members of the University; the number of patents granted to the University and members of its staff and the amount of grant funding secured.

The University's Strategic Development Plan 2018-2025 and associated Action Plans were approved earlier in 2018. The University's criteria for assessing its research output are set out in "Learning Quality Development Evaluation Mechanisms". The panel noted that the University's present practice is to make a single comprehensive annual report. Copies of such reports were provided (in Georgian) for the period 2013-17. The reports are more descriptive than analytical but they provide information on publications (in Georgia and abroad) and the participation of members of the academic staff in scientific forums.

The University's annual report on its research activities is prepared by QA service. It describes a possible evaluation scheme for scientific-research activity on the level of individuals, scientific-research units, and the University as a whole. It was, however, not clear to the panel whether this scheme has been put into practice or, indeed whether it is going to be adopted on regular basis.

The University's "Action Plan for Scientific and research activity" focuses on strengthening links with scientific centres abroad and on publishing yearbooks and periodicals rather than enabling and encouraging individual academic staff and groups to publish their research findings in refereed international journals and other publications. The panel considers that if the University is to be successful in encouraging its academic staff to engage in research it will need to develop new and more analytical techniques for measuring whether its investments of time and money in research are effective in achieving the outcomes it is seeking. The panel therefore recommends that the University should set out performance indicators, such as the number of research papers and other publications in international refereed journals that it expects each Faculty and research Centre to achieve annually and

that it uses them alongside the other measures it has already set out to identify where it should focus its attention to bring about improvements

.

Evidences/indicators
SER including Appendix 6.1; Strategic Development Plan 2018-2025 and Action Plan; Learning Quality Development Evaluation Mechanisms; meetings with academic staff; supervisors and PhD students; stakeholders; Academic Council and Representative Council

Recommendations:
That the University should set out performance indicators for the number of research papers and other publications in international refereed journals that it expects each Faculty and research Centre to achieve annually, and use them alongside its existing measures to identify where it should focus its attention to bring about improvements in its research outputs.

Suggestions:

Best Practices (if applicable):

Evaluation
Please mark the checkbox, which best describes the HEI's compliance with this specific component of the standard
☐ Complies with requirements
☒ Substantially complies with requirements
☐ Partially complies with requirements
☐ Does not comply with requirements

7. Material, Information and Financial Resources

Material, information and financial resources of HEI ensure sustainable, stable, effective and efficient functioning of the institution, and the achievement of goals defined through strategic development plan.

7.1 Material Resources
o   The institution possesses or owns material resources (fixed and current assets) that are used for achieving goals stated in the mission statement, adequately responds to the requirements of educational programmes and research activities, and corresponds to the existing number of students and planned enrolment.
o   HEI offers environment necessary for implementing educational activities: sanitary units, natural light possibilities, and central heating system.
o   Health and safety of students and staff is protected within the institution.
o   HEI has adapted environment for people with special needs
Descriptive summary and analysis of compliance with the standard component requirements
At the time of the review the University had four buildings, two of which it uses its educational purposes. The panel was able to verify from public registry documents that the accommodation the University's buildings provide meets the needs of its existing educational programmes, as calculated by the University's own "Rule for Planning of Student Body". This Rule specifies that there must be 2-2.5 m^2 per student. If, however, the University's application to expand its student numbers from 2,871 to 3,500 places is successful, the panel suggests that the University will need to ensure that the space it provides for teaching learning and other educational activities is sufficient to meet the benchmarks it has defined for itself in its "Rule for the Planning of Student Body".
The panel was told that the University had researched how students experienced its existing "Students Infrastructure" in detail, Faculty by Faculty, by asking students to comment on their experiences of the

adequacy of its provision for learning and teaching. The results of these surveys were provided as an Annex to the SER. The panel was told that Academic Council had discussed the need to modernise the University's environment for teaching and learning and that work to accomplish this was now in progress.

The panel made a learning tour of each of the University's two principal buildings at the beginning of the site visit. In the course of these tours panel members noted that work was in progress to improve the University's main building. This is being refurbished floor-by-floor to install modern central heating and air conditioning systems in all teaching rooms and modern sanitary facilities. The University is also working to install modern (digital) teaching and learning tools in more teaching rooms. At the same time, a new student cafeteria had been installed in the main building and rooms on its ground floor were being prepared to house a medical professional to ensure that students and staff have access to front-line medical services in each of the University's main buildings. The panel was told that this latter provision is being funded through an arrangement with the University's medical insurer.

In the course of its tour of the University's principal buildings the panel reviewed the University's current provision for laboratory-based learning, teaching and research. From its own observations, information in the University's SER and supporting documents, and its meetings with academic staff and students, the panel noted that the University's provision for laboratory-based teaching in the natural sciences is limited and that what is envisaged for their future development in the University's Strategic Development Plan is likely to be insufficient for the needs of teaching, learning and research in the natural sciences. The panel recommends that the University should revisit what is needed to enable it provide and support sustainable teaching, learning and research in the natural sciences and implement its findings.

From its discussions with students and staff during the visit, the panel learned that where a member of academic staff also had academic or other administrative responsibilities, they could carry out academic consultations with their students in their offices. For other academic staff, however, consultations with students have to be carried out in open access spaces, such as lecture rooms and shared office space. As noted earlier, the panel considers that the absence of spaces in which academic staff and their students can discuss academic matters freely, in small groups and one-to-one in private, is not helpful to the learning process.

The panel acknowledges and welcomes the University's determination to modernise the environment in which its students learn and staff and students carry out their research. It regards as best practice the University's willingness to research students' opinions on the adequacy of their teaching and learning spaces and to use that information in planning how to develop its learning and social infrastructure. As the University works to modernize its teaching and learning spaces, the panel suggests that it should take into consideration the diversity of teaching methods used in its various programmes and organize its teaching and learning spaces accordingly.

The panel welcomes the University's provision of a new student cafeteria in its main building and the work it is now beginning to undertake to modernize its premises. As this work continues, the panel recommends that the University should provide further social circulation space for students, including spaces for group work; that it should ensure that there is an increase in the number of private spaces and offices where lecturers, professors, and invited academic staff can meet students for academic consultations without interruption, and academic staff can undertake research; that it should continue to modernize its teaching rooms and lecture spaces, its libraries and washroom facilities, including for those with disabilities; that it should ensure that all rooms and circulation spaces have adequate heating and air conditioning facilities and that for each of its premises it sets aside dedicated parking spaces for disabled persons.

The University has formulated an Information Technology Management and Development Plan which emphasizes the need for preventative measures to secure the University's IT infrastructure from cyber-attacks and other adverse events, such as breaks in the local electricity supply. From the SER and supporting documents, its tours of the University's buildings, and its discussions with members of staff, the panel noted that the University has installed a standby generator to protect against breaks in the local electrical supply and that, in order to protect its digital records services and IT support services (including for learning and teaching), it has arranged for them to be hosted by a commercial provider in a secure facility away from its main buildings. This is consistent with best practice in the provision of IT support services in higher education.

The panel noted during its tour of the University's principle buildings that safety rules and procedures were not prominently displayed in the laboratories that were visited, including laboratories used by the University but located in other institutions. The panel suggests that the University should ensure that safety rules and procedures are clearly visible to staff and students working in laboratories managed, leased, or loaned to the University, and used by its students. There are, however, evacuation plans posted prominently on every floor of the University's buildings visited by the panel and clearly signed fire extinguishers. The University has recently refurbished its internal "rising main" system for distributing water throughout the building in the event of fire, and the University's fire precautions have been approved by the Emergency Management Agency. First Aid facilities are held by the Sports, Culture and Youth Affairs Service

The panel checked with members of the University whether there had been instances of fire or breaches of security and, if so, how they had been managed. It learned that in previous years the University had had a small fire in one of its offices but that only paperwork had been damaged and the experience of the fire had not given the University cause to change its procedures. The University has a team of security staff permanently on site which has at its disposal a closed-circuit TV (CCTV) monitoring system for security. The University's security staff use CCTV and patrolling to monitor its premises for unauthorised access and for safety and fire hazards; they also enforce the University's ban on smoking inside its buildings.

The University has enrolled a small number of students with physical disabilities and associated support needs. It has lifts to all floors in its main building and its present arrangements to meet the needs of less physically able students involve allocating their teaching sessions to rooms that are accessible for them. The panel was unable to verify whether the University has set aside dedicated parking spaces for disabled persons. As the University continues to refurbish its main buildings the panel suggests that it should consider installing accessible toilet facilities for physically disabled students on each floor of its principal buildings.

Evidences/indicators

SER and especially Annexes 2.2; 7.4; 7.16; and 7.13; Information Technology Management and Development Plan; campus tours (two) of the University's principle buildings; Report Extract from the Public Registry; Internal measurement drawings of buildings; documents certifying possession of liquid assets; Rule for the Planning of Student Body; agreements with external (practice and research-scientific) institutions; A confirmation letter of Disinfection Service; confirmation letter on fire safety from the Emergency Management Agency; contract between SSU and insurance company GPI Holding; The statute of SSU Security Service; A contract between SSU and LLC Magistr. Meetings with Rector and Chancellor; meetings with academic and administrative staff, including lead IT staff; Library and e-library staff; students and students' elected representatives; technical support staff .

Recommendations:

That the University should identify and report to Academic Council and Representative Council what is needed to enable it provide and support sustainable teaching, learning and research in the natural sciences and implement its findings.

That the University should provide further social circulation space for students, including spaces for group work; that it should ensure that there is an increase in the number of private spaces and offices where lecturers, professors and invited academic staff can meet students for academic consultations without interruption and staff can undertake research; that it should continue to modernize its teaching rooms and lecture spaces, its libraries and washroom facilities, including for those with disabilities; that it should ensure that all rooms and circulation spaces have adequate heating and air conditioning facilities and that for each of its premises it sets aside dedicated parking spaces for disabled persons..

That the University should ensure that safety rules and procedures are clearly visible to staff and students working in laboratories managed, leased or loaned to the University for its students.

Suggestions:

That if the University is successful in having the number of students it is permitted to recruit increased to 3,500 that it will need to ensure that the space it provides for teaching learning and other educational activities is sufficient to meet the benchmarks it has defined for itself in its "Rule for the Planning of Student Body"

That as the University works to modernize its teaching and learning spaces, it should take into consideration the diversity of teaching methods used in its various programmes and organize its teaching and learning spaces accordingly.

Best Practices (if applicable):

The University's willingness to research its students' opinions on the adequacy of their learning spaces and to use the resulting information in planning how to develop its learning and social infrastructure.

That the University has arranged for its core digital learning and administrative services to be hosted by a commercial provider in a secure facility away from its main buildings.

Evaluation

Please mark the checkbox, which best describes the HEI's compliance with this specific component of the standard

☐ Complies with requirements

☒ Substantially complies with requirements

☐ Partially complies with requirements

☐ Does not comply with requirements

7.2. Library Resources

Library environment, resources and service support effective implementation of educational and research activities, and HEI constantly works for its improvement.

Descriptive summary and analysis of compliance with the standard component requirements

In each of its principal buildings the University has a reference and lending library for books, periodicals, and journals for staff and students. The University has also established an "E-Library", through which students and staff can access licensed copies of digital publications through on-line services. Licensing restrictions mean that this facility is only available from PCs and terminals on the University's premises. There are scanning and copying facilities in the libraries that are available to students. The Libraries are open to readers from 09.00 to 20.00 on weekdays and from 09.00 to 14.00 on Saturdays

The University has negotiated a Memorandum of Cooperation with the National Library of Georgia to enable staff and student to use its facilities. The University Library has access to an "inter-library" service through which books that are not in its own stock may be borrowed from other higher education institutions.

The panel discussed the University's library services in meetings with members of the Library staff, and with academic staff and students. It learned that the main part of the Library's book stock consisted of items listed in syllabuses, and that teaching staff routinely advised students to use the Library to research their assignments. It also learned that, as a group, the Library's staff were well qualified, with some having higher qualifications in information management, and that they had opportunities to benefit from continuing professional development and training.

Library staff provide some tuition for newly enrolled undergraduate students in how to use the Library and its digital catalogue. From its meetings with academic staff and students, however, the panel considers that the tuition that the Library provides is either insufficient, or insufficiently well-delivered, since staff and students told it that they preferred to rely on Library staff to find books for them rather than use the Library's digital search system for themselves. The panel recommends that the University should review the effectiveness of the tuition it provides for students to enable them to become confident independent users of library and other information and data resources and reports its findings and recommendations for improvements to the Academic and Representative Councils.

As noted previously, however, undergraduate and taught postgraduate students do not appear to receive systematic training in research methods (see above, Standards 2.3 and 6.1) other than in the Faculty of Education. Students told the panel that they were unaware that the University was party to an "inter-library" service: when the University's Library does not have a text they need they expected to make use of public libraries.

During its learning tours of the University's main buildings the panel visited the University's Library areas which provide Wi-Fi access to the University's networks and access to the Internet for students and staff users. The panel noted that floor space in the Libraries is currently limited, as are reading spaces, and that the seating provided is uncomfortable. Invited lecturers and professors who met the panel told it that they tended not to use the Libraries in the main buildings but to use on-line texts for reference.

Through its meetings with Library staff, academic staff, supervisors, and PhD students, the panel sought to understand how widely staff and students, including research students, made use of the on-line information sources to which the University subscribes, such as Thomson-Reuters, JSTOR and, most recently, EBSCO. The panel was disappointed to learn that the use of these valuable sources of information seemed confined to active researchers, and that they were not being used by a majority of academic staff. The panel suggests that the Library should regularly report data on the extent to which the on-line databases to which the University subscribes are being used by academic staff to the Academic and Representative Councils.

The Library regularly collects information, via user surveys and usage data, on how academic staff (including invited staff) and students use its services, and how they envisage their future needs will develop.. Survey information gathered from users of the Library was provided with the University's SER. This shows that that 44 per cent of student users are satisfied with the library environment and 47 per cent are satisfied with the service provided in the Library. Only 24 per cent of respondents found the Library to be fully equipped. These findings are worrying: the Library must hope that satisfaction with its provision will improve when new library spaces become available as the first floor of the University's main building is refurbished. If user satisfaction does not improve the Library will need to look more closely at improving the environment for study and the services that it provides.

Evidences/indicators

SER; Annex 2.2 (Rules Library; Library Regulation); Strategic Development Plan; Documentation certifying the possession of library resources; Electronic catalogue published on the web-site; State procurement contract with Clarivate Analytics; Student survey results; meetings with Library staff; academic staff; invited staff; students and research students

Recommendations:

That the University reviews the effectiveness of the tuition it provides for students to enable them to become confident independent users of library and other information and data resources and reports its findings and recommendations for improvements to the Academic and Representative Councils.

Suggestions:

That the Library should regularly report data on the extent to which the on-line databases to which the University subscribes are being used by academic and research staff to the Academic and Representative Councils.

Best Practices (if applicable):

Evaluation

Please mark the checkbox, which best describes the HEI's compliance with this specific component of the standard

☐ Complies with requirements

☒ Substantially complies with requirements

☐ Partially complies with requirements

☐ Does not comply with requirements

7.3 Information Resources

- o HEI has created infrastructure for information technologies and its administration and accessibility are ensured
- o Electronic services and electronic management systems are implemented and mechanisms for their constant improvement are in place
- o HEI ensures business continuity
- o HEI has a functional web-page in Georgian and English languages.

Descriptive summary and analysis of compliance with the standard component requirements

As noted previously (Standard 7.1), the University has established secure computer networks with servers off-site to support its administration; services for students and staff; and teaching, learning, and research. The panel noted that students have access to PCs and the internet in dedicated rooms and can connect to the Internet though the University's Wi-Fi access points. The panel observed during its learning tours of the University's main buildings that some computer rooms were not open to students.

The University's "Elgoni" information service has been in use since 2014 to support the learning process management system. There are modules to manage training; the registration of students; fee payments by students; and the administration of the University.

The University's successor to Elgoni is "StudLab", a web-based information system that was in the final stages of development at the time of the review. StudLab is intended to gather together and make accessible to authorised users all the University's data and information about staff and students and its educational programmes.

The University's Public Relations Service has editorial responsibility for the accuracy of information placed on the University's web site; this provides information on the University's Mission together with access to on-line copies of University regulations and news about future events. The panel can confirm that the University has recently added English language pages to its contents and was able to confirm from its own observations during the visit that web pages in both Georgian and English were being updated. For the future, the panel suggests that it would be helpful to students and staff, stakeholders and partners, if the minutes and supporting papers of the Representative Council and Academic Council were to be placed on the web site together with the University's annual financial and internal audit reports and its approach to risk management. The panel also recommends that it would be helpful for prospective PhD research students seeking to identify possible research supervisors if the University was to publish information about the research being carried out by academic and research staff at the University and its outcomes.

Evidences/indicators

SER; Rule for the Planning of Student Body; IT management and development policy; A contract with the Internet provider Grena; the University's web pages as operating during the panel's visit; in the Georgian and English languages; digital information management systems sampled by the panel during the site visit (including the Library systems); meetings with Library and E-Library staff; academic staff (including invited staff) students (including research students) PR Service; IT Service

Evaluation

Please mark the checkbox which mostly describes your position related to the HEI's compliance with this specific component of the standard

☐ Fully complies with requirements

☒ Substantially complies with requirements

☐ Partially complies with requirements

☐ Does not comply with requirements

Recommendations:

That the University should post the minutes and supporting papers of the Representative Council and Academic Council on its web site together with the University's annual financial and internal audit reports, its approach to risk management, and information about the research being carried out at the University and its outcomes to help prospective research students to identify possible research supervisors.

Suggestions:

Best Practices (if applicable):

7.4 Financial Resources

- o Allocation of financial resources described in the budget of HEI is economically achievable
- o Financial standing of HEI ensures performance of activities described in strategic and mid-term action plans
- o HEI financial resources are focused on effective implementation of core activities of the institution
- o HEI budget provides funding for scientific research and library functioning and development
- o HEI has an effective system of accountability, financial management and control

Descriptive summary and analysis of compliance with the standard component requirements

The SER provided information on the University's finances including its budget and revenue statistics and how they are managed. From this information it was clear to the panel the degree to which the University relied on students' tuition fees and why it placed so much importance on diversifying its sources of income.

The panel learned that the greater part of the University's annual budget discussions revolve around estimates of revenues from student tuition fees (income) and the reported needs for investment and other expenditures, chiefly from the Faculties. The panel discussed the University's financial management with the Rector and the Chancellor, members of the Material and Financial Provision of the Educational and Scientific Process Department and members of the Representative Council and in other meetings with academic and administrative staff and students throughout the site visit.

Following these discussions it seemed to the panel that the processes through which the University's annual budget was decided was broadly collegial, with the Representative Council, led by its Speaker, continually seeking to achieve "value for money" from all items of expenditure. It also seemed to the panel from what it heard that, as part of this collegial process, requests for funding and statements of needs were brought together and exhaustively discussed, in order to achieve a settlement that was consistent with the University's projected income and with a consensus view on what would be an acceptable division of that income. It was not however clear how the University decided what proportion of its overall income should be held back ("top-sliced") for expenditure and investments that would benefit all members of the University, such as for refurbishing the University's estate and facilities, for research and research facilities, for its IT and Library provision or for new areas of academic work where there is, as yet, no income from tuition fees.

Overall the panel recommends that the University needs to ensure that the financial and other resources that it allocates to scientific research match its ambitions for this area of its work and that they are consistent with what is appropriate for a higher education institution that engages in research. This should include provision for paid leave for academic staff to undertake extended or otherwise substantial programmes of research.

Reviewing the financial information and data that the University had provided, the panel noted the University's own view that in present circumstances its financial position is stable. The panel noted, however, that the fulfilment of the University's Strategic Development Plan 2019-25, and associated Action Plans, and improvements to remedy deficiencies in the University's premises, its provision for the natural sciences, and the advancement of research that the panel has identified, will require considerable resources. The University's revenues between 2013 and 2017 have been growing (from 5,048,455 to 6,543,753 GEL); however, this improvement will need to be at least maintained in the coming years and, for better and more rapid progress, further improved.

The University has recently established an Internal Audit Service to improve the financial and other data and information available to it about its financial circumstances and the efficiency and effectiveness with which it is working. The panel welcomes this development. At the time of the review this new Service had yet to provide its first reports to the University's Rector and Chancellor and the Representative and Academic Councils. The panel recommends that when each report of the Internal Audit Service is finalised and after it has been accepted by the Representative Council, it should be published on the University's

web site in the interests of transparency and as a demonstration of the University's confidence in the robustness of its financial procedures.

The University has produced a statement of its approach to risk as an annex to its Business Continuity Plan. As a statement of the principles the University intends to follow in its activities these documents are satisfactory. The panel recommends that it would now be helpful to the University for its Representative and Academic Councils, respectively, to discuss the University's risk management strategies and agree the nature of its "risk appetite" for each of the "Risk Categories" in its Risk Management Strategies.

Evidences/indicators

SER, especially Annex 7.4 (Revenue Dynamics 2013-2017_1; Revenue Dynamics 2013-2017_2) Budget; Dynamics of funding; Business Continuity Plan; Statute of SSU's Internal Audit Service. meetings with Rector and Chancellor and their staffs; Representative Council; Academic Council; Letter of the Ministry of Education and Science on Implementation of Compliance Audit

Recommendations:

That the University ensures that the financial and other resources that it allocates to scientific research match its ambitions for this area of its work and that they are consistent with the allocations that are appropriate for a higher education institution that engages in research. These resources should include provision for paid leave for academic staff to undertake extended or otherwise substantial programmes of research.

That when each of the reports of the Internal Audit Service is finalised, and after it has been accepted by Representative Council, it should be published on the University's web site in the interests of transparency and as a demonstration of the University's confidence in the robustness of its financial procedures.

That it would be helpful to the University for its Representative and Academic Councils, respectively, to discuss the University's risk management strategies and agree the nature of its "risk appetite" for each of the "Risk Categories" identified in its Risk Management Strategies.

Suggestions:

Best Practices (if applicable):

Evaluation

Please mark the checkbox, which best describes the HEI's compliance with this specific component of the standard

☐ Complies with requirements

☒ Substantially complies with requirements

☐ Partially complies with requirements

☐ Does not comply with requirements