



განათლების ხარისხის განვითარების ეროვნული ცენტრი
NATIONAL CENTER FOR EDUCATIONAL QUALITY ENHANCEMENT

**Higher Education Institution Authorization Experts’
Final Report
LLC Free University of Tbilisi**

July 31, 2024

Tbilisi

Expert Panel Members

Chair: Milan Pol, Masaryk University, Czech Republic

Members:

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Authorization Report Resume

General information on the educational institution

The Free University of Tbilisi (FUT) is a higher education institution which was founded by the non-profit organization Knowledge Fund. The FUT was founded in 2008. At the moment, the FUT has eight schools (Business School/ESM; School of International Relations; Law School; School of Mathematics, Computer Science and Engineering/MACS[E]; School of Physics; School of Governance and Social Sciences; School of Visual Art, Architecture and Design/VA[A]DS; and Graduate School of Social and Natural Sciences). The FUT implements 22 accredited programs, incl. 12 bachelor, 6 master and 4 PhD programs. The FUT also operates five research units, namely Centre for the Study of Arab Countries and the Islamic World Studies; Confucius Institute; Institute of Asia and Africa; Research Institute of Cognitive Neurosciences; Memory and Anxiety Research Lab. According to the self-evaluation report (SER), in December 2023 there were among active students at the FUT 2.733 bachelor, 347 master and 14 PhD students. A total number of staff is 443, among them 88 academic staff with 31 professors and 26 associate professors. A total number of affiliated academic staff is 63, the number of international academic/scientific/invited staff is 10, invited staff in teaching 230. Total budget of the FUT amounts 9. 220 561 GEL, the budget allocated for research-related activities is almost 14% of the total budget (SER, p. 10).

Brief overview of the evaluation process for authorization: SER and Site visit

The evaluation process started well before the very site visit by organizing online meetings of the panel and providing the panel with the information about the evaluation procedure and also with the documents submitted by the FUT. The self-evaluation report contained basic information; in some cases, the panel was requesting for some additional documents. The very site visit was held on June 26-29, 2024, and it was very well organized both by NCEQE coordinators, and by the FUT leaders. This way, the panel had a good opportunity to study all the materials provided, to meet and interview different actors within the FUT and beyond, and also to visit the facilities in which FUT is functioning. This all helped the panel to get a relatively complete picture about FUT's functioning.

Overview of the HEI's compliance with standards

In general, the Free University of Tbilisi complies with requirements in case of all seven standards. In case of standards 3, 4 and 7 all sub-standards are fully met. There are many aspects of Free University of Tbilisi's operation that deserve appreciation. These relate, for instance, to the teaching process, personnel policy, student support, facilities, and more. In some cases, the expert panel also identified examples of best practice related to joint programs, support of students, involvement of stakeholders, and the use of eco-infrastructure elements.

Individual cases where some sub-standards are evaluated on the level of substantial compliance are related to the potential of formulating the mission statement in the broader way, explicit links between action planning and finances, profile of internationalization policy as well as research development policy, enhancement of students' involvement in decision making and development of student self-governance practice. Some suggestions were formulated, too.

The expert panel stresses that the overall impression about the Free University of Tbilisi's performance is positive.

Summary of Recommendations

- It is recommended to indicate the link between the Action Plan activities and financial resources.
- It is recommended to reconsider internationalization strategy and to open effectively a possibility of international mobility to students at all levels of study.
- It is recommended to enhance students' involvement in decision-making processes related to academic aspects of the FUT's operation.
- It is recommended to support the set up and independent functioning of student self-governing bodies/structures at the FUT.
- It is recommended to evaluate and analyze the quality of research activity, the performance of academic personnel, and the efficiency of research activity within scientific-research units. Based on the results of this evaluation, a plan for the further development of research activities should be developed.

Summary of Suggestions

- It is suggested to consider a possibility of reflecting the FUT's involvement in community reach-related activities more visible also in the FUT's mission statement.
- It is suggested, in order to alleviate the workload of deans, to consider redistributing quality assurance responsibilities more evenly across all organizational structures, thereby balancing stakeholder and student engagement efforts.
- It is suggested to develop strategic solutions for the creation of new ERASMUS+ international exchange programs.
- It is suggested that FUT implements public, rigorous, and fair procedures for research funding and provide information about funding to stakeholders.
- It is suggested to prepare the framework that supports and encourages the development of dual supervision or joint degree PhD programs.
- It is suggested to improve the guideline for PhD supervisors to support their supervision work with PhD students.
- It is suggested to strengthen and expand guidelines for research ethics.
- It is suggested to establish a dedicated commission or structure responsible for robust review and oversight of research practices.
- It is suggested to enhance publicity and dissemination of PhD theses through various channels, including academic publications and public forums.
- It is suggested to foster closer ties and collaboration between research centers and PhD programs.
- It is suggested to design an effective software solution for analyzing the exam process at the FUT's Exam Center.
- It is suggested to grant access to library resources remotely, from off-campus locations.

Opinion of the experts' panel on the position of the FUT towards the draft report

The panel discussed the argumentative position of the FUT towards the draft report and acknowledged some arguments of the FUT and made some changes in the report. In concrete, the recommendation related to sub-standard 3.2 was removed, one of the recommendations related to sub-standard 5.1 was reformulated, the recommendations related to sub-standards 6.2 and 7.2 were changed into suggestions. At the same time, most originally formulated recommendations stayed as they were, based on the data, evaluation standards and international trends in higher education area. Consequently, the overall evaluation was adjusted.

Summary of the Best Practices

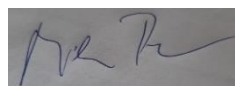
- The Free University of Tbilisi jointly with the Agricultural University implements joint master's and doctoral programs in STEM fields. e.g. master students of Biology have the opportunity to deepen their knowledge with courses taken from the master program Chemistry arising from their research, and vice versa, master students Chemistry have the opportunity to deepen their knowledge with courses taken from the master program Biology arising from their research.
- The Alumni Fund, established in 2020 by a group of Free University of Tbilisi graduates, supports students in their pursuit of education at the university.
- The establishment of an International Board of Trustees for a PhD program in Social Sciences enriches both the academic rigor and global impact of the program; it also has a potential to cultivate a nurturing and intellectually stimulating environment for students and faculty members.
- The solar energy infrastructure installed by the Free University of Tbilisi not only minimizes its environmental footprint but also serves as a good example for others in the sector to emulate.

Summary Table of Compliance of HEI with Standards and Standard Components

	Standard	Compl ies wit h Req uire me nts	Sub s t a n t i a l l y c o m p l i e s w i t h r e q u i r e m e n t s	Parti ally Com plies with Req uire m e n t s	Does not Compl y with Req uire m e n t s
1.	Mission and strategic development of HEI	x	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
1.1	Mission of HEI	x	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
1.2	Strategic development	<input type="checkbox"/>	x	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2.	Organizational structure and management of HEI	x	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2.1	Organizational structure and management	<input type="checkbox"/>	x	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2.2	Internal quality assurance mechanisms	X	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2.3	Observing principles of ethics and integrity	X	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3.	Educational Programmes	X	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3.1	Design and development of educational programmes	X	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3.2	Structure and content of educational programmes	x	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3.3	Assessment of learning outcomes	X	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4	Staff of the HEI	X	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4.1	Staff management	X	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4.2	Academic/Scientific and invited Staff workload	X	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5	Students and their support services	x	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5.1	The Rule for obtaining and changing student status, the recognition of education, and student rights	<input type="checkbox"/>	x	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5.2	Student support services	X	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6	Research, development and/or other creative work	X	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6.1	Research activities	X	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6.2	Research support and internationalization	X	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6.3	Evaluation of research activities	<input type="checkbox"/>	x	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7	Material, information and financial resources	X	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7.1	Material resources	X	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7.2	Library resources	X	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7.3	Information resources	X	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7.4	Financial resources	x	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Signature of expert panel members

1. Milan Pol (Chair)



2. Gaioz Partskhaladze (Member)



3. Davit Sikharulidze (Member)



4. Elene Zhuravliova (Member)



5. Giorgi Merabishvili (Member, student expert)



Compliance of the Applicant HEI with the Authorization Standard Components

1. Mission and strategic development of HEI

Mission statement of a HEI defines its role and place within the 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 describes 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

The mission of the FUT is focused on several directions and is formulated as follows:

- *"Create the best opportunities in Georgia for learning, teaching, research and creating new knowledge.*
- *Help form values based on freedom and critical thinking among its students so that they can adapt and orient themselves in diverse circumstances, make important decisions and approach challenges presented to them by the modern, swiftly changing world with creativity.*
- *Ensure education and teaching in Georgian language, in order to help develop the Georgian language as a language of scholarship and education.*
- *Be oriented toward the interests of its students and their future success."* (SER, p. 14)

Further, the FUT declares that it *"opens the gates for current and future students onwards free cognition and at a relevant stage of high education gives them an opportunity:*

- *To understand what nature, society, humans, and art is.*
- *To be able to think quantitatively.*
- *To be able to convey their thoughts professionally and academically both in writing and orally.*
- *To utilize analytical thinking to acquire and create new knowledge.*
- *To make ethical decisions based on moral values.*
- *To accept diversity in the world and in society and to be tolerant towards others."* (SER, p. 14-15).

The mission of the FUT is positively related to the FUT's vision, too.

The mission statement has been reviewed by the FUT since the last authorization period, taking into account the advice of authorization experts. Research activities were strengthened in a new version of the mission statement, the panel was informed by the FUT leaders during the site visit.

The mission statement of the FUT relates in one or another way to all three main pillars of functioning of current higher education institutions, learning/teaching, research/development, and public/community reach, although the third mission is present there indirectly, or implicitly to some extent, despite the fact that there is persuasive evidence about the FUT's activities oriented to the society.

This can be confirmed that the mission statement of the FUT defines clearly the FUT's role locally, nationally and in a certain sense internationally, too. It surely takes into consideration the role of higher education in developing active members of the society, knowledge creation and dissemination, facilitating students' personal development and ensuring their competitiveness on the labor market. The FUT declares its education

concept is based on what they call liberal education, emphasizing students' creativity, critical thinking and practical skills, and contribution to the new knowledge.

The mission statement is shared by the community of the FUT to a sufficient extent, as it was proven at interviews with different respondents during the site visit.

Evidence/indicators

- Self-evaluation report
- Interviews

Recommendations:

None

Suggestions:

- It is suggested to consider a possibility of reflecting the FUT's involvement in community reach-related activities more visible also in the FUT's mission statement.

Best Practices (if applicable):

None

Evaluation

- Complies with requirements
- Substantially complies with requirements
- Partially complies with requirements
- Does not comply with requirements

1.2 Strategic Development

- HEI has a strategic development (7-year) and an action plan (3-year) in place.
- HEI contributes to the development of the society, shares with the society the knowledge gathered in the institution, and facilitates lifelong learning
- 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 FUT has the strategic plan for the period 2024-2030 as well as the action plan for the next three years.

This can be agreed that the strategic plan is based on the mission and priorities of the FUT's activities. These are achievable, time-bound and measurable. The document is called Strategic Review and Action Plan (Action Plan is provided as a separate document with some more specifications, though). The document informs about mission, vision and motto of the FUT, introduces the reader to historical as well as current context of FUT's functioning, informs about methodology of strategic planning and offers SWOT analysis as it was produced during the process of strategic plan development.

Then come the chapters focused on specific areas of FUT's functioning which describe many aspects of each area, and at the end of the chapter focus on the activities done in the last six years, and on the plans for the next six years. These areas are as follows: Organizational Structure and Management; Teaching Concept and Educational Programs; Mechanism, Methodology and Target Benchmarks for Student Body Planning; Personnel management; Stakeholder Information Mechanism and Student Support; Public Relations; Research and Publishing; Material, IT and Financial Resources; Business Process Continuity Plan. Quality assurance seems to be penetrating these areas.

Methodology for the development of the strategic plan can be viewed as participatory; the FUT formed thematic working groups, organized a number of meetings, some workshops and other activities involving key stakeholders in order to develop relevant plans. For devising, updating and monitoring of strategic plan is Strategic Planning Group has been formed consisting of main leaders of the FUT, including those who lead schools and some support units.

This can be said the strategic and action plans cover main areas/aspects that are vital for the operation of the institution, as seen in the description above. Also, future activities are clearly indicated.

Action plan complements the main strategic document, brings some specific information about activities envisaged for the next three years, usually sets timeframes for the implementation. It does not relate the planned activities with financial resources, though.

Overall, this can be confirmed that the FUT contributes to the development of society and knowledge dissemination by planning and implementing its main activities. They relate to educational programs, research, activities of lifelong learning, and more. The staff of FUT is involved in the discussions on important social issues, often the staff members are experienced and well qualified experts in their fields who are capable of contributing significantly.

There is the evidence (activities of the FUT in recent years, current strategic and action plans) that FUT has developed measures for monitoring and implementation of strategic and action plans, and it is prepared to act duly on monitoring results, if necessary.

Evidence/indicators

- Self-evaluation Report
- Strategic Development Plan
- Action Plan
- Interviews

Recommendations:

- It is recommended to indicate the link between the Action Plan activities and financial resources.

Suggestions:

None

Best Practices (if applicable):

None

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

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

The highest representative and executive body of the Free University of Tbilisi is the Rectorate. Several structural units report directly to the Rector, including the Quality Assurance Service, Student and Enrollment Affairs Department, Human Resources Management Department, Financial Analytics Department, Public Relations and Marketing Service, International Relations Office, Examination Center, Coordination of Scientific Activities, and specialized institutes/centers and laboratories.

The university's strategic development plan includes the following main aspects: motto (Science, Labor, Liberty), mission and vision, current situation analysis, SWOT analysis, organizational structure and governance, teaching concept and educational programs, student contingent planning, personnel management, informing stakeholders and student support, public relations, research activities and publishing, resources, and a business continuity plan.

To achieve the FUT's goals, all structural units of the university act in a coordinated manner based on the principle of project-based management. This means that for each new issue, working groups are created, which are responsible for completing the tasks within the set time limits. FUT's representatives often refer to principles of total quality management in this context.

The analyzed information shows that Free University of Tbilisi strives to maintain a simple and "lean" organizational structure, which reduces the distance between decision-makers and students. From 2013 to 2023, administrative expenses made up only 25% of the total budget. Employees work in open spaces that promote transparency and the exchange of ideas. This policy outlines the FUT's guidelines for the spatial arrangement of the working environment for administrative staff. With the help of deans and coordinators, the university operates eight schools.

In the management structure of the Free University of Tbilisi, vice-rectors and the chancellor are subordinate to the rector.

The university has two vice-rectors: one for managing the educational process and the other for program development. The following structural units report directly to the vice-rectors: Registration and Learning Process Management Service, School of Business, School of International Relations, School of Law, School of Mathematics, Computer Sciences and Engineering, School of Management and Social Sciences, School of Physics, School of Visual Arts, Architecture and Design, Graduate and Doctoral School of Social and Natural Sciences, and the Manager of Professional Development for Academic Staff.

The following structural units report directly to the chancellor: Legal Service, Information Technology Department, Publishing and Events Management, Library, Museum, Art Center,

Sports Center, Procurement Department, Chancellery and Archives, Internal and External Infrastructure Services, and Maintenance and Cleaning Logistics.

The interviews revealed that the decision-making process is effective and timely. In terms of decision-making, the university has developed regulations for structural units, which consist of 46 articles. Each article defines the functions and duties of the structural units.

The case management instruction has been updated to regulate the university's case management and document circulation. The FUT uses the electronic case management system in the management process.

Free University of Tbilisi is actively working to ensure business continuity. To achieve this, a comprehensive approach has been developed, including identifying risks, establishing a rapid notification system, and creating harm reduction plans.

The university pays particular attention to risks related to infrastructure, health and safety, operational processes, technology provision, human resources, and financial sustainability. Constant monitoring and rapid response mechanisms are implemented to address potential gaps in these areas.

These measures are taken by the university to ensure its smooth and continuous operation.

The FUT has developed an internationalization policy that includes two directions: internationalization of teaching and internationalization of research. In terms of internationalization of research, the university cooperates with many foreign universities and has joint projects, which are explained in detail in the sixth standard.

The FUT representatives expressed clearly during the interviews their intention to emphasize some aspects of internationalization (mainly by stressing the involvement of international experts, and internationalization of research). Much less, especially on the bachelor level they emphasized other internationalization opportunities for the students (namely mobilities). This can be seen as contradictory to international trends, incl. Bologna process - for instance, already in 2001 the declaration of European Ministers in Charge of Higher Education in which they agreed that "the objective of improving the mobility of students, teachers, researchers and administrative staff as set out in the Bologna Declaration is of the utmost importance" (Communiqué of the meeting of European Ministers in charge of Higher Education in Prague on May 19th 2001). Bearing in mind the tendency of the Georgian tertiary sector to develop with regard to the Bologna process, this aspect of the FUT's operation needs to be viewed with a certain level of criticism. During the interviews with the students, their motivation to get international study and life experience was evident, too.

Evidence/indicators

- The structure of the FUT
- Functions of the structural units of the FUT
- The procedure of conducting the proceedings of the FUT
- Management effectiveness monitoring mechanisms and evaluation system
- Business process continuity plan
- Internationalization policy
- Interviews

Recommendations:

- It is recommended to reconsider internationalization strategy and to open effectively a possibility of international mobility to students at all levels of study.

<p>Suggestions: None</p>
<p>Best Practices (if applicable): None</p>
<p>Evaluation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Complies with requirements <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Substantially complies with requirements <input type="checkbox"/> Partially complies with requirements <input type="checkbox"/> Does not comply with requirements
<p>2.2 Internal Quality Assurance Mechanisms</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> 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. <input type="checkbox"/> HEI has a mechanism for planning the student body, which will give each student an opportunity to get a high quality education.
<p>Descriptive summary and analysis of compliance with the standard component requirements</p> <p>The Free University of Tbilisi has embraced a Total Quality Management (TQM) system aimed at optimizing and advancing teaching, learning, and research. This comprehensive approach ensures that all structural units of the university engage in both direct and indirect participation in quality control and development. The university's quality assurance system is aligned with its strategic vision of maintaining a lean organizational structure. This vision facilitates close interaction between students, teaching processes, and decision-makers. By keeping these elements closely connected, the university ensures effective and responsive quality management.</p> <p>Quality assurance at the Free University of Tbilisi is a collective responsibility, extending beyond the Quality Assurance Office. Every relevant entity within the university is involved in quality management and is committed to its continuous improvement. The responsibilities of the Quality Assurance Office are closely intertwined with those of School Coordinators, School Deans and Heads of Programs, and other key roles. Through teamwork, these units identify problems, coordinate quality assurance mechanisms, and plan implementation, prevention, and reaction strategies.</p> <p>The Faculty Development Manager is directly involved in the QA mechanism that ensures continually improving of faculty members' teaching skills, staying updated with the latest educational trends, and contributing to the institution's strategic goals. This, in turn, leads to higher student satisfaction, improved learning outcomes, and a robust quality culture within the institution.</p> <p>The university periodically evaluates the quality of its services and resources, utilizing the results for continuous improvement. This regular assessment ensures that FUT can maintain and enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of its operations and services.</p> <p>The FUT adopts the systematic approach to determine and analyze the number of accepted students each year. The analysis considers various factors across different academic levels</p>

(bachelor's, master's, and PhD). The university's approach to determining student intake is thorough and multifaceted, considering a blend of market demand, academic performance, student preferences, internal mobility, resource availability, and financial feasibility. This comprehensive method ensures:

- Alignment with Market Needs: Programs remain relevant, and graduates are employable.
- Sustainability and Quality: Admissions are balanced against available resources, ensuring quality education without overburdening faculty or facilities.
- Student Satisfaction and Retention: Low internal mobility and high first-choice rates indicate that students are generally satisfied with their programs and initial choices.
- Continuous Improvement: Regular assessments and adjustments based on concrete data foster an environment of continuous improvement.

By integrating these factors into their admissions strategy, the university can maintain high academic standards, meet market demands, and ensure sustainable growth.

Academic, invited, and scientific staff, along with students and external stakeholders such as employers and alumni, are actively engaged in the continuous improvement process of the programs offered by FUT. This collaborative approach ensures that the programs remain relevant, up-to-date, and aligned with industry standards and expectations. The involvement of the Faculty Development Manager in the QA mechanism ensures that faculty members are continually improving their teaching skills, staying updated with the latest educational trends, and contributing to the institution's strategic goals. This, in turn, leads to higher student satisfaction, improved learning outcomes, and a robust quality culture within the institution.

FUT places significant emphasis on monitoring students' academic performance, recognizing that this is crucial for enhancing the overall quality of education. The university employs a variety of tools and methods to track and assess student performance, using the data collected to identify areas for improvement in the teaching process. This continuous feedback loop helps to ensure that the educational experience is both effective and enriching for students.

To evaluate the effectiveness of the services provided, FUT has developed and utilizes a range of surveys. These surveys gather feedback from students, staff, and other stakeholders, providing valuable insights into the university's operations and services. This feedback is then analyzed and used to make informed decisions about potential changes and improvements.

In addition, FUT has established a performance evaluation system for its academic and scientific staff. This system is designed to assess the performance of staff members regularly, ensuring that they meet the high standards expected by the university. ..

The maximum number of students established during the 2018 authorization process is 3,200. The FUT seeks to increase this number to 4,300. The request is based on the analysis, which include the rate of program completion (and the corresponding volatility in student numbers), the frequency of students taking and returning from academic leave, a small, strategic increase in program admissions, and student transfers through mobility programs. By integrating these factors into their admissions strategy, the university can maintain high academic standards, meet market demands, and ensure sustainable growth. Each factor provides critical data that helps ensure any increase is justified, sustainable, and aligned with the university's strategic goals. By integrating these factors into its quality assurance mechanism, the university can make informed decisions about increasing the maximum student quota. Accordingly, the university aims to increase the student population gradually by about 30% between 2024 and 2030. This will gradually raise the workload for staff involved in Quality Assurance processes. However, the university has already expanded its Quality Assurance coordination team over the past few years. Therefore, the FUT is prepared to manage this increase effectively if the new maximum student number is approved. This

approach ensures that the university can expand its student body without compromising academic standards, resource availability, or student and faculty satisfaction

Evidence/indicators

- Quality Assurance Mechanisms
- Survey Forms
- Semester Evaluation Report
- Mechanism, Methodology and Target Benchmarks for Student Body Planning
- Interview results
- Strategic Review and Action Plan,
- Strategic Planning Methodology and Monitoring Mechanisms

Recommendations:

None

Suggestions:

- It is suggested, in order to alleviate the workload of deans, to consider redistributing quality assurance responsibilities more evenly across all organizational structures, thereby balancing stakeholder and student engagement efforts.

Best Practices (if applicable):

Evaluation

- Complies with requirements
- Substantially complies with requirements
- Partially complies with requirements
- Does not comply with requirements

2.3. Observing Principles of Ethics and Integrity

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

Descriptive summary and analysis of compliance with the standard component requirements

The FUT has established comprehensive regulations including a Statute, Employee Code of Conduct, Academic Personnel Code of Ethics, and Disciplinary Council Charter.

These regulations are publicly accessible on the university website, ensuring transparency and accountability. By outlining clear codes and procedures, the university sets a standard for ethical behavior and ensures that disciplinary actions are taken when necessary, maintaining integrity across all operations.

The university has implemented robust measures to combat plagiarism and academic cheating. These include strict supervision during exams, renovation and enhancement of the Exam Center, and mandatory training for students in academic writing. By focusing on prevention through strict monitoring and educational initiatives, the university ensures academic integrity and fairness in evaluations.

The FUT upholds principles of academic freedom, including freedom of conscience and choice. Academic personnel have autonomy in teaching and research, participate in curriculum development, and have support for professional development and research activities. This commitment fosters a conducive environment for intellectual exploration and innovation, crucial for advancing knowledge and education.

Free University of Tbilisi upholds high standards of ethics, integrity, and academic freedom, thereby fostering a supportive and intellectually vibrant educational environment.

Evidence/indicators

- Statute, Employee Code of Conduct
- Academic Personnel Code of Ethics
- Disciplinary Council Charter
- Student Code of Ethics
- Ethics Council Charter
- Examination Rules
- Interview results

Recommendations:

None

Suggestions:

None

Best Practices (if applicable):

None

Evaluation

- 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 Free University of Tbilisi implements educational programs at all three levels of higher education, which correspond to the mission, goals, and vision of the university. Currently, the FUT has 22 educational programs, including 12 bachelor's, 6 master's, and 4 doctoral programs. The FUT unites eight different schools implementing 22 profile educational programs.

The FUT has a rule for the design, planning, evaluation, and development of programs, which describes the structure of the curriculum, semester plan, program, methodology for the development of the individual curriculum, the procedure for the operation of mechanisms for the renewal of educational programs. The rule also includes mechanisms for direct and indirect assessment of educational programs.

The FUT uses labor market research, and quantitative and qualitative methodology when introducing an educational program and its further implementation. Regarding internationalization, the Free University of Tbilisi pursues its policy "not extensive, but intensive". For example, the Architecture Bachelor program was developed in collaboration with American School of Architecture Professor Jesse Vogler, and the Building Systems Engineering Bachelor program was developed with San Diego State University Professor Michael Saunders. The programs are mainly created based on international analogies.

The Free University of Tbilisi jointly with the Agricultural University implements joint master's and doctoral programs in STEM fields. e.g., master students of Biology have the opportunity to deepen their knowledge with courses taken from the master program of Chemistry arising from their research, and vice versa, master students of Chemistry have the opportunity to deepen their knowledge with courses taken from the master program of Biology arising from their research.

By the current legislation, the FUT has developed regulations and procedures for making changes in the educational program or canceling it. In cases of amending/annulling of programs, an institution seems to be prepared to give due consideration to legal interests of the students, and grant students an opportunity to smoothly complete an educational program.

The Expert Group proposes the FUT to develop strategic solutions for the creation of new ERASMUS+ international exchange programs. Based on the interviews, university regulations and surveys, it is evident that the FUT considers various factors when planning, designing, implementing, developing, and annulling educational programs. These factors include the requirements of the labor market, feedback from alumni and employers, results from student and alumni satisfaction surveys, monitoring of students' academic performance based on program learning outcomes, consultations with professional associations, and local and international best practices.

Evidence/indicators:

- Self-evaluation report
- Interviews
- Educational Programs, Syllabi
- Methodology of Elaboration, Planning, Assessment and Development of Educational Programs
- Labor Market Research Reports,
- Stakeholder engagement in program design
- Development reports

Recommendations:

None

Suggestions:

- It is suggested to develop strategic solutions for the creation of new ERASMUS+ international exchange programs.

Best Practices (if applicable):

- The Free University of Tbilisi jointly with the Agricultural University implements joint master's and doctoral programs in STEM fields. e.g. master students of Biology have the opportunity to deepen their knowledge with courses taken from the master program Chemistry arising from their research, and vice versa, master students Chemistry have the opportunity to deepen their knowledge with courses taken from the master program Biology arising from their research.

Evaluation

- Complies with requirements
- Substantially complies with requirements
- Partially complies with requirements
- Does not comply with requirements

3.2 Structure and Content of Educational Programmes

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

When developing the program, the FUT takes into consideration the basic principles of the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS), as well as the legislation of Georgia and the rules of the FUT.

The learning outcomes of the programs are formulated and correspond with the qualifications awarded at the higher education level. The FUT's educational programs have changed to three-component learning outcomes, including Knowledge, Skills, Responsibility and Autonomy, although there are cases when programs contain seven-component learning outcomes, defined by earlier normative acts. The learning outcomes of a specific field are based on the characteristics of Sectoral Benchmarks developed by the NCEQE; they are in line with the qualification's framework.

The structure and content of the programs provide a logical connection of its components and take into account the specifics and requirements of each component. Planned learning outcomes and student workload are adjusted within a reasonable timeframe, which is confirmed by analyzing student progress.

Programs offer students elective courses. Deans of the school, heads of programs and the heads of the schools advise the students regarding the elective courses. The FUT also offers students free credits from all FUT's programs of the same level. The teaching-learning methods described in different programs take into account the sectoral benchmarks and ensure the achievement of the learning outcomes of the program.

The structure of educational programs consists of modules, compulsory and optional courses. Depending on the teaching system, for students is possible to create an individual study plan.

The catalog of educational programs is available and posted on the university's website (<https://freeuni.edu.ge/ge/educational-programs/?Programs=1600>).

The FUT has significant capacity and resources to offer students individualized curriculum tailored to their unique needs and goals. The university recognizes student diversity and is committed to providing a flexible and adaptive educational environment.

<p>Evidence/indicators</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-evaluation Report • Interviews • Educational Programs, Syllabi
<p>Recommendations:</p> <p>None</p>
<p>Suggestions:</p> <p>None</p>
<p>Best Practices (if applicable):</p> <p>None</p>
<p>Evaluation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Complies with requirements <input type="checkbox"/> Substantially complies with requirements <input type="checkbox"/> Partially complies with requirements <input type="checkbox"/> Does not comply with requirements
<p>3.3 Assessment of Learning Outcomes</p> <p>HEI has a law-compliant, transparent and fair system of learning outcomes assessment, which promotes the improvement of students' academic performance.</p>
<p>Descriptive summary and analysis of compliance with the standard component requirements</p> <p>To achieve the learning outcomes of the educational program, the program has created learning courses. Learning outcomes are specified in the syllabus of each learning course, and for each learning outcome, an appropriate assessment method is selected to achieve the learning outcomes established by the educational program.</p> <p>The assessment system is multi-component, consisting of intermediate and final forms of assessment. Minimum competency thresholds are established for midterm and final assessments. The minimum passing score on the final exam is not more than 60%, which is specified in all curricula. When assessing learning outcomes, such learning methods are used as: written exam; oral exam; control questioning test; essay; abstract; practical work; laboratory work; Project, etc. In the evaluation system, rubrics are written for each component and the gradation of points according to the rubrics is given.</p> <p>Knowledge testing at the university is carried out in different ways: written exam, verbal exam, presentation of a project with practical or laboratory work, etc. Most exams are taken at the examination center.</p> <p>Transparent criteria are used to assess student learning.</p> <p>The institution informs students about the achieved goals, gaps, and ways of improvement; Students are informed about the assessment system used in the institution and related regulations. The panel was informed about the intention of the FUT to increase the number of academic staff in case of increase of student numbers.</p> <p>The FUT has an effective system of appellation and students confirmed they are informed about it.</p>

<p>Evidence/indicators</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-evaluation Report • Interviews • Educational Programs, Syllabi • Learning Outcomes Evaluation Mechanisms
<p>Recommendations:</p> <p>None</p>
<p>Suggestions:</p> <p>None</p>
<p>Best Practices (if applicable):</p> <p>None</p>
<p>Evaluation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Complies with requirements <input type="checkbox"/> Substantially complies with requirements <input type="checkbox"/> Partially complies with requirements <input type="checkbox"/> 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

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

Descriptive summary and analysis of compliance with the standard component requirements

The activity of the employees of the Free University of Tbilisi is regulated by the legislation of Georgia and the labor regulations of the FUT. The labor relations of the employees are regulated based on the labor contracts concluded with the university.

The university has developed structured general rules and principles of personnel management to ensure the effective fulfillment of university employee's functions. The human resources of The Free University of Tbilisi consist of the following categories: Teaching Staff; Academic Staff; Administrative Staff; Academic Staff Support; Guest Lecturers; and Support Staff. To attract, select, and employ staff, the FUT usually announces vacancies for relevant positions. However, in a number of cases, in accordance with the legislation, the FUT conducts recruitment and selection of staff even without announcing vacancies. Based on the Interviews, the pane assumes that the competition for academic positions is announced by the university's rector and is conducted through as an open process.

The FUT recruitment process can be categorized into (I) - administrative, academic, and support staff; (II) - academic staff/research staff; (III) - visiting lecturers. The FUT has policies in place for each category of recruitment or appointment of staff and these are described in the Recruitment Policy, Academic Staff Affiliation Policy, Personal files of the,

Sample Contracts, Qualification Requirements, and Job Descriptions. After recruitment or appointment of staff, the Free University of Tbilisi concludes several types of contracts and annexes to them with the staff: (a) - for administrative/academic/supporting academic staff; (b) - for visiting lecturers; (c) - for support staff; (d) - Affiliation Agreements. The labor activity of the employees of the Free University of Tbilisi shall be regulated on the basis of the labor contracts concluded with the University (including annexes to the labor contracts) and the following legal acts related to the activity of the employees: a) - the Statute; b) - labor regulations; c) - the procedure of personnel selection; d) - the Regulations on the Disciplinary Board; e) - the Code of Ethics of the teaching staff and other persons involved in the educational process; f) - the Rules of Academic Staffing; g) - the provision of structural subdivisions of the University; h) - the Regulations on the Academic Staffing of the University; i) the Regulations on the Disciplinary Board of the Free University of Tbilisi.

The university staff demonstrates good professional and communication skills, based on which it can be concluded that the qualifications of the university staff and the positions they hold are in line with the mission and strategic plan of the university's development.

The FUT has a clear strategy for professional development of its staff, which includes the induction process as well as activities in other phases of employees' work. Training and consultation are two main forms of professional development of the staff, some activities are conducted by international experts.

To fully integrate the teaching staff into the teaching process, The Free University of Tbilisi holds the following meetings: (1) Proper methodological support of the curricula and assessment system. (2) Improvement and enhancement of learning and teaching strategies. (3) Introduction of modern teaching methods and techniques. (4) Effective use of electronic management systems. 443 employees are working at the Free University of Tbilisi: (a) Academic staff; (b) Visiting and core teaching staff; (c) Academic staff; (d) Administrative Staff; (e) Academic support staff; (f) Support Staff. The total number of personnel involved in the educational process is 318 lecturers and guest lecturers. The academic staff of the University consists of 69 professors/ associate professors/ associate professors: (1) Professors – 31; (2) Associate Professors – 26; (3) Assistant Professors – 12. The total number of affiliated academic staff is 63: (1) Affiliated professors – 29; (2) Affiliated associate professors – 23; (3) Affiliated assistant professors – 11.

The Free University of Tbilisi promotes the professional development of academic staff, namely conducting research in international cooperation, publishing articles, organizing conferences, participating at international conferences, implementing national or international projects, and more. The FUT has developed merit-based principles of personnel management. These principles assist each employee in effectively fulfilling their roles, promoting their professional development, and maximizing their capabilities. Additionally, these principles focus on identifying and addressing areas for improvement in the activities of university staff.

Principles of remuneration seem to be preliminary defined, they include fixed rates, a combination of fixed rates and hourly rates, and hourly rates with some flexibility provided. Staff performance evaluation results are taken into consideration in this context. The Free University of Tbilisi has a policy of formation of scientific and pedagogical staff salaries, which is aimed, on the one hand, at promoting the productivity of academic staff and, on the other hand, at their development as researchers and specialists. As a rule, the functions of academic staff consist of three parts: (1) administrative; (2) pedagogical; (3) academic/research. The formation of their salaries is based on the principle of proportionate remuneration of all three functions and the encouragement of relevant activities. The salary formation policy is as follows – the university mainly concludes three types of labor contracts with the teaching staff: (I) fixed amount; (II) with a combination of fixed amount and hourly component; (III) hourly payment only.

Overall, evaluation of the staff performance is used actively in the process of staff management. For a full integration of academic personnel into the university's teaching

process, the Free University of Tbilisi organizes orientation meetings. These meetings help the personnel: In ensuring methodological suitability of their syllabi and grading system; Upgrading and improving their learning and teaching strategies; Implementing modern methods and techniques of teaching; Efficiently using electronic management system; Creating functional course sheets. Orientation meetings are held at the beginning of each term. Meetings are held individually by programs. Orientation meetings are supervised by Vice-Rectors, the Deans of corresponding schools or Heads of Programs, the Head of the Quality Assurance Office, and the Faculty Development Manager.

The ratio of academic and scientific staff to the number of administrative and support staff is 1:0,89 (92/82). The ratio of academic, scientific and invited staff to number of students is 1:9,7 ((318/3094). The ratio of administrative staff to the number of students is 1:37.73 (82/3094). The retention rate is 74% (academic staff), 51% (invited staff) and 67% (administration and support staff).

Evidence/indicators

- Self-evaluation report
- Interviews
- Personal files of the staff
- Personnel Selection Rules
- Academic Personnel Affiliation Rules
- Personnel Files

Recommendations:

None

Suggestions:

None

Best Practices (if applicable):

None

Evaluation

- 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 HEI'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

This can be confirmed that the FUT has a clear workload scheme relevant for academic staff functions and duties. This scheme is regularly updated, and it ensures implementation of educational programs and proper fulfillment of all other activities assigned to them.

The workload for each position is specified in the Methodology for determining the number of academic, scientific, and visiting staff, personal files, sample contracts, and individual staff workloads. The average workload of academic staff is: (1) Annual Contact Hours - 248 hours; (2) Subject Coordination, Program Development, and Assessment - 455 hours; (3) Research and Professional Development - 953 hours.

Planning of the number of academic and scientific staff as well as invited staff includes considerations of the number of existing and future students as well as specifics of the programs and some other relevant aspects.

The number of academic staff gradually increases at the FUT. While in 2018 the total number of academic and invited staff was 268, in 2023 it was 318 (SER, p. 65). Analogically, there is an increase in the number of professors and associate professors (in 2018 25 professors, 17 associate professors; in 2023 31 professors and 26 associate professors). This can be concluded that formal academic qualification of the staff has continuously been increasing at the FUT.

Academic staff is defining its primary allocation to the FUT, they nominate their affiliation to the FUT, and this is a matter of formal agreements. With regard to the interviews and university regulations, it is evident that professors affiliated with the university can receive financial support from the Foundation for various activities. These include research, publishing articles in international journals, attending conferences, publishing monographs, printing textbooks, participating in internships at foreign universities, and other related endeavors.

Staff management, including evaluation practice include setting clear expectations as for the work performance of all categories of the staff at the FUT. This seems to be effectively working and it is a matter of continuous adaptations.

Evidence/indicators

- Self-evaluation Report
- Interviews
- Personnel Files
- Personnel Individual Workloads
- Personnel Selection Rules
- Methodology of Determining the Number of Academic, and Invited Personnel per Program

Recommendations:

None

Suggestions:

None

Best Practices (if applicable):

None

Evaluation

- Complies with requirements
- Substantially complies with requirements
- Partially complies with requirements
- Does not comply with requirements

5. Students and Their Support Services

HEI 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

- 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.
- HEI ensures the protection of student rights and lawful interests.

Descriptive summary and analysis of compliance with the standard component requirements

The FUT has developed regulations for, assignment, suspension and termination of student status, mobility, qualification granting, and recognition of education.

University's bachelor, master and doctorate study levels' charters describe student's assignment procedures and qualification granting process, that is in line with Georgian high education legislation.

Suspension and termination of student status is explained in the university's statute under article 16 and 17, the process is transparent and fair. Mobility process is highlighted in Internal and external mobility rules.

During the interview students have mentioned that they are aware about the process and they have access to the following documents. All these regulations are public and accessible to the students and other stakeholders at the website of the university. (<https://freeuni.edu.ge/students/bachelor-students/?bachelor=academic-calendar>)

The contract between students and the university is in accordance with the current legislation on education in Georgia. Students confirmed that they had the opportunity to read their agreements when they enrolled at the university.

The Free University of Tbilisi ensures effective and timely implementation of the above-mentioned procedures to protect student rights and lawful interests. At the beginning of the academic year, the FUT has two weeks of orientation days, during this period, the Office of Student and Applicant Relations informs and instructs students about their rights and obligations included in the contract, which was also confirmed during the interviews.

The Free University of Tbilisi has a mechanism for the protection of student rights, students' appeal mechanisms related to the study process, academic and administrative bodies that is highlighted in the Student Code of Ethics, Examination Rules and Academic Personnel Code of Ethics.

Students' surveys include questionnaires including evaluating the academic as well as the administrative staff of the university. Students are also asked to appeal if there is something that they do not agree with in the learning process. The Free University of Tbilisi utilizes the EMIS (emis.freeuni.edu.ge) student information system, where students can register, select courses, review the program and address any kind of issue about the lecturer or the subject.

One of the mechanisms for the protection of student rights includes Students Dean consultation service, however the student dean is appointed by the university administration, so for more transference and fairness of the mentioned process, it is desirable to dispose of such authority on elected student's self-governance.

At the FUT, there is no student self-governing structure. This, again, contrasts with international trends that emphasize the importance of civic education experience (in a broad sense) at schooling of all levels, incl. tertiary. Also, student involvement in decision-making bodies of the FUT is not well visible.

Evidence/indicators

- Bachelor’s Programs Charter
- Master’s Programs Charter
- PhD Programs and Dissertation Councils Charter
- University’s Statute
- Internal mobility rules
- External mobility rules
- Self-evaluation report
- Student Information System (emis.freeuni.edu.ge)
- University webpage (www.freeuni.edu.ge)
- The contract between FUT and a Student
- Interview results

Recommendations:

- It is recommended to enhance students’ involvement in decision-making processes related to academic aspects of the FUT’s operation.
- It is recommended to support the set up and independent functioning of student self-governing bodies/structures at the FUT.

Suggestions:

None

Best Practices (if applicable):

None

Evaluation

- Complies with requirements
- Substantially complies with requirements
- Partially complies with requirements
- Does not comply with requirements

5.2 Student Support Services

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

Descriptive summary and analysis of compliance with the standard component requirements

Students receive proper consultation and support on the planning of the education process and improvement of academic performance. Interviews with staff and students showed that there are designed and implemented consulting services at the beginning of the academic semester provided by the Dean, Head of Programs, School Coordinator, Office of Student and Applicant Relations (Student Dean). Students also receive help from a professor regarding a course as specified in the syllabus, covering aims and outcomes of the course, study content, teaching and learning methods and evaluation criteria.

The FUT has career support service under the Office of Student and Applicant Relations, which provides students with professional orientation and other information events regarding employment and career development. The Career Development Manager provides the students with information regarding current vacancies on a daily basis. Students are often provided consultation and given recommendations on this issue. The Office of Student and Applicant Relations organizes training for students to help them to draft better CVs and achieve success in interviews.

The Office of Student and Applicant Relations organizes the employment forum twice in an academic year to attract potential employers and ensures cooperation with them. The potential employers are interviewed regarding the job calls, and their human resources officers or managers interview the students during the forum. The employment forum allows the students to share their skills and knowledge with their potential employers and thereby manage their career development. Often, some organizations plan internship programs specifically for the university, and the most successful ones offer employment.

Employers are actively involved in the creation, development and implementation of educational programs in Free University. To identify the employers' requirements, the Career Development Manager is involved in the organization of focus groups. Feedback received from companies are considered during the development of the program curricula and specific courses. Above mentioned processes also were confirmed during the interviews with stakeholders.

Information about international mobility as well as some international projects is available via email. The university gives several chances to students to participate in international mobility, mostly cooperating bilaterally with some universities abroad. Institution creates some opportunities for students' participation in various projects, ensures students' awareness on various domestic and international projects and events carried out outside of the institution. During interviews students expressed their low interest and readiness to participate in exchange academic programs. Also, they underlined a few opportunities in this direction. Consequently, it is desirable to promote exchange opportunities among the students and encourage their participation.

The Free University of Tbilisi ensures student information and involvement in various university, local or international projects and events that cover extracurricular activities – sports, arts, educational activities and supports students' initiatives by internal funding.

Institution has transparent and objective mechanisms for supporting low SES students and the information on these mechanisms are public and accessible(<https://freeuni.edu.ge/ge/freshmen/?entrants=financing>). The rule about scholarships and grants claims that Free University does help its students in flexible paying as well as giving so called "Knowledge Fund Grant". During interviews students confirmed about financial supporting mechanisms. It is noteworthy that the Knowledge Fund awards each of its students, without any additional prerequisites, with a partial scholarship to cover a part of their tuition fees.

One of the best practices of university student financial support utilizes - The Alumni Fund, established in 2020 by a group of Free University of Tbilisi graduates, aims to support accomplished students in their pursuit of education at the university.

Evidence/indicators

- Self-evaluation report
- Memorandums
- Stakeholder Information Mechanisms
- Completed and Planned Student Initiatives and Activities
- Student Employment Support Mechanisms
- Student, Alumni and Employer Survey Result Analysis

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • University webpage; (www.freeuni.edu.ge) • The contract between FUT and a Student • Interview results
<p>Recommendations:</p> <p>None</p>
<p>Suggestions:</p> <p>None</p>
<p>Best Practices (if applicable):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Alumni Fund, established in 2020 by a group of Free University of Tbilisi graduates, supports students in their pursuit of education at the university.
<p>Evaluation</p> <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Complies with requirements</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Substantially complies with requirements</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Partially complies with requirements</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Does not comply with requirements</p>

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

<p>6.1 Research Activities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ HEI, based on its type and specifics of its fields, carries out research/creative activities. ○ Ensuring the effectiveness of doctoral research supervision ○ HEI has public, transparent and fair procedures for the assessment and defense of dissertations which are relevant to the specifics of the field
<p>The FUT has made considerable steps toward integration of teaching, research and economics. The FUT collaborates with economic agents to conduct its research activities. To facilitate this, the institution has signed memorandums of cooperation, presenting a total of 91 such agreements with economic agents.</p> <p>The main priority of the FUT is to strengthen scientific research within the institution. Its research mission focuses on developing interdisciplinary studies, deepening inter-science connections, and creating scientific knowledge that leads to new models and theoretical paradigms. To achieve this, the FUT engages in both fundamental and applied research. The institution presents the scientific activity report of its academic and scientific staff, detailing the completed and ongoing research projects. Research funding is provided by both local and international organizations.</p> <p>The FUT has a clear vision for research, emphasizing the growth of interdisciplinary research, the deepening of inter-science connections, and the promotion of new knowledge creation. To support this vision, the FUT has developed a mechanism to support research activities.</p> <p>To ensure the effectiveness of its research support mechanism, the university makes both direct and indirect financial investments in research initiatives. These include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creating opportunities for long-term research visits abroad for full-time employees with full or nearly full salary support.

- Providing remote part-time work opportunities for researchers in administrative positions.
- Offering professional sabbaticals for the preparation of publications.
- Financing long-term expeditions and field studies.
- Funding public lectures, meetings, and conferences related to research.
- Co-financing grant projects, including covering overhead costs by the university.
- Providing opportunities to use learning platforms and units as research resources.

These approaches strengthen interdisciplinary research and cooperation between sciences, contributing to the creation of new knowledge and the development of scientific paradigms.

The FUT's research focus and investment are reflected in the model of the research units and the graduate and doctoral schools of social and natural sciences. Several specialized research units operate within the university, such as:

- Institute of Cognitive Neurosciences
- Center for the Study of Arab Countries and the Islamic World
- Institute of Asia and Africa
- Confucius Institute
- Memory and Anxiety Research Laboratory

The FUT's research resources and efforts are concentrated in these structures, underscoring its commitment to significant scientific directions and international cooperation initiatives.

The oversight by the Graduate School ensures that supervisors are qualified, which is crucial for providing adequate academic and research guidance to doctoral candidates. Supervisors' functions are clearly described at the FUT, their workload enables them to be effectively engaged in the supervision processes. Procedures of assessment and defense of dissertations are public, transparent and fair, they seem to be relevant to the specifics of the field. The main rules are formulated in the FUT's PhD Program's and Dissertation Councils Charter.

One of the points in the research activity support mechanisms addresses the salary formation policy for academic and teaching staff. According to this policy, the functions of the academic staff consist of three parts: 1. administrative, 2. pedagogical, and 3. scientific/research.

The university's salary formation policy for academic staff is as follows:

1. Contract for a fixed amount:
 - 25% for scientific/research activities and professional development
 - 40% for academic administrative activities
 - 35% for pedagogical activities
2. Contract with fixed amount and hourly component:
 - 50% of fixed salary for scientific/research activities and professional development
 - 50% for subject coordination and teaching methodology
 - Hourly component for regular and unique hours logged by the employee, with progressive increases
3. Hourly pay only: Mostly for visiting lecturers, at individual rates

This approach helps to balance the scientific, administrative, and pedagogical activities of the academic staff and increases motivation.

The principles of the annual workload for the academic staff of the university are as follows:

1. Academic staff work 1,656 hours a year.
2. Among these, the maximum lecture hours load is approximately 764 hours.
3. An additional 764 hours (1:1 ratio) are used for lecture preparation, syllabus development, assessment, and self-development.
4. The remaining approximately 128 hours are intended for scientific/research activities and professional development.
5. The average workload of academic staff is divided as follows:
 - Annual contact hours: 248 hours
 - Subject coordination, syllabus development, and assessment: 455 hours
 - Scientific/research activities and professional development: 953 hours

These principles help to balance the scientific, educational, and professional activities of academic staff.

The university actively promotes the professional development of academic staff with the following approaches:

- During research visits or assignments abroad, reducing or rescheduling the academic staff's lecture load in the corresponding semester, as well as retaining a fixed part of the remuneration for professional development.

Academic staff remuneration includes a fixed (non-hourly) component specifically earmarked for research and professional development. The academic staff themselves decide on the purposes of using these funds. Academic staff may apply to the founding organization or the university's knowledge fund for funding or co-funding of their scientific activities (publications, conferences, grants, etc.).

Evidence/indicators

- Internationalization policy
- Research activity supporting mechanisms
- Regulations of Doctoral Programs and Dissertation Council
- List of scientific activities of the academic and scientific staff of the University of Warsaw
- Interview results
- Budget
- Mechanisms for evaluating the activities of the staff of the Higher Education Institution
- Research activities and publishing
- Structure and format of dissertation work

- PhD Program 's and Dissertation Councils Charter

Recommendations:

None

Suggestions:

- It is suggested to prepare the framework that supports and encourages the development of dual supervision or joint degree PhD programs.
- It is suggested to improve the guideline for PhD supervisors to support their supervision work with PhD students.

Best Practices (if applicable):

- The establishment of an International Board of Trustees for a PhD program in Social Sciences enriches both the academic rigor and global impact of the program; it also has a potential to cultivate a nurturing and intellectually stimulating environment for students and faculty members.

Evaluation

- × Complies with requirements
- Substantially complies with requirements
- Partially complies with requirements
- Does not comply with requirements

6.2. Research Support and Internationalisation

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

The FUT has a financing plan. In the presented budget, 6.6 percent of the total budget is allocated for scientific grants and research. However, from the interviews, it was established that neither the researchers nor the officials of the centers knew how these funds are distributed. We believe that the distribution of these funds should be clearly defined. Furthermore, the interviews indicated that the budget is developed in a cooperative and coordinated manner.

The FUT has a position of coordinator of scientific activities, whose functions include:

- Identifying new grant competitions, studying their conditions, and disseminating information among researchers.
- Preparing and processing necessary documentation for grant competitions.
- Preparing and refining documentation related to grants for scientists/researchers.
- Maintaining a register of current and completed grants and preparing reports.
- Updating information about scientific activities on the university's website.
- Coordinating with the mechanisms for evaluating the scientific activity of university staff and professional development.
- Advising researchers on the development of grant budgets and other related documentation.

This indicates a deliberate effort by the university to promote research and support researchers.

From the interview, it is clear that they care about efficiency and note that they have progressed, although at the institutional level, a specific report on this is not fixed.

The university supports students' involvement in the research process. This is expressed through field projects and participation in various laboratories. Doctoral-level students noted the university's support in terms of developing research skills.

FUT has developed an internationalization policy. The internationalization policy document highlights two main directions: the direction of teaching and the direction of research. The goal of research internationalization is to establish international connections and create platforms that contribute to the creation of knowledge products aligned with the university's strategy and the organic synchronization of the study-research process.

Collaboration focuses on exemplary international research and projects in the natural and social sciences. The same purpose is served by the international advisory board created in social sciences, which exemplifies interdisciplinary knowledge models.

In general, the FUT's concept of international collaborations includes joint platforms and products created through international collaborations. Noteworthy among the steps taken in terms of internationalization is the international advisory board in social sciences at Free University of Tbilisi. The board consists of highly qualified international scholars with extensive experience in interdisciplinary research in the social sciences and humanities. Given the specificity of the social science doctoral program, the board promotes the internationalization of this program and provides consultations on the development of its individual components. Board members directly participate in the research process of PhD students based on their individual research interests and needs."

The International Board of Trustees for the PhD program in Social Sciences comprises highly qualified scholars with extensive interdisciplinary research experience in social sciences and humanities. Their role is pivotal in supporting the program's internationalization efforts and advising on its development across various components. The International Board of Trustees plays a critical role in advancing the PhD program in Social Sciences through their expertise, international perspective, and individualized mentorship, thereby enriching the academic environment and fostering scholarly excellence.

Evidence/indicators

- Internationalization policy
- Research activity supporting mechanisms
- Regulations of Doctoral Programs and Dissertation Council
- List of scientific activities of the academic and scientific staff of the University of Warsaw
- Interview results
- Budget
- Mechanisms for evaluating the activities of the staff of the Higher Education Institution
- Research activities and publishing
- Structure and format of dissertation work

Recommendations:

None

Suggestions:

- It is suggested that FUT implements public, rigorous, and fair procedures for research funding and provides information about funding to stakeholders.
- It is suggested to strengthen and expand guidelines for research ethics.
- It is suggested to establish a dedicated commission or structure responsible for robust review and oversight of research practices.
- It is suggested to enhance publicity and dissemination of PhD theses through various channels, including academic publications and public forums.
- It is suggested to foster closer ties and collaboration between research centers and PhD programs.

Best Practices (if applicable):

None
<p>Evaluation</p> <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Complies with requirements</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Substantially complies with requirements</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Partially complies with requirements</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Does not comply with requirements</p>
<p>6.3. Evaluation of Research Activities</p>
<p>HEI has a system for evaluating and analyzing the quality of research/creative-arts activities, and the productivity of scientific-research units and academic/scientific staff.</p>
<p>FUT presented the scientific research activity report for the years 2021-2023 (a two-page table). This report provides information on the volume and number of grants, the impact factor ratio, the citation ratio, and the number of published articles and books.</p> <p>However, the report does not analyze these data or develop an improvement plan for the further development of scientific research activities. Additionally, the efficiency and analysis of the research activity of scientific research units are not evaluated, leaving unclear how the further development of research activities is planned.</p> <p>Thus, despite the presence of detailed statistical information, the report lacks an analytical approach that would ensure the effective use of these data for the further improvement of FUT's research activities.</p>
<p>Evidence/indicators</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Internationalization policy ● Research activity supporting mechanisms ● Regulations of Doctoral Programs and Dissertation Council ● List of scientific activities of the academic and scientific staff of the University of Warsaw ● Interview results ● Budget ● Mechanisms for evaluating the activities of the staff of the Higher Education Institution ● Research activities and publishing ● Structure and format of dissertation work
<p>Recommendations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● It is recommended to evaluate and analyze the quality of research activity, the performance of academic personnel, and the efficiency of research activity within scientific-research units. Based on the results of this evaluation, a plan for the further development of research activities should be developed.
<p>Suggestions:</p> <p>None</p>

<p>Best Practices (if applicable):</p> <p>None</p>
<p>Evaluation</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Complies with requirements</p> <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Substantially complies with requirements</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Partially complies with requirements</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Does not comply with requirements</p>

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.

<p>7.1 Material Resources</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ 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. ○ HEI offers environment necessary for implementing educational activities: sanitary units, natural light possibilities, and central heating system. ○ Health and safety of students and staff is protected within the institution. ○ HEI has adapted environment for people with special needs
<p>Descriptive summary and analysis of compliance with the standard component requirements</p> <p>The campus is leased from 'Agromet', a subsidiary of the Knowledge Fund, ensuring maintenance and services like security, organization, communications, and medical facilities. The lease agreement spans from December 11, 2023, to December 11, 2033, covering 14,532 m² of space. This space is in common use for two Universities, and it is large enough for a maximum number of students of both these HEIs (8300 students as required for both).</p> <p>The campus boasts extensive facilities including classrooms, amphitheaters, conference halls, laboratories, studios, exhibition spaces, libraries, an exam center, computer labs, and specialized facilities like for engineering programs.</p> <p>Infrastructure development is ongoing with regular monitoring and planning to address any shortcomings. Projects are implemented in phases to minimize disruption to educational activities.</p> <p>The campus is adapted for individuals with special needs, with ramps, elevators, and accessible facilities on each floor. Designated parking spaces are available, and the environment is inclusive.</p> <p>Comprehensive safety measures include fire safety systems, medical facilities, surveillance cameras, and security personnel. The campus undergoes regular inspections to ensure compliance with safety standards.</p> <p>The campus is equipped with renewable energy sources such as solar panels, contributing to sustainability goals. There is also a focus on maintaining green spaces and ensuring efficient energy use.</p>

The campus infrastructure supports a conducive learning environment with recreational areas and modern amenities.

Significant upgrades have been made, including the renovation of conference halls, expansion of exam centers, and continuous improvements in infrastructure like roads, lighting, and roofing systems.

Overall, the Free University of Tbilisi's Kakha Bendukidze Campus appears well-equipped to support a diverse range of educational and research activities while prioritizing safety, sustainability, and inclusivity. Ongoing developments and strategic planning ensure that the campus remains modern and conducive to academic excellence and can serve for an increased number (4300) of students. Changes in the number of staff are envisaged, if the student numbers grow at the FUT, faculties, such as library, reading space and equipment seem to be well prepared and available. The fact that the building is used by two (partnering) higher education institutions does not seem to be a complicating factor in this context.

Evidence/indicators

- Material Resource Documentation
- Campus Tour
- Interview results

Recommendations:

None

Suggestions:

None

Best Practices (if applicable):

- The solar energy infrastructure installed by the Free University of Tbilisi not only minimizes its environmental footprint but also serves as a good example for others in the sector to emulate.

Evaluation

- 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

The Free University of Tbilisi Library plays a crucial role in supporting the institution's educational and research activities, guided by a comprehensive mission and set of tasks. Here's an analysis of its operations and strategies in alignment with standard library practices:

1. Mission and Strategic Goals:

- The library's primary mission is to actively support teaching, scientific, and research processes within the university.
- It adapts its resources and services to meet modern educational challenges and continuously enhances service quality.

2. Library Collections:

- The library focuses on developing both print and electronic collections that align with academic programs and the university's teaching syllabi.
 - Regular surveys and input from academic staff help identify collection gaps and ensure relevance.
- 3. Electronic Catalog and Databases:**
- The electronic catalog serves as a pivotal tool, ensuring efficient access and management of library resources.
 - Integration of electronic databases like HeinOnline, ScienceDirect, Scopus, and JSTOR enhances research capabilities and supports academic endeavors.
 - The library actively trains users on database utilization, both through direct interactions and online resources.
- 4. Infrastructure and Facilities:**
- The library's physical infrastructure is designed to facilitate both individual and group study, equipped with necessary technologies like computers, printers, and scanners.
 - Continuous monitoring and user feedback drive improvements in space allocation and service offerings, such as creating specific areas for different types of study needs.
- 5. Professional Development:**
- Emphasis is placed on the professional growth of library personnel, ensuring they possess both traditional library skills and proficiency in modern information technologies.
 - Collaboration with international library associations and participation in webinars contribute to staying updated with global library standards and practices.
- 6. Library Services:**
- The library offers a range of traditional and electronic services, catering to the evolving needs of its users.
 - Electronic services, including virtual reference and access to electronic documents, are expanded to meet growing demand.
 - Regular assessment through user surveys guides service enhancements and innovations.
- 7. Budget and Resource Allocation:**
- A significant increase in the library's budget underscores the university's commitment to enhancing library services and infrastructure.

In conclusion, the Free University of Tbilisi Library exemplifies good practices in modern library management, focusing on user needs, and fostering continuous improvement in services and resources. Its strategic alignment with academic goals ensures it remains a vital asset in supporting the university's educational and research missions.

Evidence/indicators

- Library Charter
- Library Usage Rules
- Book Fund and Inventory Journal
- Contracts with Scientific Databases and Indicators of Usage
- Interview results

Recommendations:

None

Suggestions:

- It is suggested to grant access to library resources remotely, from off-campus locations.

<p>Best Practices (if applicable):</p> <p>None</p>
<p>Evaluation</p> <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Complies with requirements</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Substantially complies with requirements</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Partially complies with requirements</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Does not comply with requirements</p>
<p>7.3 Information Resources</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ HEI has created infrastructure for information technologies and its administration and accessibility are ensured ○ Electronic services and electronic management systems are implemented and mechanisms for their constant improvement are in place ○ HEI ensures business continuity ○ HEI has a functional web-page in Georgian and English languages.
<p>Descriptive summary and analysis of compliance with the standard component requirements</p> <p>The infrastructure for information technologies at the Free University of Tbilisi is robust and meticulously managed, aligning with best practices for higher education institutions (HEIs).</p> <p>The university has established an Office of Information Technologies responsible for administering and ensuring the uninterrupted operation of IT services. It oversees the development and maintenance of electronic services critical to educational, research, and administrative needs, ensuring the safety and accessibility of informational resources.</p> <p>Critical electronic services include internet access, email, website management, exam centers, and educational management systems (EMIS). These services are integral to both academic and administrative processes, supporting day-to-day operations and enhancing communication and information dissemination.</p> <p>The university has implemented redundancy measures such as physical duplication of server hardware, disk duplication, and backup systems. Continuous monitoring and swift incident response protocols ensure minimal downtime and data loss, maintaining business continuity.</p> <p>The university's official website is bilingual (Georgian and English), providing comprehensive and updated information about academic programs, services, and news. The website serves as a crucial communication tool for internal and external stakeholders, reflecting the university's commitment to transparency and accessibility.</p> <p>Access to IT systems and data follows the principle of least privilege (PoLP), ensuring that users have access only to information necessary for their roles. Security systems, including access control and video surveillance, safeguard campus facilities and data integrity, complying with Georgian laws on personal data protection.</p> <p>The university's IT infrastructure supports remote lecturing systems through platforms like Zoom and Google Workspace, facilitating flexible learning environments. Computer classrooms equipped with necessary software and projectors enhance teaching effectiveness, while access to computer workstations across campus supports student learning needs.</p> <p>Regular updates to hardware and software systems ensure that the IT infrastructure remains up to date with technological advancements.</p>

Therefore, the Free University of Tbilisi demonstrates a commendable approach to IT infrastructure management, focusing on reliability, security, and adaptability to support its academic mission effectively. By adhering to these standards and practices, the university enhances its capability to deliver quality education and research opportunities while ensuring operational efficiency and user satisfaction. As of December 31, 2022, FUT has presented financial statements and governance statements with an independent auditor's report. According to these documents, finances of the FUT are in a good condition.

Evidence/indicators

- SER
- Interviews
- Site visit

Recommendations:

None

Suggestions:

- It is suggested to design an effective software solution for analyzing the exam process at the FUT's Exam Center

Best Practices (if applicable):

None

Evaluation

- Complies with requirements
- Substantially complies with requirements
- Partially complies with requirements
- Does not comply with requirements

7.4 Financial Resources

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

In order to analyze the distribution of financial resources of the FUT, the group of experts studied the budget presented by the FUT for the last 5 years and the projected budget for next 5 years. The main budget items are inflows and outflows.

The 2024-2029 budget shows the sources of incoming funds: revenues from undergraduate programs, revenues from master's and doctoral programs, and other operating revenues. Additionally, the FUT has non-operating inflows in the form of interest income.

The structure of operational outflows in the 2024-2025 budget is as follows: academic salaries - 20.6%, administrative salaries - 8.7%, scientific grants and research - 6.8%, economic expenses - 2.5%, marketing and communication - 2.7%, rent and utility expenses - 3.8%, library operation and development - 0.5%, and other educational expenses - 2.8%. This structure of outflows is planned to be maintained in the coming years, with outflows for scientific grants and research increasing to 7.2%.

As a result of this analysis, it was established that the FUT's financial resources ensure the sustainable and further development of teaching and research activities, as well as human resources and infrastructure.

The FUT has implemented a system of managerial accountability, financial management, and control, ensuring the legal, transparent, economical, and effective use of resources in achieving the institution's goals. Specifically, the FUT has developed the document "Free University of Tbilisi Finances," which includes sources of financing, financial stability issues, liabilities, financial balance, risk management, and the budget and financial planning process.

The State Audit Office ensures that an authorized auditing firm conducts a financial audit, the results of which are published publicly. As of December 31, 2022, FUT has presented financial statements and governance statements with an independent auditor's report. According to these documents, FUT's net profit in 2022 increased by 51% compared to the previous year.

Evidence/indicators

- Financial reporting and management reporting of the FUT
- Budget (funding dynamics)
- Free University of Tbilisi Finances

Recommendations:

None

Suggestions:

None

Best Practices (if applicable):

None

Evaluation

- Complies with requirements
- Substantially complies with requirements
- Partially complies with requirements
- Does not comply with requirements