National Center
For Educational Quality Enhancement

Online Teaching & Learning in Georgia: Main Trends and Needs

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Abbreviations

HEI – Higher Education Institution

QA – Quality Assurance

OTL – Online Teaching and Learning

SES – Socio-Economic Status

NCEQE – National Center for Educational Quality Enhancement

NCDC – National Center for Disease Control

MOOC - Massive Open Online Course

Online Teaching & Learning in Georgia: Main Trends and Needs

National Center for Educational Quality Enhancement (NCEQE) conducted an online survey of authorized higher education institutions (HEIs) in Georgia on the subject of online teaching and learning (OTL). HEIs were informed in advance about the nature of the questionnaire[1] developed at the NCEQE HE QA department and two main purposes for it to be filled in: 1) Special decree by the Georgian government (March 31, 2020) regarding particular requirements that HEIs were ought to abide in order to carry out studies during the state of emergency[2]/global pandemic and the need for NCEQE to analyse the state of HE planning and implementation, the use of OTL, to identify main trends and needs; 2) It was also communicated that the said analysis would be helpful to the international experts[3] to support NCEQE in developing the evaluation criteria and guidelines on OTL for higher education institutions in Georgia (Within the USAID/PROLoG program).

The questionnaire consists of 23 items, represented by 6 open-ended questions, 15 closed ones and 2 items belonging to demographic block (see, appendix). The topics cover: 1. Strategic development and management of the institution, 2. Content and further development of the programs, 3. Methods of evaluation, 4. Support and development mechanisms for the academic staff, 5. Student support services and the improvement of relevant infrastructure. NCEQE sent out the survey to 64 authorized Georgian HEIs on August 18, 2020 and a 10-day period was given to them for the feedback. In total, 45 HEIs responded to the survey (70% response rate), counting one response per institution as instructed. The analysis of quantitative and qualitative data is given below.

Strategic development and management of the institution

Most of the HE institutions have designed either general or department-level strategies for OTL, only seven responders state that they are currently elaborating on the subject (see, figure 1). Two HEIs specify that OTL strategy is going to be included in their strategic action plan monitoring report. They also cover of OTL topics at some extent in other documents and plan to develop blended methodology alongside the online study courses in the upcoming years.

Additionally, all of the HEIs state that worked on a manual/video-guide for online teaching application/platform designed for students and personnel either on an institutional level or individually by different departments. They either already have internal quality

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[1] Adapted from the DIGI-HE project survey themes and preliminary findings (http://www.ehea.info/Upload/BFUG_HR_UA_71_8_2_Survey_results.pdf);

[2] "Parliament Authorized Presidential Decree over State of Emergency" (Parliament of Georgia): http://www.parliament.ge/en/saparlamento-saqmianoba/plenaruli-sxdomebi/plenaruli-sxdomebi_news/parlamentma-sagangebo-mdgomareobis-gamocxadebis-shesaxeb-saqartvelos-prezidentis-brdzaneba-daamtkica.page

[3] "NCEQE (GEORGIA) LAUNCHES CALL FOR INTERNATIONAL EXPERTS" (enqa.eu): https://enqa.eu/index.php/nceqe-georgia-launches-call-for-international-experts/

assurance mechanisms set in motion (39/45) to support online teaching in the institution or it's in the process (6/45).

1. Has your institution drawn out the strategy for online teaching and learning?
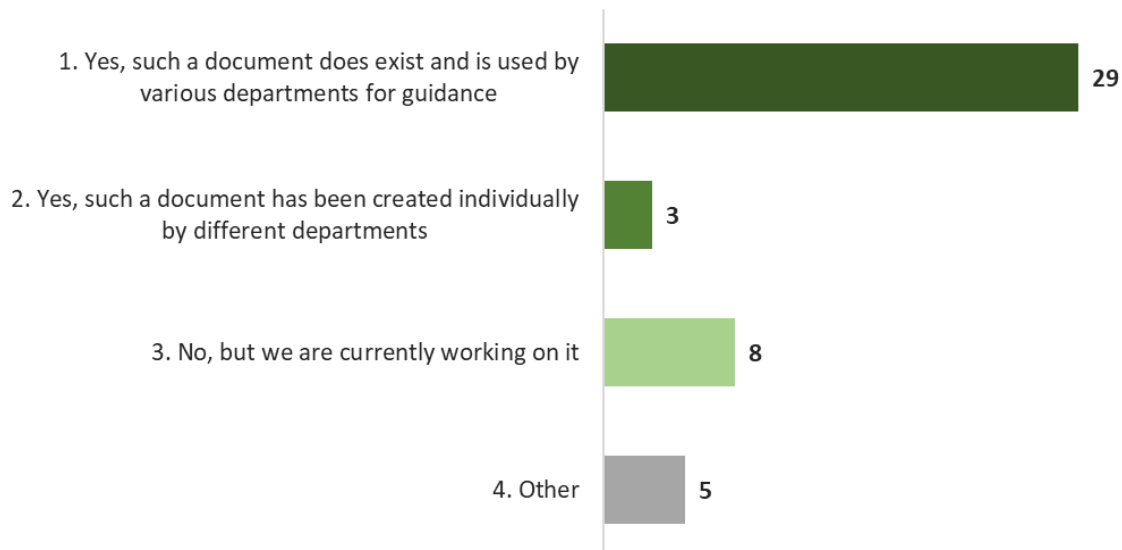

Figure 1

Regarding the mechanisms that support the online teaching in respective institutions, it was found that a support system relies functionally on both central structural units and different departments in most of the cases (39/45). Four HEIs specified that they have created special structural units for the purpose and one HEI indicates that such mechanisms have been drawn out by departments separately. In one case, instead of major structural changes, an institution devised a special tech-support group for OTL.

Surprisingly, data shows that global pandemic caused by new Covid-19 virus spreading throughout the world is not one of the main factors affecting OTL improvement in Georgian HEIs (see, figure 2). They mostly credit professional advancement mechanisms within the institution for the development of OTL, then the institutional strategy, joint international projects and finally the situation related to Covid-19. Almost all the HEIs (43/45) noted the involvement of other factors that are unlisted/unspecified due to possible limitation within the questionnaire.

Answering what kind of difficulties could their academic staff face within the institution when it comes to online teaching, a third of the HEIs selected the deficiencies in digital infrastructure (Internet, Wi-Fi, computers, etc.), 8 of them selected difficulty related to modification of the institutional procedures and regulations due to online teaching and only one HEI chose the following – "lack of support for the professional advancement". HEIs indicated a number of other possible difficulties as well (12/45), like the lack of eye-contact, necessary tech skills, a general demotivation, a fast and full switch from field to online setting and practice related aspects of the specific programs that were impossible to implement.

5. What are the factors determining the development of online teaching in your institution?
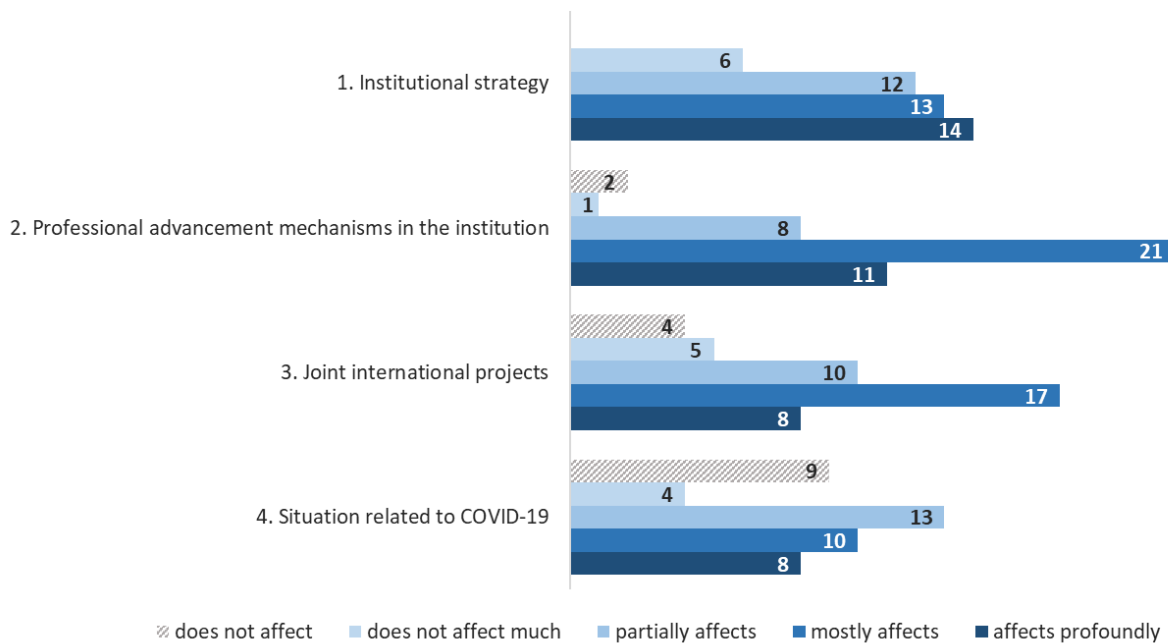

Figure 2

Same as with the academic staff, HEIs think that the biggest obstacle for their students was the deficient digital infrastructure (Internet, Wi-Fi, computers, etc.) (25/45). Only 5 HEIs selected the following as an obstacle – "lack of services for online teaching and learning". Some of them (6/45) noted practice related setback within specific fields/programs, financial problems for socially disadvantaged students, internet accessibility at home, etc. In case of both academic staff and students, one of the institutions emphasizes that the main reason behind OTL related difficulties is the legislation and the fact that full distance/online learning is not recognised in Georgia.

HEIs think that online teaching contributed least to the following aspects of their academic and/or administrative environment (see, figure 3): mastering the practical skills in students, group work in students, collaborating in international projects and communicating with international students and/or prospective students. According to data, HEIs mostly credit OTL positively for increasing accessibility to education and higher involvement of students in the educational process.

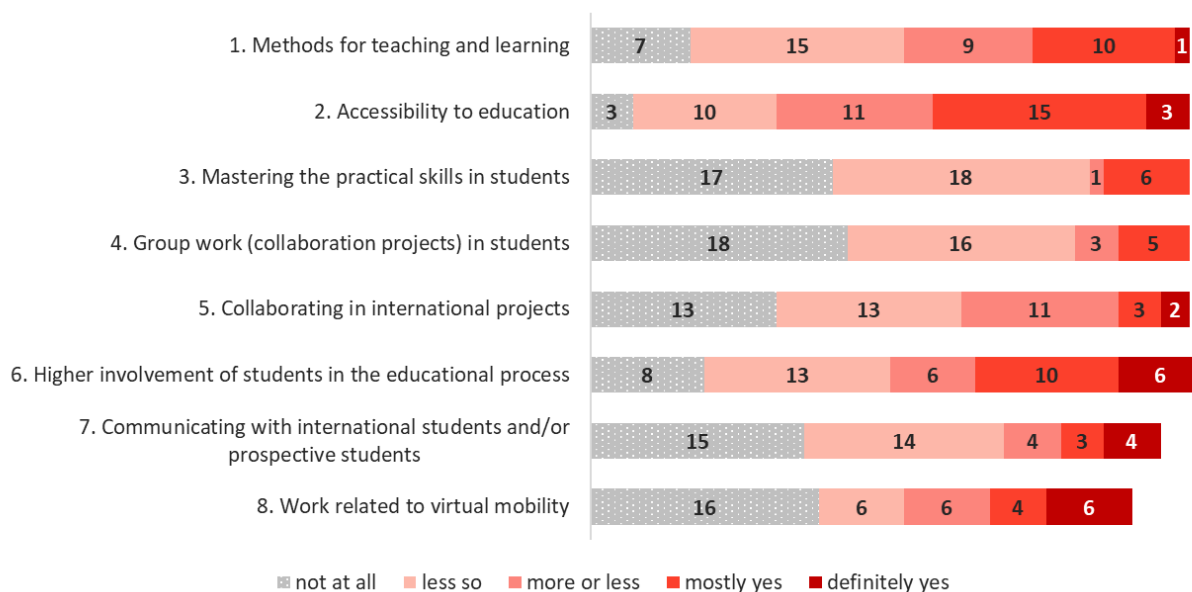**8. Do you think that online teaching can be credited positively for the following aspects in your institution?**

	not at all	less so	more or less	mostly yes	definitely yes
1. Methods for teaching and learning	7	15	9	10	1
2. Accessibility to education	3	10	11	15	3
3. Mastering the practical skills in students	17	18	1	6	
4. Group work (collaboration projects) in students	18	16	3	5	
5. Collaborating in international projects	13	13	11	3	2
6. Higher involvement of students in the educational process	8	13	6	10	6
7. Communicating with international students and/or prospective students	15	14	4	3	4
8. Work related to virtual mobility	16	6	6	4	6

Figure 3

Content and further development of the programs

HEIs report no significant changes in the learning outcomes of the programs and/or the particular courses (see, figure 4). Roughly half of the respondents indicated that at least some of the programs required the alteration of their structure. Even more programs had to accommodate with revised evaluation methodology (29/45 – for all or most of the programs) and students' feedback forms (30/45 – for all or most of the programs). However, the most noticeable spike was related to the increased demand for the electronic resources in the library, concerning all the programs in 30 Georgian HEIs.

30 HEIs employ open educational resources and MOOC courses, while 10 HEIs intend to implement them. Only 5 institutions expressed no desire or will to include such resources in their academic life for at least in the upcoming year.

HEIs state that various components of online teaching have been influential for the educational programs. In most cases they emphasize that OTL introduces innovative methods for learning in the institution (38/45), makes the mechanism of teaching and learning more flexible in terms of time and environment (33/45) and makes it possible to provide the education service to more students (26/45). Some HEIs also pointed out that OTL supports better cooperation and exchange of experiences among academic staff members (12/45) and allows a better monitoring of the study progress in the students (8/45). One institution noted that we should not be too quick to judge the effectiveness and nature of the impact online teaching might have on the educational process, more so the absence of relevant devices among the student population has to be taken into account.

**9. To what extent did the online teaching cause any alterations
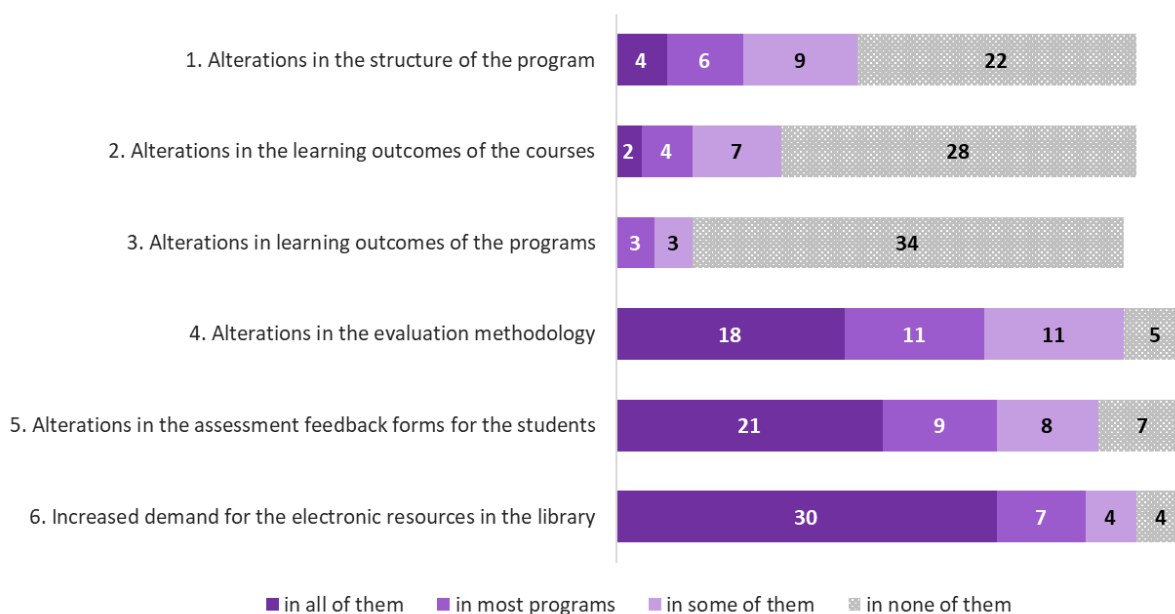in the educational programs?**

	in all of them	in most programs	in some of them	in none of them
1. Alterations in the structure of the program	4	6	9	22
2. Alterations in the learning outcomes of the courses	2	4	7	28
3. Alterations in learning outcomes of the programs	3		3	34
4. Alterations in the evaluation methodology	18	11	11	5
5. Alterations in the assessment feedback forms for the students	21	9	8	7
6. Increased demand for the electronic resources in the library	30	7	4	4

Figure 4

Methods of evaluation

In order to prevent the risks related to the violation of academic integrity, HEIs employ different mechanisms starting from thoroughly planning out the tasks/tests in advance and ending with using specific software post-factum. 28 institutions state that 'every question of every task is formulated in a way that students need to synthesize, think critically, assess the information, etc. instead of just recalling the factual information'. 19 institutions use Turnitin when submitting bachelor/master's papers and 14 institutions state that they use Turnitin, Urkund or other software in general for any paper.

Realization of vocational practice/internship/lab-work/clinical practice and evaluating students upon these components turned out to be quite challenging for HEIs. Only three of them noted the absence of such components in case of their institutions in general. As for the rest, many of them (15/42) had to go through stark structural changes throughout the semester, either postponing the aforementioned components by the end of the semester, extending the semester itself till early September 2020 or postponing the whole courses (or significant practice-related part of it) to the next semester(s) entirely. Out of these 15 HEIs three institutions specified that they were able to follow through the activities as planned from June 2020 as the country-wide lockdown was lifted.

"The place of clinical and lab-work related practice components were (where possible) taken by theoretical subjects and elective courses. The practice was postponed for the next semester. In the meantime, the university managed to purchase virtual platforms to implement clinical studies." (HEI feedback)

"The academic schedule was reorganized so that practice for the clinical disciplines was arranged by the end of the semester [.....]; Courses which have practice as their most essential part were postponed entirely until face to face setting can be reinstated." (HEI feedback)

7 HEIs reported having completed the practice-related components on-site, but it is unknown from the answers whether they adhered to the recommendations[4] from NCDC and the Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories Labour, Health and Social Affairs of Georgia. Another 7 HEIs applied blended approach stating that they did adhere to the health and safety recommendations. In fact, the HEIs mostly (17/42) reported having converted every single component of their studies to online setting.

"Practice related components were realized on-site as planned, except teacher preparatory program which was administered online involving public schools." (HEI feedback)

"Student evaluation was done online after making a few changes to the learning outcomes of the syllabi for a number of courses, which did not alter the learning outcomes of the whole program." (HEI feedback)

Regarding OTL methodology, Georgian HEIs emphasized the difficulty of carrying out the practice and clinical components (13/45), some of them had problems with group projects, discussions and other tasks of interactive nature adding to the issues with internet infrastructure, accessibility in students of low SES (7/45). Fewer HEIs mentioned the issue with a sudden need to adapt quickly to online setting and improve technical skills among their staff members (5/45). Another two institutions also had trouble with applicability of specific new legislative measures and foreseeing the exact length of time online studies would take. 7 HEIs reported to have encountered no significant challenges in terms of online teaching methodology in the last semester.

"When teaching online, it is hard to use all the methods that you would normally use like role plays and situational dialogues, group work and practice related tasks." (HEI feedback)

"It is important to have a bed-side component in medical programs and so we have bought Body Interact Virtual Patient, which only partially solves the issue. Furthermore, students did not have any access to mannequins and simulators." (HEI feedback)

8 institutions did not notice any problems from the student's perspective of OTL. Many of them however encountered the risks/cases of violating academic integrity (12/45). There were accessibility issues due to bad infrastructure or low SES in student population (7/45). Issues were also related to the assessment procedures for seminars and exams, which required much more time (8/45) as reported by HEIs. As a matter of fact, one institution experienced a cyber-attack during exam hours.

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[4] Recommendations (NCDC): https://stopcov.ge/en/Recommendation

"One student was using a mobile phone to complete the given task, which did not really translate into the good performance. Later, the students with technical difficulties were offered to go through the exams on-site." (HEI feedback)

"Writing component was replaced by oral examination and then we switched to Moodle platform for the writing tasks." (HEI feedback)

"We had questions whether students performed independently during the written examination, without anyone's help; to what extent did they apply the given literature, materials and online resources. Also, it was impossible to evaluate them on the practice related components." (HEI feedback)

Support and development mechanisms for the academic staff

All of the HE institutions that participated in the survey report having offered some form of instruction, guidance, IT support, and training to their academic staff in order to improve their digital skills and prepare adequately for OTL. Some of them note that instructions for online teaching (using Moodle, etc.) had been approved and applied long before Covid-19 pandemic. Two institutions also specified that they organized webinars with the support of their international partner HEIs.

"We have worked on the standards of conducting lectures online, created test rooms/auditoriums where staff members can exercise their skills individually in a simulation." (HEI feedback)

"HEI offered our staff to participate in educational courses to boost their digital skills; special support group was created helping both lecturers and students; the group produced video instructions on how to use various applications." (HEI feedback)

Academic staff made active use of various platforms and applications during the educational process, including Zoom, Webex, Microsoft Teams, Google Meet, Moodle, JITSI, Trello and Slack. Couple of them also used their own electronic platforms/portals for the collaboration and exchange of their experiences. Moreover, absolute majority of HEIs (41/45) state that there is a structural unit within their institutions that would help the academic staff teaching digitally.

Three most influential factors that improved online teaching the most were named by Georgian HEIs as follows: 1. Sharing experience with colleagues, the possibilities to exchange knowledge (34/45), 2. Local and international trainings and meetings on the subject of online teaching (26/45), 3. Reflecting on the needs of online teaching and the resources present in the institution (23/45). Other sources were also mentioned such as the best international practice, feedback from the students and the recommendations[5] given by NCEQE.

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[5] NCEQE Covid-19 page (https://eqe.ge/ka/page/static/903/rchevebi-institutsiebisatvis-elektronuli-stsavlebis-khariskhis-uzrunvelqofastan-dakavshirebit)

Student support services and the improvement of relevant infrastructure

Registering students on educational programs or years of study and providing individual learning platforms/portals are the two most selected services that HEIs offer their students online (see, figure 5). On the other hand, online preparatory courses and self-evaluation instruments for the prospective students are the least popular. 17 HEIs also applied the practice of online enrolment for newcomer master's students and 9 institutions enrol the PhD students online.

20. To what extent do you offer the following student services?
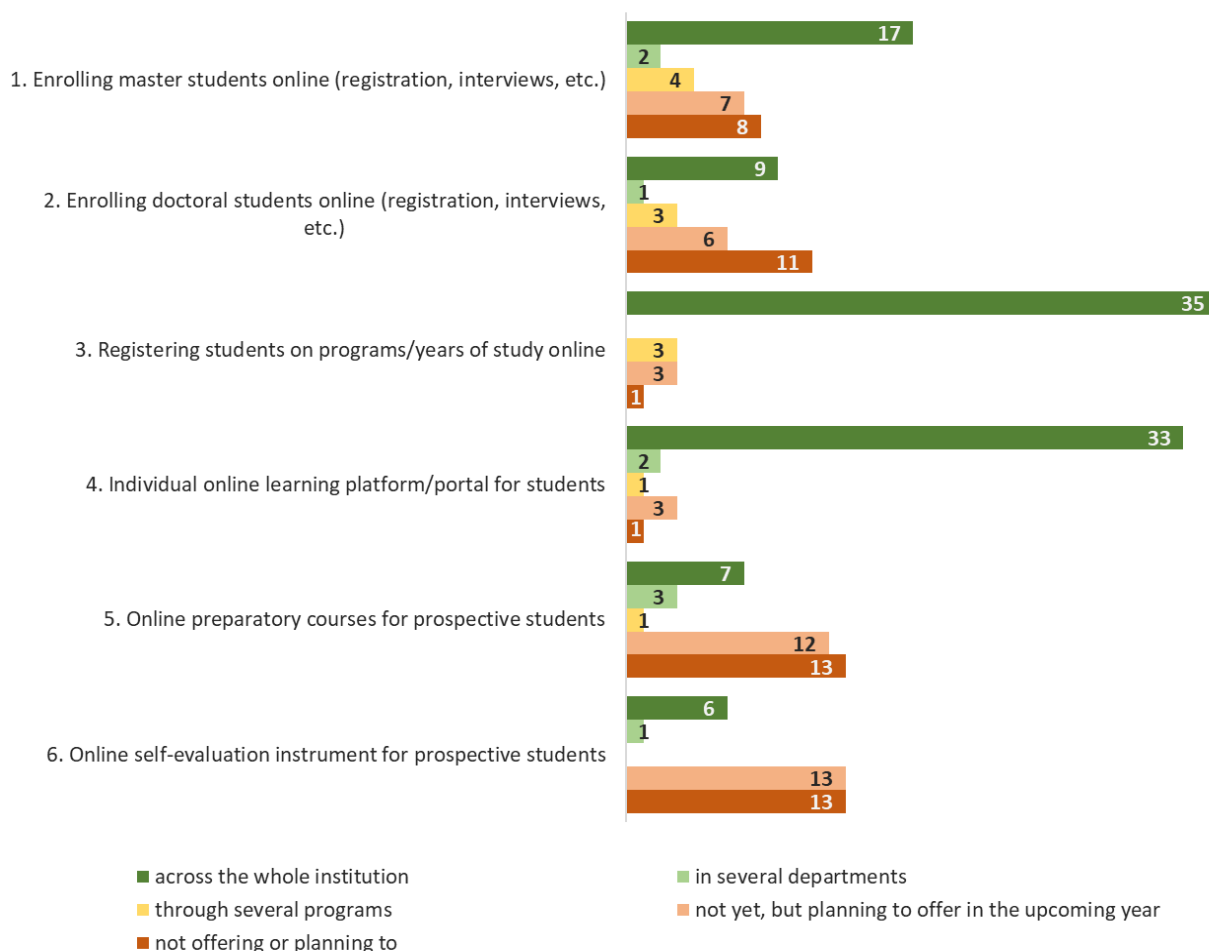

Figure 5

When asked to name a type of activity (other than financial) that would help the institutions advance their OTL practices, the answers from Georgian HEIs have been mostly unanimous, - organizing trainings, webinars to advance their practices of online teaching and student evaluation. Additionally, they highlighted the importance of other factors such as having frequent meetings among local HE institutions to exchange the experience and be up

to date, cooperating with NCEQE to assess the quality of online learning at the institution, elaborating with the government over the regulations and legislative measures that would also cover online/blended learning opportunities; and last but not least, a lack of digitalization in the regions and access to a faster internet generally in the country need to be addressed as well.

Conclusions

The survey showed that most of the HEIs in Georgia have worked on the strategies related to OTL on either institutional or faculty/departmental levels. Relevant manuals and video guides have been created to assist the personnel in planning courses and overcoming technical obstacles. On the institutional level, IT and QA departments have collaborated to achieve this goal. Interestingly, instead of global pandemic, HEIs name the mechanisms for professional development that exist at the institution as one of the main factors that boosted OTL. Almost all of the HEIs consider the low quality of digital infrastructure (Internet, computers, etc.) or its total absence as the major issue when it comes to OTL implementation, concerning both students and academic personnel being deprived of the university milieu. Moreover, they underlined the negative impact online evaluation had on group projects and the improvement of practical skills. While it was reported that many programs went through structural changes, HEIs denied having any significant modifications for study program contents, requirements or learning outcomes. Most of them stated that various mechanisms to ensure academic integrity are in active use at the institution. On some occasions, spring academic semesters were prolonged until September 2020 in order to complete the practice related parts of the courses after lockdown, while other institutions decided to postpone the execution of courses involving practice to the upcoming semesters entirely. Besides the challenges, institutions also stated in the survey that the shift towards OTL acted as a catalyst to introduce innovative methods in the field, it increased flexibility in terms of time and learning environment, boosted students' involvement in these processes.

As for the support mechanisms, institutions expressed their wish to take part in webinars, trainings involving international experts, to share their experiences among Georgian HEIs, collaborate with NCEQE and the Ministry of Education and Science over potential amendments in the legislature related to online/blended learning and the improvement of digital infrastructure, internet accessibility in the regions.

Appendix

Questionnaire

1. Has your institution drawn out the strategy for online teaching and learning?

    1.   Yes, such a document does exist and is used by various departments for guidance;
    2.   Yes, such a document has been created individually by different departments;
    3.   No, but we are currently working on it;
    4.   Other ……………

2. Have you worked on a manual/video-guide for online teaching application/platform designed for students and personnel?

    1.   Yes, it has been created on an institutional level;
    2.   Yes, it has been created individually by different departments;
    3.   No, but we are currently working on it;
    4.   Other ……………

3. What kind of mechanisms do there exist to support the online teaching in your institution?

    1.   A separate structural unit exists for that;
    2.   A support system relies functionally on both central structural units and different departments;
    3.   Support mechanisms have been drawn out by departments separately;
    4.   Other ………………

4. Are there some internal quality assurance mechanisms set in motion to support online teaching in your institution?

    1.   Yes, there is;
    2.   No, there is not;
    3.   No, but we are working on it;
    4.   Other ………………

5. What are the factors determining the development of online teaching in your institution?

Answers: 1. does not affect, 2. does not affect much, 3. partially affects, 4. mostly affects, 5. affects profoundly

Aspects:

    1.   Institutional strategy;
    2.   Professional advancement mechanisms in the institution;
    3.   Joint international projects;
    4.   Situation related to COVID-19;
    5.   Other ………………

6. What kind of difficulties could your academic staff face within the institution when it comes to online teaching?

(You can select several options)

1. Difficulty related to modification of the institutional procedures and regulations due to online teaching;
2. Lack of support for the professional advancement;
3. Lack of the digital infrastructure (Internet, Wi-Fi, computers, etc.);
4. Other ....

7. What can be the biggest obstacle for students when it comes to online teaching in your institution?

(You can select several options)

1. Lack of services for online teaching and learning;
2. Lack of the digital infrastructure (Internet, Wi-Fi, computers, etc.);
3. Other ....

8. Do you think that online teaching can be credited positively for the following aspects in your institution?

Answers: 1. not at all, 2. less so, 3. more or less, 4. mostly yes, 5. definitely yes

Aspects:

1. Methods for teaching and learning;
2. accessibility to education;
3. Mastering the practical skills in students;
4. Group work (collaboration projects) in students;
5. Collaborating in international projects;
6. Higher involvement of students in the educational process;
7. Communicating with international students and/or prospective students;
8. Work related to virtual mobility;
9. Other ....

9. To what extent did the online teaching cause any alterations in the educational programs?

Answers: 1. in all of them, 2. in most programs, 3. in some of them, 4. in none of them

Aspects:

1. Alterations in the structure of the program;
2. Alterations in the learning outcomes of the courses;
3. Alterations in learning outcomes of the programs;
4. Alterations in the evaluation methodology;
5. Alterations in the assessment feedback forms for the students;
6. Increased demand for the online resources in the library.

10. Does your institution employ open educational resources?

1. Yes, we use MOOC courses;
2. Yes, we use open educational resources;
3. No, but we are working on it;
4. No and not going to use one in the upcoming year.

11. Choosing from the options given below, which aspects of your educational programs have been affected most by various components of online teaching?

(You can choose 3 options deemed to be most influential)

1. Introduces innovative methods for learning in the institution;
2. Allows professors to spend more time with students elaborating on practical tasks;
3. Supports better cooperation and exchange of experiences among academic personnel members;
4. Allows a better monitoring of the study progress in the students;
5. Makes it possible to provide the education service to more students;
6. Makes the mechanism of teaching and learning more flexible in terms of time and environment;
7. Allows better interaction among students;
8. Other ....

12. When teaching and evaluating students online, which mechanisms does your institution employ to prevent the risks related to the violation of academic integrity?

(You can select several options)

1. Using Turnitin before submitting bachelor/master's papers;
2. Using Turnitin by the administrative staff of the institution after submitting bachelor/master's papers;
3. Every question of every task is formulated in a way that students need to synthesize, think critically, assess the information, etc. instead of just recalling the factual information;
4. The institution is using online software (Turnitin, Urkund, etc.) in order to check whether the paper is original or not;
5. Other ....

13. Based on the last semester, please, describe how were the students evaluated in the following components of the program: vocational practice/internship/lab-work/clinical practice?

....

14. Based on the last semester, please, describe what has been the biggest difficulty in terms of teaching and learning methodology?

....

15. Based on the last semester, please, describe what has been the biggest difficulty in terms of the student evaluation?

....

16. What opportunities do you offer your academic staff for the improvement of their digital skills?

....

17. What kind of online platforms do you offer your academic personnel for the collaboration and the exchange of their experiences?

....

18. Is there a structural unit within your institution that would help the academic personnel teaching digitally?

1. Yes, there is;

2. No, there is not.

19. What has helped the most to improve the quality of online teaching in the last semester?

(You can select 3 most influential factors)

1. Local and international trainings and meetings on the subject of online teaching;
2. Sharing experience with colleagues, the possibilities to exchange knowledge;
3. Rectors' conference/HEI network cooperation;
4. Reflecting on the needs of online teaching and the resources present in the institution;
5. Instrumental use of self-evaluation that leads to the possibility of assessing the goals and indicators outlined in the institutional strategic document;
6. Other ....

20. To what extent do you offer the following student services?

Answers: 1. across the whole institution, 2. in several departments, 3. through several programs, 4. not offering or planning to, 5. not yet, but planning to offer in the upcoming year

Aspects:

1. Enrolling master students online (registration, interviews, etc.);
2. Enrolling doctoral students online (registration, interviews, etc.);
3. Registering students on programs/years of study online;
4. Individual online learning platform/portal for students;
5. Online preparatory courses for prospective students;
6. Online self-evaluation instrument for prospective students.

21. Please, name a type of activity (other than financial) that would help the institution advance their practices of online teaching and learning:

....

22. Please, name your institution:

....

23. Indicate your e-mail below:

....