GUIDANCE for the Georgian National Center for Educational Quality Enhancement and Georgian Higher Education Institutions considering the development and delivery of online and/or blended education

EVALUATION CRITERIA AND GUIDELINES ON ONLINE AND/OR BLENDED TEACHING AND LEARNING

applicable in the Georgian higher education context

Document prepared by contract with EMWI/USAID, in collaboration with NCEQE.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In August 2020, the Georgian National Centre for Educational Quality Enhancement (NCEQE) announced a call for an assignment to assist it in developing "***Evaluation criteria and guidelines on online and/or blended teaching and learning*** that will guide institutions in maintaining quality of online and/or blended teaching and learning in post-COVID period and/or when resuming studies from the next semester".

The detail of the call guided the direction of this report and its recommendations:
"The developed product should…provide guidance to experts and institutions on evaluating institutional strategies to support innovation and online mode of teaching and learning…"

Throughout the world, the COVID-19 pandemic has created challenges at all levels of society; higher education in Georgia is no exception. As in other countries, the shift to online modes of delivery has created immediate challenges and also concerns in relation to the quality of online and blended learning.

This project, initiated by NCEQE with the support of EWMI/USAID is timely; higher education and quality assurance will operate in a new context in the future and the project provides an opportunity to step back and think about what that future may look like and what it may hold. Certainly both higher education and its quality assurance must be flexible enough to take account of that new context.

This report sets out the results of discussions and information gathered during the course of the project. It makes recommendations at an overarching level and at the level of detail of the Georgian national Authorisation Standards. It also proposes some interim steps to be considered in advance of any decision or legislation in relation to online/blended teaching and learning in Georgia.

The authors of this report would like to thank all those who assisted them during the project, in particular the staff of EMWI/USAID and NCEQE, the institutional representatives and the students who so willingly gave up their time to talk to us and who engaged in open and interesting debate with us.

PART ONE

1.1. Introduction

In August 2020, the Georgian National Centre for Educational Quality Enhancement announced a call for an assignment to assist it in developing "***Evaluation criteria and guidelines on online and/or blended teaching and learning*** that will guide institutions in maintaining quality of online and/or blended teaching and learning in post-COVID period and/or when resuming studies from the next semester".

The detail of the call guided the direction of this report and its recommendations:
"The developed product should…provide guidance to experts and institutions on evaluating institutional strategies to support innovation and online mode of teaching and learning…"

The detail of the call was supplemented by regular meetings with NCEQE and its partner, EWMI. The focus of the project was the *Authorisation Standards for Higher Education Institutions* and the outcome would be a report that made recommendations and suggestions for further consideration by NCEQE, the Georgian Ministry for Education and the Georgian higher education sector.

Following discussion with NCEQE and also with groups of staff and students from a range of HEIs in Georgia, including the Internal Quality Assurance Working Group, this report offers recommendations and suggestions in two parts:

- **Part 1** of the report contains overarching suggestions and recommendations that are intended for the consideration of NCEQE, the Ministry and institutional management teams;
- **Part 2** of this report contains more detailed suggestions and recommendations in relation to each of the authorisation standards.

All recommendations have the twin focus of programme delivery and its evaluation.

1.2. Context

Throughout the world, the COVID-19 pandemic has created challenges at all levels of society; higher education in Georgia is no exception. As in other countries, the shift to online modes of delivery has created immediate challenges and also concerns in relation to the quality of online and blended learning. The rapidity with which HEIs were forced to react led to a situation that has been less than optimal due to the overwhelming need to continue to provide higher education and assessment for registered students. Such a situation has not allowed universities to exploit the potential benefits of different modes of teaching, learning and assessment. The continuing uncertainty means there is little time to reflect on what has happened, to distinguish between the benefits and challenges and to plan appropriately for the future.

The NCEQE initiative to provide guidance for its HE sector is timely and to be welcomed. Its intention to provide support for the future of online and/or blended learning and its quality assurance aims to ensure that the Georgian HE sector is well-placed to take full advantage of what has been tested during Covid-19 and is prepared for the next phase of HE in these uncertain times both nationally and as part of the international HE arena.

This global context and how HE responds to it is important in two respects:

i)   There is an immediate impact of COVID-19 on higher education in the form of a forced increase in online and blended teaching and learning and the subsequent impact on the national and institutional criteria and guidance for quality.

ii)   At the same time, there is international agreement that the *principles* on which QA of HE is based remain essentially unchanged; attention must rather be focused on their application and on how evidence to support adherence to the principles is sought and provided.

In Europe, there is agreement that the ESG 2015 provide a solid basis on which to build guidance for QA of on-line and blended learning and to consider what additional or revised criteria are needed. This is in line with the ESG statement that its standards cover all HE, "…regardless of the <u>mode of study</u> or place of delivery." *(ESG 2015: Scope and Concepts).*

HEIs have been forced to react to the current crisis with haste, both in terms of delivery and of QA of that delivery. In many countries across the world, there has been neither the technology or the expertise to respond quickly and effectively in terms of quality assurance and both internal and external QA have been affected by the situation. Until very recently, on-line education was an option or a choice made by HEIs and students (for example, the introduction of MOOCs). The pandemic allowed no time for planning and development; instead, institutions and their students were thrown into a new world and had to cope accordingly. Of course, it is crucial that QA continues to function in the short term. However, there is also now an opportunity to reconsider how international and national standards and criteria might function in the medium to long term.

Moving forward, higher education and quality assurance will operate in a new context and there is an opportunity to step back and think about the future. Quality assurance must be flexible enough to take account of that new context. The maintenance of standards and the quality of the student experience will still be of central importance, but how criteria and guidance are applied may differ depending on whether a programme is wholly on-line, blended or face-to-face.

The same applies to EQA methodologies: they too may be wholly online, blended or face-to-face and different QA agencies in the EHEA will take different approaches. National criteria and guidance will still need to be able to demonstrate alignment with the ESG, regardless of the national EQA approach and methodology.

This report, therefore, aims, as far as possible, to provide recommendations that will be useful in a rapidly changing and unstable context.

1.3.   Scope

It is important to state that the scope of this report and its recommendations goes beyond the immediate context of the COVID-19 pandemic. It looks to provide recommendations and suggestions that address the following:

1. What has changed in the short, medium and long term?
2. What do we need to do in the short, medium and long term to a) cope with the current situation; b) continue to maintain high standards for teaching and learning and c) seek to benefit from the potential offered by a new set of parameters for the delivery of HE?

The report aims to acknowledge change in the short, medium and long term, with a view to ensuring that NCEQE and Georgian HEIs have a framework of criteria and guidance that will endure and be sustainable in the face of any future changes.

The report aims to deliver overarching recommendations and suggested additions to the Authorisation Standards and Criteria that are:

a) Flexible enough to be used in different circumstances and in different approaches;
b) Provide guidance that will help HEIs demonstrate how they are meeting the criteria, regardless of their institutional approach to delivery;
c) Will allow NCEQE flexibility in the future if it wishes to develop its EQA methodology for institutional assessment (possibly also in blended mode).

In short, the report aims to deliver recommendations on standards and criteria and guidance to HEIs that acknowledge change in the short, medium and long term, with a view to ensuring that NCEQE and Georgian HEIs have a framework that will endure and be sustainable in the face of any future changes.

1.4.   Methodology

The key aspects of the methodology used to arrive at the conclusions in this report were:

- A review of documentation, including that provided by NCEQE which directly informed the project of the current context in Georgia, and also a wider scanning of the international environment to allow the project to be informed by the European/global perspective;
- Collection of data, through four focus groups representing key Georgian stakeholders: students, teaching staff, senior management staff and senior QA staff through the Internal Quality Assurance Working Group constituted of representatives from a wide range of HEIs. Multiple interactions throughout the project with staff from NCEQE allowed for relevant adjustments to be made.
- A table of results was used to cross-reference the comments that were heard from each group with the Authorisation Standards.

1.5.   Key themes

The recommendations set out below are based on information gleaned from information and documentation on an evaluation by NCEQE on the impact of COVID-19 on Georgian HE and also on the output of the four focus groups that were held during the course of the project.

Both of these sources of information revealed positive and negative outcomes from the emergency response period in the second semester of 2019-20. They also pointed to a perceived stagnation in the first semester of 2020-21 and pointed to the kind of action needed to ensure that the Georgian HE sector is able to move forward into the medium and longer term in a planned, strategic and effective way that will benefit not only the HE sector but also society at large.

- A willingness to engage, across the HE sector, very rapidly, in what was a new situation and which involved the need for staff to rapidly upskill to maintain delivery of education to students
- The crisis has highlighted the potential for a more international education that is accessible to a greater number of potential students
- Students acknowledged the support and effort made by academic staff, many of whom lacked experience in on-line delivery
- Staff acknowledged the support and help they received from the MoE and NCEQE
- In some cases, the emergency response was beneficial and resulted in, for example, better attendance and student engagement and better end of term papers.

All of these have created a solid base on which to build a sustainable response to the crisis and some clear directions are highlighted for the medium and longer term.

Negatives outcomes from the emergency response to COVID-19:

- A lack of strategic initiatives and planning at institutional level
- Stress and workload have increased for staff; this impacts on their ability to participate fully in training and quality assurance activities
- The impact on programmes of study that are practical/lab-based or require clinical or other placements
- The need to reconsider research projects within new parameters
- The QA of online TLA is not happening at the moment. There has been an impact on the assessment and achievement of learning outcomes, for example, due to the fact that programmes were not designed to be delivered online.

Summary of key themes

The positive and negative outcomes of the emergency period as described above, both point to a set of circumstances that, according to feedback, now need to be resolved and exploited in order to move forward into the next phase of planning. Like many other countries, Georgia remains in a state of uncertainty in relation to the pandemic. This makes planning and action very difficult as there will always be a tendency to remain on 'stand-by mode' in case there is any possibility that things will go back to 'normal.' However, such a stance does not allow for exploitation of the good that has come out of the recent situation; nor does it allow for concrete planning to take place, thus creating the sensation of a vacuum.

Currently, the Georgian HE sector is in what might be termed a 'transition phase.' Staff and students have become accustomed to the technology and have worked through many of the issues that the crisis threw up. However, there is a danger that a prolonged trading on goodwill, without concrete decision-making or planning will lead to uncertainty and burn-out, without having capitalised on opportunities.

In Georgia, as in other countries around the world, the following themes have been thrown into relief:

- That we are all at a moment when there is an opportunity for real change. COVID-19 has been a catalyst for looking beyond the response to an emergency and considering the national role for higher education and what the role of a higher education should be in the future.

- That this is an opportunity for clear thinking about the future of higher education.
- This opportunity for strategic thinking will change the relationship between HEIs, ministries and agencies. The importance of the links between internal and external quality assurance and the further development of relationships with external stakeholders (including the NCEQE) cannot be underestimated.
- A clear idea at national level of strategic direction is essential in order to determine the detail of the kind of support and guidance that is necessary to achieve change.
- This development of a new relationship between stakeholders must encourage change at the national, legislative level. Without this, it will be impossible for institutions to develop their pedagogical strategies.
- A one-size fits all approach will not work for all HE or for its QA&E. Programmes that have a practical/performance/lab-based/clinical element will not easily fit into one overarching structure.
- In Georgia, online learning and its QA is emerging. Being able to offer an education experience in response to a crisis is far from real, planned flexible online or blended learning.

1.6.   Overarching recommendations

The following overarching recommendations are made in the spirit of assisting the MoE, NCEQE and the Georgian HE sector to address the key themes highlighted above. They are made in the spirit of improvement and are open to discussion and revision by all stakeholders to make them as useful and relevant to the Georgian national context.

1. We recommend that a forum for discussion amongst the key stakeholders (MoE, institutions and NCEQE) be created with a view to agreeing on the strategic direction of HE in Georgia for the medium and long term. This forum for discussion should set formal timelines for its discussion and decision-making and have, as its goal, an action plan to carry forward its resolutions.

2. We recommend that all types of institutions should be involved in these discussions to ensure that those offering education that is clinical, performance-related or laboratory-based have a voice.

3. We recommend that the outcomes of the discussions detailed under Recommendation 1 above should lead to institutions being able to focus on the kind of support and development that is needed for the future delivery and internal quality assurance of their programmes. The current document can support this activity.

4. We recommend that NCEQE should be in a position to begin to revise and develop its external QA standards and processes in line with the national strategic direction. The current document will underpin this activity.

5. We recommend that the suggested additions to the current authorisation standards should be considered as a starting point for any future decisions on support, training and development for delivery of online and/or blended learning and for their quality assurance.

1.7.   Proposed Steps for Implementation

As with any change in national strategy for higher education, a sudden, insufficiently planned-for shift to the encouragement to offer online/blended provision would be counterproductive.

A trusted digital education ecosystem (at both national and institutional level) requires well-designed and high-quality content, user-friendly tools, clear added value and secure platforms that maintain privacy and uphold ethical standards. It also requires a continued level of national and public trust in the higher education system and its outcomes,

In line with the Georgian context that currently allows blended learning but with very little provision offered in that mode, and in line with the first recommendation of this report (above) a process of risk assessment and assurance of the maintenance of quality will be of the utmost importance to the Ministry of Education (MoE), NCEQE, higher education institutions (HEIs) and students. As this report identifies, the introduction of online and blended learning can highlight both opportunities and challenges; for example, it could be seen to open up accessibility to students who do not live in proximity to a higher education institution. It also facilitates international input into programmes. However, in Georgia, is has also been noted that inequality and exclusion from higher education have increased during the crisis. This social dimension is a key theme of the Bologna Process and, as such, must be taken into consideration by all countries in the EHEA.

Therefore, this report suggests that, before any legislation is debated or passed in relation to permitting further consideration of online/blended teaching and learning, a number of steps will need to be considered by the MoE/Government, in collaboration with NCEQE and the higher education sector, in order to mitigate any imminent risk, especially one resulting from a false sense of comfort/competence with online delivery as resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic emergency response.

These can include the following (with the suggested order below):

- **STEP 1: A risk assessment** of the different scenarios (e.g. online, blended etc) across the entire HE sector should be conducted to identify realistic risk as compared to perceived benefits and to allow for full consideration of mitigating factors and how resource-intensive these may be;

- **STEP 2:** Before any decision regarding legislation is taken, the undertaking of **research or environmental scanning** to ensure that there is interest from students and employers for online/blended learning in Georgia and/or that this mode of delivery fills a need/gap that cannot be addressed otherwise or is better, more efficiently addressed through online/blended delivery.

- **STEP 3:** Any needs/interests analysis would need to be supplemented by **activities of awareness-raising** to ensure that any expression of interest is the result of a well-informed position. As such, prospective students need to fully understand the details of such a set-up (with benefits and drawbacks), and employers need to be prepared to accept students from this mode of delivery as having comparable competences to those who have completed programmes face-to-face;

- **STEP 4:** In addition, before any decision is taken, NCEQE should develop and conduct a **pilot methodology** for the quality assurance of online/blended learning. This should be carried out with a small number of volunteer HEIs and should involve the use of the augmented authorisation standards suggested in this report;

- **STEP 5:** Following any agreement that online/blended learning will be possible and encouraged, any HEI wishing to offer such provision should undertake a **probationary period** during which their online/blended provision is monitored. This probationary and monitoring process should be developed and organised by NCEQE, in line with any arrangements for or outcomes from the pilots, in order that it can provide advice and reassurance to the Ministry.

- **STEP 6:** An initial **focus on blended rather than fully online provision** to allow for a gradual accumulation of experience could also be beneficial and reduce some of the risk associated exclusively with online education.

PART TWO

2.1. Key Summary Considerations for Specific Authorisation Criteria for Institutions with Online and/or Blended Provision

This Guidance acknowledges that Georgian legislation allows for blended teaching and learning, but does not allow for full online delivery. It also recognises that no HEI has taken up and developed blended programmes so far, which means that experience of online and/or blended is completely lacking in the Georgian HE context. As such, a staged approach (involving piloting, see above 1.7) can protect the public interest, and will allow for various models to be trailed and reassurances to be gained before full approvals are granted, via specific legislation.

The specific criteria below are designed as **baseline** QA requirements for developing and delivering online and blended approaches by HEIs, comparable with international practices.

For Government/Agency:

This Guidance presupposes that HEIs in Georgia will be encouraged to strategically decide for and organise online and/or blended approaches. As such, for this Guidance to become applicable, there needs to be legislation approved by the Georgian Government to grant permission for online HE delivery and/or more support for blended HE.

For HEIs:

As HEIs in Georgia have not taken any prior opportunities to consider implementing online and/or blended education, some key considerations will be imperative in embarking on this route.
The below are mandatory and cumulative.

Important Point 1: HEIs must make clear differentiation between digitalisation of various practices, including support services, and online and/or blended approaches to programme delivery.
The HEI must be clear on whether:
1. It is digitising its activities, i.e. uses more ICT-enhanced practices, including options for online communication/interaction with stakeholders, or
2. It is adopting (as part of its mission) online and/or blended approaches to programme delivery. Such a decision needs to realistically evaluate the required level of investment (time, effort, money) versus the targeted institutional gains (budgetary, sector positioning, societal, reputational).

Important Point 2: HEIs must make clear distinction between fully online and blended approaches. Online and blended are not to be regarded as interchangeable.
The programmes for which the HEI decides delivery through online means/with online support must clearly articulate whether the approach taken is fully online or blended, and plan/develop accordingly, with relevant synchronous/asynchronous, classroom-based/virtual TLA activities.
There can be multiple scenarios all of which require distinct consideration:
- A programme is offered in both fully face-to-face modes for a group of students and fully online to a different group of students. These are to be treated as different programme paths with different/specific implementation modes, in spite of the same learning outcomes being targeted.

- A programme contains both face-to-face and online elements for the same group of students. Delivery is mixed between face-to-face components and online components and this is dictated by relevance and appropriateness in respect the content/activities being proposed.
- A programme is offered face-to-face for some students and streamed online (in real-time) for a different group of students. This model may have been applied under Covid-19 conditions, but poses major issues and may result in acute dissatisfactions.

Important Point 3: HEIs must not confuse the Covid-19 emergency response where face-to-face delivery was mainly transposed into online/synchronous activities with a fully-fledged (appropriately planned, effectively implemented and adequately supported) online approach. There has to be clear recognition of the fact that the mode of delivery (and its degree of acceptability for staff and students) during the pandemic was an attempt to maintain educational activities during a crisis situation but that it may not resemble successful online and/or blended TLA experiences; and that its alleged success may be attributed to staff and students goodwill/commitment towards their educational goals, and their lack of understanding/experience of online delivery methodologies. Consequently, what may be deemed effective emergency response does not have the potential to automatically morph into online-appropriate delivery, and is unlikely to be sustainable. Any evaluation of the rapid transition to online delivery due to Covid-19 will, likely, have been skewed (demonstrating positive bias) by contextual factors such as increased tolerance towards underperformance and increased availability to compromise while relying on the restrictive temporality of any crisis to eventually pass.

Important Point 4: HEIs need to devote full consideration and dedicated effort to developing specific, stand-alone policies and procedures to accommodate online and/or blended education. Reliance on existing policies and procedures may prove ineffective, initially, as stakeholders come to terms with the differences in approaches required to deliver and support online and/or blended education. Subsequently (i.e. after at least one complete quality cycle), the HEI may want to embed online and/or blended TLA specific policies and procedures into broader structural/operational patterns.
Important Point 5: HEIs will need to consider meeting the specific criteria outlined below irrespective of the size of their proposed online and/or blended provision offering, i.e. if an institution decides to go fully online; if an institution decides for the majority of its provision to be online and/or blended; if an institution decides for a only a restrictive number of programmes to adopt an online and/or blended delivery approach; or if an institution decides to take a parallel approach with programmes being offered both in an online variant and face-to-face.

2.2. Options for Usage of the Specific Authorisation Criteria for Institutions with Online and/or Blended Provision

The specific criteria and guidelines presented below in table format may serve multiple purposes.

Prime usage options:

- To allow NCEQE to consider and propose final threshold (minimum) QA requirements for online and/or blended delivery by Georgian HEIs
- To allow HEIs to understand minimum requirements for implementing online and/or blended education and to decide if this is something they want to consider strategically, and what likely timeline they need to allow for successful delivery
- To allow students and other stakeholders to understand how online and/or blended education needs to be designed and delivered.

- To allow the MoE to understand minimum requirements for online and/or blended education and design support mechanisms for HEIs considering implementing such delivery
- To allow the MoE, together with NCEQE and HEIs, to agree on piloting requirements based on the quality elements which need to be in place before full approval is granted through legislation.
- To support the development of a pilot methodology for external QA assessments in support of a fuller decision regarding renewed legislation.

Secondary usage options:

- To allow HEIs to relate their current Covid-19 response to priorities for online education and calibrate resources and actions accordingly.
- To create a basis for developing a recognition model for online/blended education delivered outside of Georgia.

IMPORTANT: The principle purpose for these criteria and guidelines is not directly for the external QA evaluation of Covid-19 emergency responses across the Georgian HE sector. However, with the appropriate level of adjustment, they can serve also this purpose.

2.3. Specific Authorisation Criteria for HEIs with Online and/or Blended Provision

The NCEQE Authorisation Standards for Higher Education Institutions apply to all types of provision, including so as to ensure the quality of online and/or blended delivery. The Standards comply with the European Higher Education Area requirements and are non-modifiable for online and/or blended education. The general criteria as set out alongside the description hold true and are fully applicable for online and/or blended TLA, and HEIs must demonstrate compliance accordingly. Additionally, if online and/or blended education is being offered the specific criteria highlighted below need to be observed and HEIs must demonstrate full understanding and consideration of these requirements within their internal structures so as to be externally evaluated as compliant.

1. Mission and strategic development of HEI
Mission statement of a HEI defines its role and place within higher education area and broader society. Directions for strategic development plan of HEI corresponds with the mission of an institution, are based on the goals of the institution and describe means for achieving these goals.
1.1. Mission of HEI
Specific Criteria for Online and/or blended Provision: • The ambitions for online and/or blended education are realistic in the context of the HEI's national and international standing. • The rationale for choosing online and/or blended TLA (alongside or over face-to-face arrangements) as the option for delivery of various programmes is clearly articulated and aligns with the mission of the HEI. • There is clear understanding and explicit consideration of how online and/or blended programmes serve the mission of the HEI.

1.2 Strategic Development

Specific Criteria for Online and/or blended Provision:

- There is a clear distinction (through strategic consideration) between increased digitalisation of activities across the institution (i.e. more ICT-enhanced activities) and online and/or blended programme delivery (i.e. an explicit offer of online and/or blended TLA experience for students and staff).
- There is an explicit strategic decision by the HEI about online and/or blended delivery which will have been reached by full consideration of all implications at academic, scientific and administrative levels (including a risk analysis and financial capacity) and in consultation with the wide-reaching stakeholder groups. There is a clear rationale for such a decision and full alignment with the mission. Any operational implementation plans need to be realistically set out and effectively communicated across all stakeholder groups (but most importantly students and staff involved in such delivery).
- Communication of such strategic direction needs to be effective and to involve all stakeholders which have a direct contribution to the online and/or blended TLA experience.
- Strategic development and action plans specifically include action lines which consider the specific needs (planning, investment, support, quality assurance and enhancement) for online and/or blended delivery. Action lines focusing on online and/or blended TLA need to acknowledge the implications and ramifications/interdependencies across all areas of activity proposed by the HEI to ensure that all operations are appropriately calibrated to sustain online and/or blended delivery. All aspects vital to the operation of an institution will need to be scrutinized (and subsequently developed) for online and/or blended delivery appropriateness.
- Strategic documentation clearly stipulates the allocation of appropriate human, information and material resources which support the specificities of online and/or blended delivery requirements. Resources are earmarked and compatible with online and/or blended developments.
- Strategic documentation clearly states the level of institutional prioritization (e.g. through a priority matrix of strategic directions/action lines) for online and/or blended developments, i.e. any strategic documents will need to explicitly indicate the level of priority online and/or blended initiatives will take over other activities so that there is clear direction for decision-making structures.
- Specific policies addressing online and/or blended TLA need to be designed as stand-alone, initially when online and/or blended delivery is introduced, and embedded in broader policy, subsequently once online and/or blended delivery becomes a constant/habitual feature of the institutional portfolio.

Guidance Note: Attempting to use existing policies to also regulate online and/or blended delivery without devoting specific policy documentation to cover such initiatives may prove less effective and will reduce the impact and the speed with which change can be embraced by stakeholders. Initially, on introduction of such initiative, clear distinct policy is required to focus attention of stakeholders to the specificities they are likely to be confronted with; subsequently, when the online and/or blended components have been through at least one cycle of monitoring and evaluation, the HEI may consider bringing specific online and/or blended policies into broader overarching institutional policies, eventually embedding in full the online and/or blended element.

- Other institutional policies need to be updated to account for the implications of online and/or blended delivery and to ensure alignment with specific needs emerging from the strategic transition to online and/or blended TLA experiences.

Guidance Note: Clear and explicit statements need to be made about online and/or blended requirements where these will impact the planning and implementation of operational activities at the HEI. It may prove less effective to rely on existing systems/structures to identify specific needs for online and/or blended education without dedicated policy specifications to highlight such needs.

- There needs to be a clear understanding (and explicit delineation) of the impact of the transition to online and/or blended delivery also for societal developments and support of lifelong learning activities.

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

Specific Criteria for Online and/or blended Provision:
- Online and/or blended TLA requirements need to be identified and appropriately embedded throughout the organisational structure (e.g. mirrored in committee membership/representation, updated in ToRs and on standing agendas) to ensure parity of consideration with presential delivery modes. Clear functions and responsibilities need to be attributed for the management of online and/or blended delivery structures.
- Decision-making at all levels will need to duly consider the level of priority attributed strategically, at institutional level, to online and/or blended TLA developments.

2.2 Internal quality assurance mechanisms

Specific Criteria for Online and/or blended Provision:
- HEIs should have in place arrangements to specifically evaluate online and/or blended TLA and its support mechanisms. Where necessary, these will differ to standard QA tools for face-to-face education. As such, there will be QA instruments which may need adjustments, repurposing or entirely new development to ensure the specificities of online and/or blended programme delivery are captured relevantly.
- QA staff dealing with online and/or blended programmes need to be adequately trained to be able to differentiate between QA&E operations for face-to-face, blended or online education.
- Performance evaluation systems for staff (academic, scientific, invited, administrative, support) need to be relevantly modified to ensure the specificities of online and/or blended delivery requirements are adequately accounted for.
- The planning of the student body for online and/or blended education must consider the limitation of this environment to ensure that educational quality is comparable in impact (not delivery) with presential experiences. Relevant indicators and benchmarks need to be specifically developed for online and/or blended delivery.

2.3 Observing principles of ethics and integrity

Specific Criteria for Online and/or blended Provision:
- The HEI needs to provide clear stipulations about acceptable online behaviour for its students.
- The Codes of Ethics and Academic Integrity clearly define expectations of academic integrity in the context of online and/or blended TLA, contain specific regulations regarding online and/or blended delivery (which consider the challenges of online and/or blended contexts) and clearly stipulate what constitute violations of such regulations and consequences/ penalties to be expected.

Guidance Note: Regular training should promote better understanding of challenges posed by online and/or blended interactions and offer models for compliance in support of developing academic conduct.

- The HEI must clarify aspects regarding intellectual property rights for content being used in online media and/or posted to the VLE. Copyright protection in instances of electronic dissemination should be promoted (what is allowed and what not).
- The HEI must clarify data protection requirements for synchronous activities which may be subject to recording (when and how is this appropriate, and when not).

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

Specific Criteria for Online and/or blended Provision:
- Design and development of online and/or blended programmes follow principles and practices specific for online or blended delivery, respectively. Aspects relating to flexibility and accessibility of learning opportunities across all student groups are given specific attention.

Guidance Note: There is no confusion about the fact that Covid-19 emergency response cannot constitute an appropriate means of delivering online and/or blended education and, whereas HEIs ca build on the lessons learned, institutions should distinctly plan for online and/or blended education once a strategic decision has been reached. This entails that HEIs do not carry on with the model implemented during the pandemic crisis unless this has been amply scrutinized for relevance in the context of online and/or blended delivery.
- Online and/or blended programmes should follow a normal planning route and should be allocated ample time to be implemented.
- The HEI needs to acknowledge and allow for differentiated planning paths for the two modes, even when the intention is for the same programme to be offered and delivered both face-to-face and online. Standard decision-making processes will apply for both initiatives and these should not be conflated.

Guidance Note: It can prove risky to leap into a model where a programme continues in both face-to-face mode and online, following the pandemic crisis. If the HEI has the intention to offer both modes in parallel, the two should be treated as distinct design and development initiatives with proper consideration given to the needs they may serve, the investment required and the alignment to the mission. Assuming that staff who traditionally delivered the face-to-face programme can swiftly move into online delivery is problematic and will result in delivery challenges. Assuming that resources required are comparable in the two modes is also problematic and will result in delivery challenges. Assuming that streaming of face-to-face classes (with in-class cameras) to students enrolled on the online version of the programme can accommodate online training needs will result in dissatisfaction for both staff and students.
- Feedback should be collected explicitly for all programme delivery modes.

Guidance Note: Feedback on possible developments of structure and content received for one mode of delivery will not necessarily be transferable to the other.
- The HEI ensures that on approval it has considered sustainability risks for online and/or blended programmes and, especially, where a decision is taken to run the same programme with in both online and face-to-face variants.
- Programme closure policies need to be amended to accommodate online and/or blended specificity.

Guidance Note: The HEI must acknowledge that closure of one mode of delivery does not automatically mean that students can and will move to the other mode. There are multiple challenges with any closure and clear steps to protect students affected need to planned, with online and/or blended programmes falling under regulations which consider their specificity.

3.2 Structure and content of educational programmes

Specific Criteria for Online and/or blended Provision:
- Whereas the structure and learning outcomes can be replicated across face-to-face and online and/or blended programmes, the resources used (including VLE platforms and web-based collaborative tools), the teaching methods (type of interactivity), the accessibility considerations are very different. A meaningful distribution between synchronous and asynchronous T&L needs to be established, the volume of which must be carefully planned. A clear identification of specific challenges for online and/or blended delivery needs to guide the planning and delivery processes.
- Presentation of structural units is consistent across the various programme components to ensure ease of navigation for the students.
- The structure allows for flexibility and modularity, and promotes stackability of various structural units in composing the overarching entity of the programme.
- Where the programme requires credited work-based experiences (internships or placement) and professionally-oriented learning (simulations, projects etc), it is important to distinguish between the options available in face-to-face encounters and those adequate for online delivery.

Guidance Note: Clearly there will be programmes (medical/health, arts etc) where online professionally-based learning may prove unsatisfactory to achieve the desired learning outcomes. Such programmes may possibly only accommodate a blended approach.
- Compulsory resources need to be made available through mechanisms compatible with the mode of delivery. E-resources need to be appropriately licensed and sufficient in number.

Guidance Note: Practices such as scanning or photocopying whole books need to be discouraged through adequate policy stipulations.
- The delivery of content needs to consider specific teaching methodologies appropriate for the online environment and supported by adequate educational software applications. The virtual learning environment (VLE) of the institution needs to facilitate synchronous and asynchronous delivery methodologies.
- The content developed and uploaded onto the VLE needs to be duly protected for copyright. The HEI needs to provide policy stipulations in regards intellectual property rights for the content being uploaded (who retains copyright – staff member, HEI or public)
- The content adapted from existing online resources needs to abide by principles of responsible use for Open Educational Resources (OER) which may be subject to different types of Creative Commons (CC) licenses. The HEI needs to provide policy stipulations to ensure that good practices are promoted in the use of OER and CC, with permissions being clearly defined.
- Online and/or blended delivery relies heavily on digital competencies. Specific training needs to be offered to allow for ICT skills development by staff and students so that they may engage effectively with the programme content and underpinning technology.
- Information on programmes as marketed by the institution will attribute clear differentiation between face-to-face and online and/or blended modes highlighting the specificities of each in terms of availability/accessibility, delivery, assessments and overall graduation expectations.

3.3 Assessment of learning outcomes

Specific Criteria for Online and/or blended Provision:
- The HEI needs to have developed assessments appropriate for online and/or blended implementation, and to be using tools which support effective assessment arrangements for online assessments.

Guidance Note: Assessments for online and/or blended programmes/modules cannot be replicated from face-to-face assessments. Online and/or blended education will require more formative assessments and different types of summative assessments than appropriate for face-to-face learning.

- The HEI needs to recognize that there will be different ethical challenges with online assessments, which need proper stipulations.
- Equality and fairness needs to be achieved frequently through different mechanisms than what is appropriate for face-to-face learning.
- The appeal system needs to contain regulations specifically addressing online and/or blended educational needs.
- Where work-based learning is credited and contributes directly to overarching programme learning outcomes, assessment models from such experiences need to be adjusted to allow for accurate and reliable assessment.

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, research, creative, performing activities 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

Specific Criteria for Online and/or blended Provision:
- Staff engaged in online and/or blended T&L must be recruited with the relevant experience and competence and/or be trained accordingly. Job descriptions must clearly stipulate where an online and/or blended component is expected and what requirements are essential and/or desirable for such a role.

Guidance Note: The HEI must distinguish by role what qualifications staff need to have on recruitment and what expertise they can gain or be trained for after recruitment.
- The HEI must allow staff migrating from face-to-face delivery to online and/or blended delivery the time and resources to upskill and reskill to allow for appropriate online and/or blended delivery to take place.
- The HEI must organise specific training to develop digital competences, online pedagogies and familiarisation with specific educational IT tools which support online delivery. The HEI must closely monitor participation of staff involved in online delivery to ensure appropriate development of knowledge, understanding and skills in relation to the effective use of online educational environments.

Guidance Note: The continuous professional development/training requirements of staff need to align with the institutional continuous professional development plan which must be strategically-driven and relevantly monitored to ensure objectives are met in a timely and coordinated manner.
- Performance reviews of staff engaged in online and/or blended delivery adequately take account of the specificities of this medium and duly consider the challenges staff are facing.
- The HEI employs clear benchmarks of quality for performance which are applied differentially by delivery mode so as to pertinently evaluate levels of satisfaction and identify development needs.

4.2. Academic/Scientific and Invited Staff Workload

Specific Criteria for Online and/or blended Provision:
- The HEI must ensure the use of a workload matrix which accounts adequately for all planning and preparation time for online and/or blended delivery, including for asynchronous activities, not just synchronous.

Guidance Note: The time needed for preparation of materials for asynchronous and synchronous activities in online delivery is demonstrated to exceed the time spent for preparation of face-to-face activities.

- The HEI must ensure that continuous professional development training is adequately captured in the workload model, for both its own and invited/associated staff.

Guidance Note: Workload should be captured realistically for staff engaged in online and/or blended delivery, including time for continuous professional development regarding online environments/models of interaction, otherwise the HEI runs the risk of staff eventually becoming overworked and less motivated.

- The HEI actively monitors the psychological wellbeing of staff and ensures psychological counselling is available where staff may be struggling with the dynamics of the online environment (e.g. symptoms of digital fatigue).

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

Specific Criteria for Online and/or blended Provision:
- The HEI needs to amply consider the needs of students when enrolling them on the various programmes. Students with disabilities and/or from low-income backgrounds may require reasonable adjustments to be made in respect online and/or blended delivery.
- Admission processes need to be clearly separated for online and face-to-face programmes, ensuring that students understand the specificities of delivery if they opt for an online variant and that they have the minimum technology skills and equipment required.
- The contract between the HEI and the student clearly stipulates if the delivery mode is intended to be online, i.e. if the student has followed the enrollment for and was admitted to an online programme, and will protect the student from any subsequent changes the HEI may be inclined to make in respect its online delivery (i.e. change from online to blended, change from online to face-to-face).

5.2 Student support services

Specific Criteria for Online and/or blended Provision:
- Support services need to be well calibrated to allow for adequate support to be offered equally to all students (full-time, part-time and distance learning).
- All support services need to be available at the same level of competence and professionalism to all students, including distance-learning students.
- The HEI offers reasonable adjustments and additional support mechanisms for students from low-income backgrounds and/or students with disabilities enrolled on online programmes.

Guidance Note: Students struggling with accessibility requirements (internet connection, laptop/tablet etc) will find it difficult to maintain an adequate level of engagement with an online programme (but also with a blended programme).

- The HEI ensures that students have permanent access to academic counselling (e.g. through personal tutoring/mentoring arrangements or other means) and that this is not restricted to engagement with the teacher delivering specific courses.
- The HEI recognizes the need for intensified technical support and puts in place relevant measures for distance-learning students and those on blended programmes to have adequate access to technical advice/training allowing them to engage with the online elements of their programme in a timely and effective manner.

- The HEI ensures that cooperation with employers is organized effectively also for online programmes, importantly for where such cooperation is directly relevant to the achievement of the learning outcomes, but also for enhancing employability opportunities for its students.
- The HEI ensures relevant international exposure for distance-learning students for whom the location of study may be culturally different to that of the HEI. Such opportunities are designed to consider the specific needs and accessibility requirements of distance-learning students.
- The HEI actively monitors the psychological wellbeing of students and ensures psychological counselling is available where students may be struggling with the dynamics of the online environment (e.g. pronounced feelings of isolation).
- Where possible, the HEI designs extracurricular activities (sports, arts, educational) for social interaction to allow for the appreciation and full participation of distance-learning students. If this cannot be achieved, such details are communicated as part of the admissions process to ensure that students' expectations are adequately set and that there are no misconceptions.

Guidance Note: Clearly, the online experience will be very different to an on-campus experience and students should be made aware of the differences. Considering that the Georgian context has not had any experience of online education, prior to the Covid-19 emergency response, it is imperative that expectations are set at the correct level to avoid subsequent disappointment by the student.

- Surveys conducted to measure the level of satisfaction of students will be adequately adjusted to ensure items specific for students on online and/or blended programmes are included, thus can be identified and given attention.

6. Research, development and/or other creative work
Higher Education Institution, considering its type and specifics of field(s), works on the strengthening of its research function, ensures proper conditions to support research activities and improve the quality of research activities.

6.1. Research Activities

Specific Criteria for Online and/or blended Provision:
- The HEI ensures it scrutinizes proposals for online-based research activities and determines from the outset if these are eligible for approval and what additional risks they may present.
- Where PhD research is conducted in distance/online mode, PhD students and supervisors are properly inducted into the technical platforms they will be using to develop the research collaboration.
- Policy requirements are set and stipulate the frequency and content of online interaction, and the options for recording relevant progress and/or outcomes.
- The HEI recognizes that online interaction may be more time-consuming and continuously monitors the workload of supervisors.

6.2. Research support and internationalization

Specific Criteria for Online and/or blended Provision:
- Where research is conducted in distance/online mode, the HEI ensures opportunities for internationalization and monitors the participation of PhD students, supervisors and researchers.

6.3. Evaluation of Research Activities

Specific Criteria for Online and/or blended Provision:
- Research activities in online mode are subject to continuous evaluation as part of the institutional QA system and specific challenges are highlighted and addressed.

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

7.1 Material resources

Specific Criteria for Online and/or blended Provision:
- The online infrastructure is considered mission-critical and given priority to maintain stability and accessibility.
- Access to computers/laptops and adequate broadband needs to be made available to staff and students. The HEI needs to have a systematic approach to identifying and resolving any issues of accessibility when online delivery is affected.
- The must be adequate back-up servers to allow for information stored on the VLE to be maintained and protected.
- There is a contingency plan for continuation of data centers and support services in case of prolonged service disruption.

7.2. Library resources

Specific Criteria for Online and/or blended Provision:
- HEIs must ensure students enrolled on online and/or blended programmes have access to relevant resources in electronic format, through means which are legislatively approved.

Guidance Note: Copyright legislation stipulates that scanning of whole books is illegal, as such scanning/photocopying beyond 10% is unacceptable. The HEI requires sufficient licenses/e-copies of books which can be accessed through specialised platforms so that students can lawfully access books.

7.3 Information Resources

Specific Criteria for Online and/or blended Provision:
- The HEI has a functional, well developed virtual learning environment (VLE) which is subject to regular maintenance and abides by data protection and intellectual property legislation.
- Dedicated software for online delivery must be available and needs to have sufficient number of licenses purchased.
- Dedicated technical staff supporting online and/or blended initiatives must offer an adequate level of support in a timely and accessible manner, for both students and staff.

7.4 Financial resources

Specific Criteria for Online and/or blended Provision:
- Appropriate financial resources must be specifically allocated for the implementation of online and/or blended initiatives. Such resources should be earmarked as part of strategic and budgetary planning, and constitute distinct budgetary items. Estimations for online and/or blended developments should be realistic and compatible with the financial possibilities/opportunities of the HEI.

Guidance Note: Online and/or blended Education requires a substantive level of specific investment, which should not be underestimated when the decision is reached to offer such education.
- Staff expected to access the online environment in an off-campus mode must be supported financially to cover costs of such interventions.

Conclusion

As is the case across the world, the detail of working through the implications of a sustained move towards on-line and/or blended learning (possibly alongside the more traditional face-to-face model of delivery) will require much further work and development.

We hope that this report will provide relevant guidance as to the kind of strategic/policy environment in which such changes can begin to flourish and also an indication of the areas in which, alongside colleagues internationally, the Georgian HE sector can begin to use its expertise and knowledge to further develop a sustainable model for future delivery and evaluation of teaching and learning.