

“Catch the Internationalization Train”: The Impact of Internationalization on Administrators’ Decision Making in Georgia

Elif Betul Erguvan*
Jacob Reid**

Abstract

Over the past few decades, education institutions have responded to the challenges and opportunities of globalization through the process of internationalization. This qualitative study explores how administrators in higher education institutions in the country of Georgia understand and practice internationalization. Though often overlooked in internationalization studies, administrators play a key role as interpreters of internationalization, government policies, and their institutional mission. Though respondents defined internationalization in a variety of ways, there was considerable overlap in practice. Their institutions employ several common tools of internationalization (e.g., exchange programs, collaborative research, benchmarking). Georgian administrators sought to enhance academic quality by facilitating an intercultural environment on the domestic campus, usually through mobility programs. HEIs in the study also use internationalization to evaluate their institutions, improve university practices, and compete more effectively. When making decisions, participants find themselves balancing government expectations, their university mission, and contextual constraints. Given Georgian universities’ high aspirations and limited budgets, it is recommended that administrators prioritize internationalization opportunities that can serve multiple purposes. It is also recommended that administrators consider ways to internationalize the curriculum and promote internationalization at home so that a wider array of students and staff can benefit from the university’s internationalization activities.

Key words: Georgia, internationalization of education, international education, higher education, mobility, administrator

1. Introduction

Before defining internationalization, it would be best to discuss the differences between globalization and internationalization. Despite the fact that the two concepts are commonly understood as the same thing, they actually differ in their contexts (Altbach & Knight, 2007). Globalization is related to the economic trends that emerged in 21st century while internationalization entails the approaches, policies and strategies institutions use to meet the demands and requirements of global world (Altbach & Knight, 2007). In short, internationalization is higher education’s response to globalization.

The internationalization of higher education institutions is a recent concept with political, academic and sociocultural elements and its influence differs in accordance with the nation’s or institution’s context and setting (de Wit & Altbach, 2021). In the 1970s, education included international components such as mobility, student exchange, multicultural education, and international studies. All these aspects were referred to as international education. However, the term internationalization became dominant in the 1990s and replaced all the terms related to international education (de Wit et al., 2015). Furthermore, increased commercialization of education due to the need to attract more students and enhance student mobility have challenged traditional views of education as a public service. Education administrators are contemplating how to balance ethical standards with the commercial aspect of higher education internationalization (de Wit et al., 2015).

* International Relations Office, International Black Sea University, Georgia

** Faculty of Education and Humanities, International Black Sea University, Georgia
Corresponding Email: eerguvan@ibsu.edu.ge

If universities include internationalization in their mission, it must be embraced and practiced at every level of the institution with the goal of enhancing the quality of education (Ota, 2018). Thus, internationalization is not limited to teaching and learning but also the enhancement of research and improvement of cross-border scholarship. Some institutional leaders mistakenly believe that comprehensive internationalization can be accomplished through the creation of an international office. But internationalization cannot be achieved by accretion—merely adding on international programs (Ota, 2018). Responding to the global demands requires education administrators and staff members to work hand in hand (Hudzik, 2015). Enhancing an institution's internationalization should not be the sole responsibility of the international relations office; it should be distributed throughout other departments as well. Therefore, higher education institutions should create a culture where individuals consistently articulate the mission and act with colleagues to achieve the university's internationalization goals (Hudzik, 2015).

Approaches to internationalization vary from country to country and from institution to institution (Knight, 2004). For instance, Qiang (2003, pp. 250–251) describes the activity approach (e.g., creation of mobility programs), the competency approach (developing internationalized curricula and programs to instill certain skills, knowledge and values), the ethos approach (applying organizational development theory to make internationalization part of the warp and woof of the institution), and the process approach (consciously integrating activities and policies to make internationalization coherent and sustainable).

Along with the growth of internationalization, two key terms have emerged: internationalization at home and internationalization abroad. Internationalization abroad is mainly understood as all the components related to cross-border activities such as staff and student mobility and exchange programs. On the other hand, internationalization at home adds global elements to the curriculum and promotes mutual understanding on the home campus (de Wit & Hunter, 2018). However, these are not completely distinct because internationalization at home may include intercultural elements while internationalization abroad may include curriculum-related components (de Wit & Hunter, 2018). Moreover, in light of the fact that not all the students have the opportunity to travel abroad, educators and education administrators started to put much more emphasis on internationalization at home by internationalizing the curriculum (Mittelmeier et al., 2021).

Brandenburg (2016) argues that studies and research carried out in the field mostly focus on students and academics and give less importance to the role of administrative staff. However, it is essential to mention the role of administration in implementing internationalization (Brandenburg, 2016). Research indicates that internationalization has an influence on university leaders' decision-making in a variety of ways. Though there are external pressures to internationalize, Renc-Roe and Roxå (2014) emphasize the agency of individual actors (including leaders and administrators) in interpreting and enacting internationalization based on their goals and local context. There are a variety of trends administrators may choose to follow (e.g., exchange programs) and tools administrators can use to accomplish their internationalization goals (Egron-Polak, 2012; Vitenko et al., 2017). Despite the fact that internationalization is required by the global world, concentrating too much on the internationalization process may endanger the traditional aims of education (Egron-Ploak, 2012). Therefore, university administrators must take into consideration both the threats and opportunities offered by internationalization as they seek to enhance the quality of education at their institutions (Egron-Polak, 2012). Such threats include commercialization of education and potential brain drain. Given the importance of internationalization and lack of attention to administrators in the literature, the manner and extent to which internationalization impacts administrators' decision making needs to be examined.

New requirements and competition challenge higher education institutions (HEIs) to establish more connections with other universities on the local, national and international level (Hayle, 2008). This is true in the country of Georgia where several studies have been conducted on the internationalization of higher education. Chokheli and Alpenidze (2015) investigated the strategies of internationalization in Georgian HE context and provided recommendations for further improvement. A study carried out by Campbell and Gorgodze (2016) explored the major influences of internationalization in Georgian HE both in national and

international levels. They analyzed the factors that shape internationalization as well the benefits of the concept. Another study conducted in 2016 discussed the challenges and opportunities of internationalization in Georgian higher education and provided background information about the concept (Zhvania, 2016). Chanadiri (2017) has discussed the importance of internationalization of Georgian higher education institutions and the connection between HEIs and tourism. He argued that internationalization is one of the main tools that would lead to engagement with other countries globally. Korghanashvili (2018) explored the major features and characteristics of internationalization of HE in Georgia and analyzed Georgian HE system in general. Nastase (2020) investigated the drivers for internationalization in Georgian Higher Education. She mainly discussed internationalization in Georgian HEIs and mentioned the drawbacks and challenges that other countries (EU, the USA and neighbouring countries) confronted. She also investigated the main challenges for Georgia in the process of internationalization in which it was discovered that the loss of Georgian language was considered to be one of the consequences (Nastase, 2020).

Even though there are various studies conducted on the internationalization of higher education in Georgia, a study focusing on the impact of internationalization on education administrators' decision-making is lacking. Internationalization in Georgian higher education has become a requirement according to the accreditation and authorization standards (National Center for Educational Quality Enhancement, 2020a; 2020b). Previously, administrators considered internationalization to be one option among many to enhance the quality of education, but now it has grown to be a must-have component in Georgian higher education institutions.

With enhanced competition among education institutions regarding the internationalization process, administrators confront challenges in balancing competing priorities and coping with pressures. It is important to see how administrators define and carry out internationalization in the Georgian context because conceptualization and approaches vary from institution to institution and from country to country. This article begins to fill that research gap by investigating how university administrators understand and respond to internationalization. This research also examines the impact of internationalization on education administrators' decision-making. To achieve this aim, three major research questions were addressed. How do administrators perceive internationalization? What strategies do administrators employ to enhance internationalization? In what ways does internationalization influence administrators' (strategic) decisions? It is hoped that the research findings can contribute to the improvement of internationalization strategies and practices in Georgian HEIs.

2. Literature review

2.1 Globalization and Internationalization

A few decades ago, Welch and Luostarinen (1988) argued that internationalization is a broad term which does not have a single definition and needs further clarification. They felt that when using the term internationalization, there is a tendency to understand the term as an "outward movement" of the smaller or inner organizations to the bigger firms or institutions (Welch & Luostarinen, 1988, p. 36). To provide focus and clarity to the term, Knight proposed a definition in 1994 (Knight, 1994), which she later updated to read: "Internationalization at the national/sector/institutional levels is defined as the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education" (Knight, 2004, p. 14). This has become the most widely accepted definition though it has been further modified by internationalization scholars. To Knight's definition, De Wit and colleagues (2015, p. 29) append: "In order to enhance the quality of education and research for all students and staff, and to make a meaningful contribution to society."

The Cambridge Dictionary (n.d.) defines globalization as "a situation in which available goods and services, or social and cultural influences, gradually become similar in all parts of the world". The ideology of globalization emerged and became popular

in the 1960s where it brought new responsibilities and concerns (Enders & Fulton, 2002). The two concepts, internationalization and globalization are not new, and they began to attract researchers' interest in the 1990s. Embracing the cultures, socio/economic aspects of nations and having an influence on higher education institutions, internationalization began defying the power of the nation state. Globalization on the other hand, is considered to be comprised of every aspect that was 'new' around 1970s, including the enhancements in technology, international mobility and cross border capital flow (Enders & Fulton, 2002, p. 5).

Knight (2004, p. 5) sees a domino effect: "Internationalization is changing the world of higher education, and globalization is changing the world of internationalization." Thus, even though globalization and internationalization are tightly coupled, they are distinct. Globalization is a larger phenomenon entailing social and economic aspects while internationalization serves as education's response to globalization through a variety of strategies and tools (Cantu, 2013). It is important to understand and analyze the definitions and meanings of the two concepts carefully in order to implement better strategies in appropriate contexts. Otherwise, as Brandenburg and de Wit (2015) stated, becoming more internationalized would be regarded as a goal rather than a tool on the way of serving and becoming more efficient in the global world.

2.2 Internationalization of Higher Education in Georgia

Internationalization is not a new concept, but the studies that are conducted in this field were not easily accessible three decades ago (Kehm & Teichler, 2007). Therefore, internationalization of higher education started to dominate the research areas and interests only in the 1990s due to enhanced access to publications and journals studying the concept. Internationalization of higher education is viewed and referred to as "fuzzy" due to its complex and changing aspects (Kehm & Teichler, 2007).

Internationalization in Georgian higher education started to be applied and implemented a few years ago with the intention of providing individuals and students with the necessary skills that are required in globalized world (Nastase, 2020). Even though Nastase (2020, p. 91) stated that internationalization is a one-size-fits-all term in referring to a variety of processes including the staff/student mobility, knowledge transfer, cooperation, and competition, internationalization is actually a broad and a complex phenomenon that does not have a single definition that applies to all contexts (Knight, 2004). Internationalization of Georgian higher education served as a reform in the education system where the traditional curriculum and student experience would be expanded to a more global or international level. Nastase (2020, p. 94) discovered three main forces propelling internationalization of higher education in the Georgian context: Western influences; faculty members and students returning from abroad; and national university accreditation processes.

Chanadiri (2017) discusses the importance of internationalization of higher education in improving and developing societies. In Georgia there have been international projects in the fields of infrastructure, business, tourism, and entertainment; however, there is a lack of development in national policies related to internationalization. Chanadiri (2017) advocates greater internationalization of higher education institutions in Georgia, citing the possible benefits that attracting foreign students would contribute to the country's economy and reputation.

Zhvania (2016) pointed out that participation in the Bologna Process led to improvements in Georgian higher education system and the initiation of internationalization processes. Granted, there was a huge shift in the Georgian education system from the Soviet system to a more internationalized and globalized perspective. However, Zhvania (2016) stresses that internationalization and implementation of new projects needs to continue. Zhvania (2016) has discovered the factors that are hindering or diminishing the internationalization to be implemented in Georgian higher education system. There were mainly two factors affecting the arrival of foreign students in Georgia which were: internal factors of particular higher education institutions and external influences such as country image and financial issues.

Campbell and Gorgodze (2016) conducted research on how lecturers, administrators and governmental and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) perceived internationalization. The findings demonstrated that the strategies and approaches utilized in Georgian context were similar to the global practices operating in other countries but there was little agreement about the best practices in internationalization. Their research called for developing a definition that would apply to the internationalization of higher education in the Georgian context and serve as a guide for future improvements and enhancements of internationalization (Campbell & Gorgodze, 2016).

A study conducted by Chokheli and Alpenidze (2015) investigated the internationalization strategies that were applied in Georgian higher education institutions. The findings mainly demonstrated that the strategies implemented in the Georgian context reflected wider global patterns (Chokheli & Alpenidze, 2015). Their recommendations for improvement included observation of current trends and approaches that are operating in Georgian HEIs, development of objectives, strategic plans, trends and approaches in HEIs, and contemplating the possible threats and opportunities in the implementation processes (Chokheli & Alpenidze, 2015).

Another study carried out by Korghanashvili (2018) discusses the importance of internationalization in Georgian higher education and its main implementations in HEIs. Joint trainings and double degree programs, exchange programs and staff/student mobility as well as attracting international students were among the main practices of internationalization in Georgian higher education system (Korghanashvili, 2018).

2.3 Internationalization and Administrators' Decision Making

Internationalization has evolved over the past twenty-five years and brought a significant shift in university administrators' concerns from simply seeking ways for providing scholarships or financial support for international students to considering ways to enhance international projects, mobility and and intercultural environment (Knight & de Wit, 2018). Though indispensable as a part of business strategic planning and tools, internationalization of higher education still demands careful contextualization depending on each country and region's needs and demands (Jiang & Carpenter, 2013). University leaders and administrators have been challenged to adapt to the new requirements and demands to enhance quality while sustaining their institutions in the world of competition. Rumbley, Altbach and Reisberg (2012) state that education administrators need to be aware of the changes and trends around the globe while observing and analyzing the needs and aspirations of their institutions. Thus, as educational administrators make decisions, there should be an interplay between global trends and the institution's demands.

Among the benefits of internationalization of higher education are staff/student mobility, intercultural understanding, international collaboration and increased access to scientific publications around the globe (Jibeen & Khan, 2015). For administrators seeking to keep their universities competitive, these can be attractive. However, though universities are often considered to be 'businesses' that spread and produce knowledge, leaders need to make sure their institutions continue to serve the public good (Hunter et al., 2018). In light of globalization, it has been suggested that the notion of education as a servant of the public good be expanded to include the "global common good" (Tian et al., 2017; UNESCO, 2015). Internationalization—as education's response to globalization—can facilitate students' understanding of their responsibility to contribute to the larger, interconnected world. Internationalization in higher education not only develops staff and student skills in meeting the global requirements but also fosters ethical values such as mutual understanding and enhanced intercultural communication and integration among nations (Jibeen & Khan, 2015).

Brandenburg (2016) argues that internationalization studies and research generally focus on instructors and students while paying less attention to administrative staff. For instance, Stohl (2007) argues that in order to internationalize an educational institution, the faculty should be internationalized first. However, to understand how internationalization is implemented, studies of

administrative staff are essential. This study contributes to the literature on administrators and internationalization (e.g., Brandenburg, 2016; Cantwell et al., 2018; Renc-Roe & Roxă, 2014) with a focus on the country of Georgia.

3. Methodology

This research is qualitative, and it aims to present how university administrators in Georgian higher educational institutions understand and respond to internationalization. Qualitative research is about gathering data in the respondents' words, not in numbers, and presenting the data in narrative form (Bogdan & Biklen, 1997). Citing a lack of qualitative research in internationalization of higher education, de Wit (2020) calls for more studies using qualitative methodologies.

Twelve semi-structured interviews were conducted with administrators in HEIs in Georgia. Serving as the heart of qualitative research, interviews are a central method of qualitative approaches (Sandelowski, 2002). Interviews also allow the interviewees to present and nuance their viewpoints, which increases the richness of the data and enhances diversity. Each interview lasted approximately thirty to forty minutes. The interviewees were purposefully selected based on the research purpose and research questions (Creswell, 2014). Participants were from six universities in Tbilisi, Georgia: International Black Sea University (IBSU), Tbilisi State Medical University (TSMU), New Vision University (NVU), European University (EU), Sokhumi State University (SSU) and Caucasus University (CU). Two of these HEIs are public (TSMU and SSU). The remaining four are private.

The interviews were recorded with participant permission and then transcribed. The transcripts were analyzed using first- and second-cycle coding procedures (Saldaña, 2016). The researchers used an iterative process, moving between fine-grain qualitative data and major themes, what Merriam and Tisdell (2016) call a "trees-forest-trees" approach. Seven main categories—also called "themes" (Creswell & Creswell, 2018)—were distilled from participant responses.

4. Results

The seven themes developed based on analysis of participant responses were: contextual definitions of internationalization, promoting an intercultural environment, research, benchmarking and competition, institution-wide participation, internationalization as requirement and reputation, and feedback and quality enhancement.

4.1 Contextual Definitions of Internationalization

When the respondents were asked about their perception of internationalization, there were a variety of answers and explanations offered. Respondents viewed internationalization in terms of a change process, visibility, and globalization. They also mentioned that internationalization is a multifaceted process entailing international, intercultural, and research components. Administrators repeatedly asserted that understanding internationalization and deciding on appropriate tools and strategies varies significantly from institution to institution and from administrator to administrator. Thus, having a consensus on a single definition would not be realistic. For instance, when asked to define internationalization, R01 responded, "This is a very fundamental question but there is no cut to case recipe for the internationalizations." R03 stated "...the concept itself is very important to be somehow understood..." before offering her own definition of internationalization. When asked for his definition of internationalization, R07 started with "... oh, that's a tough question..." Despite the fact that participants agreed on the importance of internationalization, they often struggled to put into words what they meant by it.

Descriptions of internationalization centered around intercultural and knowledge exchange for the purpose of improving institutional quality. R01 remarked, "Internationalization to me is intercultural, and in the globalized world to adapt and integrate

your higher education in the globalized change." R02 provided a definition where she remarked "Internationalization only means that we are increasing the standard of the university and developing the skills."

Regarding the role of internationalization in HEIs, R09 stated "Let me start with how I perceive the role of the internationalization. So, that's about sharing different good practices and different experiences of educational institutions." R10 expressed the issue as "In the 21st century, internationalization, the process is very important, because you must exchange your knowledge, you must exchange your experience, you can exchange your contacts... to get everywhere more intercultural communication." R04 views the role of internationalization in the following way: "So, in higher education, internationalization allows for a multidimensional inclusion of the international component into the educational process." While exchange seems to be a common thread among these definitions, the manner in which international or intercultural components are incorporated into the learning process may depend on the institution's understanding of academic quality as well as its needs and goals.

Other participants described internationalization more comprehensively, reflecting Knight's (2004) definition. R05 discussed the definition of internationalization as "... the process of involving international, multicultural and global dimensions into all the spheres of universities, including but not limited to student recruitment, teaching body, exchange programs, ratings and rankings, research grants, curriculum building and employability of students." R05 referred to the internationalization process as a broad concept which combines the intercultural elements with teaching and learning processes.

R01 compared the process of internationalization to a train, and he explained "...it's always mobility, interactive mobility and engaging. Otherwise, if you don't engage, you will miss the train. I don't know if it is a correct analogy but if you have an internationalization train, it's particularly good on a track. When you get out of that, you derail and you are going to miss a lot. And this is very hard. Then, later on it costs you a lot of budget to follow up. So, when you have a right time, the right decision, I think they will bring you internationalization." In this example, R01 stresses not missing opportunities when they present themselves. Otherwise, a university might not be able to maintain its place in the world.

4.2 Promoting an Intercultural Environment

Respondents mentioned several internationalization practices including benchmarking, cross-border partnerships, collaborative research, international mobility, and shared decision making. A frequent topic was both inbound and outbound mobility of students and staff. Inbound mobility is often used to facilitate an intercultural environment among students and staff. For instance, R05 stated that the presence of international students and staff "helps improve the already existing multicultural environment at the university. It promotes intercultural dialogue and global citizenship. The members of the institution get to know a different part of the world and the international students and staff get to know Georgia, which may result in some economic ties in the future as well." Moreover, R10 indicated her appreciation of shared experiences among local and international students. She remarked, "Also, we have students from Spain, from Poland, we have eight, we had one student from the Netherlands. And when they come here, they always share their experiences with the local students, they exchange ideas about their education systems... and we always help our students to get involved in these processes..."

R04 discussed the process of involving foreign staff in administrative decisions: "...this board is gathering systematically at least once in two-months to discuss some large-scale questions or some plans and events. So, academic staff equally takes part, foreign and local ones. Everyone takes part in the discussions and then all of their opinions are taken into consideration". Thus, in this respect a diversity of viewpoints and experiences are seen as a strength and an important contribution to the university. The presence of international faculty on campus also provides professional development opportunities. R09 explained, "...we recommend our staff members to attend the lectures of these foreigners and to see what they are doing different way and to share these experiences as well."

Ideally, there is mutual benefit. In addition to the diversity of perspectives they provide for domestic students, R12 felt that international students in Georgia “will have more understanding about our culture and the economy.” Participants explained that, as administrators, they try to shape mobility programs to promote interaction and exchange of experiences. Administrators hope that Georgian students and staff able to travel to universities abroad will return to the home campus and share their experiences. R07 mentioned the intercultural aspect of internationalization as a primary goal: “...the chance for students to travel from country to country and to get experience not only in educational issues but at personal level, to be exposed to different cultures, different people, different traditions.” At the staff level he added, “...again to share experience with colleagues and to gain much knowledge and expertise from international colleagues.”

Adequately facilitating international mobility requires some time, expense, and planning. R06 explained that administrators do what they can to bring in international faculty within the university’s budget constraints: “There are international experts...We try to provide, especially invited lecturers, who come to (teach) package courses. We try to provide travel expenses for them and maybe a little bit higher salary than staff, and it limits the university’s desire to hire international professors, so we don’t hire many.” Although hiring foreign professors would enhance the intercultural ethos of the campus, administrators need to take financial issues, Georgia’s policies, and salary expectations into account.

R07 addressed the need to welcome and provide housing for international students, remarking “I think we could be doing a little bit more with supporting some students with accommodation, offering some services but actually this is beyond my expertise. I am not focusing on these issues. This is my personal attitude. We could be doing this.” In order to provide a better student experience, some Georgian universities have two offices devoted to international students—one for admissions and the other for support services. Thus, attracting foreign students does not only consist merely of bringing students to the host country but also thinking of ways to ease their transition to Georgia.

4.3 Research

Research was mentioned by several participants, and the need for expanding research was discussed repeatedly. Education leaders found it important to build and develop it in order to engage in international cooperation. When asked to name strategies for internationalization, R05 responded, “Academic cooperation to increase research activities...”. R03 stated “So, one of the indicators that we look at like having international research and study projects at the university...” R07 also added “Internationalization should put much emphasis on research projects...” Internationally published research and scientific and joint publications serve as powerful tools in quality improvement as well as in engaging the international community. For example, R03 described how her institution enhances quality with the help of reports on faculty publications. She stated, “We help the professors to get professionally developed and this is one of the indicators. And what we do at university level is that we have annual reports from the affiliated professors.... And the criteria contain like publications, local, international conferences. I mean they have this obligation to do research.” The annual assessments to some extent “push” the professors to participate in international conferences and to publish in international journals.

4.4 Benchmarking and Competition

Participants described internationalization as a way to both compare and compete. In the words of R09, “there are so many very good higher educational institutions worldwide and internationalization gives you the opportunity to do benchmarking and compare what they have and what you have to evaluate yourself.” Though self-improvement and enhanced quality are consequences of benchmarking, they are located within a context of competition. R01 saw this as a downside of internationalization, pointing out that there is a lot of pressure to keep up with new “trends” and “brands.” Universities who lag behind are lost because “even high schools today are internationalized” (R01). R05 explained that “Internationalization is also

used as a business tool for higher education institutions to get a better place in the international competition..." Thus, administrators look for tools that would enhance internationalization in their institutions whether to improve the quality of their organizations or to maintain their institution's place in international competition.

Expanding their network of partners, international cooperation and projects, and staff and student mobility are among the strategies that university leaders employ. They felt that memoranda of understanding (MOUs), exchange programs, and international conferences were "best practices" in internationalization serving several goals simultaneously. For example, administrators described international cooperation in terms of institutional "visibility" in addition to the academic benefits. The metaphor of catching the "internationalization train" applies here as they aim to simultaneously cooperate and compete at the national and international level.

4.5 Institution-wide Participation

R05 articulated a compelling picture of comprehensive internationalization: "Organizing multi/cross/inter-cultural activities regularly and to blend internationalization with teaching, research as well as administrative affairs." To achieve such a goal, administrators described the importance of institution-wide internationalization though this is more often an aspiration than a reality. R04, R10 and R11 mentioned the need for equal participation from all departments in the process of internationalizing. From their comments it was clear that administrators faced the challenges of persuasively articulating internationalization's link to the institutional mission and encouraging broad participation among staff in internationalization efforts. R07 emphasized not segregating academic and administrative staff when seeking to enhance internationalization. He remarked, "...teaching or administrative staff? To tell you the truth, both these components should work hand in hand. So, they should not be separated." R11 complained about the challenges encountered at her university, arguing that internationalization cannot be established if all departments do not work together to develop it within the institution. She felt that she was the only one in her faculty looking for international opportunities. She continued, "Every time I find the partners and sending them letters to have mutual cooperation. ...We have the strategic policy on paper. But we must work and must implement innovations all the time." R01 advocated a ripple-effect strategy, arguing that internationalization can be contagious: "...you need to internationalize your individual staff. Your higher education institution will be definitely, automatically internationalized. It's kind of evolving and involving others if your individuals are highly internationalized, but you have to support them as well. And then your institution will be internationalized."

Still, some felt that their institution was well on the way to comprehensive internationalization. As R02 stated, "That's why I am really proud to mention here that our university is really an international university because we implement internationalization in high manner." R09 described systematic efforts to internationalize through feedback from various stakeholders as well as strategy meetings. She stated "...I can talk on the example of our university to show the importance of this process...of internationalization. We have a separate department for that and group of people working on this. And they of course, have a very close relationship with the educational units, faculties and administration as well. They search for different opportunities for the university staff, administrative staff or the academic staff and the invited staff and foreign students."

4.6 Internationalization as Requirement and Reputation

Internationalization has become a "must-have" for higher education institutions because it is a requirement in the accreditation process in the Georgian educational system (National Center for Educational Quality Enhancement, 2020a; 2020b). R04 explained that it "...became a component of the accreditation process. And now, accreditation and authorization of the university cannot successfully take place without an internationalization strategy in place, and so that's very important." R11 alluded to the fact that

such government legislation can be a “problem” for universities. R12 added “...as administrators, actually we are obliged to have and support internationalization inside the university, as we are asked, according to authorization standards at the same time.” The majority of participants stressed that internationalization must be put into practice. While government policy requires internationalization, respondent comments hinted that some internationalization strategies remain theoretical and never see the light of day. R02 emphasized having internationalization in practice, adding “...so, we don’t have internationalization policy on the paper. We are implementing it in an active way.” R01 argued that “...there is an adage, they say ‘you are what you eat.’ I think you are what you are whether you are internationalized, how much you are internationalized, how much degree you are internationalized and to what extent you are going to be internationalized is the most important.” In short, words and internationalization strategies are not enough—they must be coupled with action.

Although all universities in Georgia are required to have an internationalization strategy, the extent to which that strategy influenced administrators’ decision-making depended on the identity and ethos of the institution. If the institution was known for being international, administrators felt obligated to live up to their reputation. As R01 expressed, “If your name is ‘international,’ you have to have foreign students. If your name is ‘international,’ you have to have foreign exchange staff. Because your name is ‘international.’” An international reputation in Georgia also implies strong academics. As R02 added, “...an international university—and we are international—should have higher standards, right?” Responding to the question of how foreign staff and students impact the administrators’ decisions, R07 indicated that “Well, actually that’s an essential question but I do think that this is one of the strongest aspects of our university because from the very start, our university was established as an international institution.” Thus, administrators tended to point to internationalization as a stronger influence when it was more deeply embedded in the history and ethos of the institution.

Still, some administrators admitted that internationalization is not a main driver but only one among several factors they must consider when making decisions. R09 stated, “I will not say that in every decision-making process it (internationalization) affects because as I have mentioned even without that you try to do your best for the students and for your staff.” She also adds “...but as I said, even in the decision-making process, this (internationalization) is kind of additional motivation for you to do something even more.” R08 also echoed a concern for balance and equitable treatment of foreign and domestic students: “I don’t think separate place must be international students. I don’t think so. ...Who will win this contest, it will be foreign or local students, it doesn’t matter for me.” And R06 stated that “...all students in higher education in Georgia are required to participate in the assessment process... so both international staff and students are actively enough involved in developing the program.” In such institutions, internationalization is used to enhance the academic experience, but it is not central to the university mission. For example, in selecting students, university leaders take students’ academic backgrounds and language competencies into consideration. Rather than pursuing international recruitment at all costs, they are attempting to create an environment where all students—domestic and international—have the language skills and academic competencies to be communicate with one another and be successful in university. Also along the lines of recruitment, an administrator explained that one of the most important factors in attracting foreign staff and students is tightly coupled with what the country and the institutions offer. She continued, “Unfortunately, universities (in Georgia) cannot offer very high salaries or they usually don’t offer scholarships, which may be a drawback. However, taking into consideration the fact that Georgia is cheaper than many other countries, this somehow compensates for that problem.” While administrators do what they can to provide good accommodations for international students and staff, there are always budget constraints.

4.7 Feedback and Quality Enhancement

Some respondents explained that administrators at their universities intentionally collaborate with and invite feedback from international staff and students. These institutions have created mechanisms to give international staff and students a stronger

voice in decision-making processes and the academic life of the university. R08 stressed the importance of student assessments and feedback on their decision-making, stating: "Of course, not only strategy of financing a student, for example. We strategize about our assessment of students and many other things we are sharing. Foreign experiences are immensely helpful for us to improve the situation in our university." R02 discussed the impact of internationalization in terms of best practices, saying "Best practice would be when we involve many people in any strategic goal when just preparing activity plans or action plans or mission or strategic goals, internationalization policies." R02 believed that internationalization leads to involving as many stakeholders in the decision-making process as possible, be it foreign or local professors or students. Furthermore, she considers the involvement of multiple stakeholders in university decisions to be an encouraging example of internationalization's influence on her institution. R05 was also upbeat about the influence of internationalization, stating "Internationalization has a positive impact on research and other academic issues, university budget and the social life at the university. As an example, we have made it compulsory to have an international co-supervisor to supervise doctoral dissertations. We have utilized international expertise in getting prepared for institutional accreditation and we have taken part in international capacity-building grant activities."

5. Discussion

The seven themes that emerged from participant comments reflect the complexity of internationalization and its influence on administrators' decision making. The first theme—contextual definitions of internationalization—showed that the concept of internationalization is often nebulous. This partly reflects the diversity of higher education in Georgia. Some institutions have "international" reputations to live up to while others see their primary mission as service to domestic students. Given the variety of needs, goals, and resources among Georgian HEIs, it is not surprising that internationalization means different things to different people. As participants pointed out, the Ministry of Education in Georgia requires HEIs to show an internationalization strategy though this may at times be a box-checking activity. Still, leaders of Georgian HEIs need to carefully articulate what they mean by internationalization, when collaborating with one another or internationally.

The Georgian administrators interviewed for this study described the interplay between academic quality, competition, and contextual constraints in their decision making. Their descriptions of an intercultural environment, research collaboration, and benchmarking show that academic quality is at the front of their minds. Globalization requires that university graduates have a sense of the interconnectness of the world and their responsibilities within it. Recognizing this, the Georgian administrators in this study strive to develop intercultural competencies in their students, most commonly accomplished through internationalization at home activities (Agnew & Kahn, 2014; Beelen & Jones, 2015; de Wit & Hunter, 2018).

The irony of internationalization is that institutions simultaneously collaborate and compete. R01 described an almost frantic sense of competition as the "internationalization train." To stay on "the train," Georgian administrators seek out international partners both for the academics as well as the enhanced visibility such relationships provide. Participants also recognized that they are competing with peer institutions for both domestic and international students. Though some administrators admitted that Georgian universities could do more to improve the experience of international students (and thus possibly attract more), there are always budget limitations. One participant mentioned that a lack of financial aid for international students is somewhat offset by the low cost of living in Georgia. While often considered a weakness, creative administrators could view Georgia's affordability as an opportunity to attract international staff and students.

It is clear that one internationalization practice or tool can serve several purposes. For instance, hiring foreign instructors provides students with an international perspective, creates professional development opportunities for local staff, gives administrators an outside perspective when making decisions, and raises the institution's visibility. However, participants pointed

out that foreign staff are expensive. While participants were able to articulate “best practices” in internationalization (e.g., MOUs, exchange programs, dual degree programs, collaborative research), it was less clear that Georgian institutions have the resources to do all of these. For Georgian administrators working with limited budgets, it may be helpful to identify a limited number of high-value opportunities rather than taking a shotgun approach. Administrators in Georgia use the tools of internationalization to shape an intercultural environment on their home campuses. They should make judicious use of the international-at-home resources available on their campuses and consider how a carefully selected internationalization practice can serve multiple ends. Internationalizing the curriculum (Fragouli, 2020; Mittelmeier et al., 2021) was not a major theme in respondents’ comments. However, a stronger focus on internationalizing the curriculum in Georgia would make intercultural and international perspectives more widely and consistently available to the entire student body.

When making decisions, Georgian administrators integrate government requirements and their institutional mission. Section 2.2 of the Authorization Standards (National Center for Educational Quality Enhancement, 2020a) reads: “Considering the mission and goals of the HEI, leadership of the HEI supports international cooperation of the institution and the process of internationalization.” This phrasing seems to allow internationalization to be interpreted and applied in a variety of ways based on each institution’s unique mission. However, other portions of the Authorizations Standards (e.g., section 6.2) and Accreditation Standards (National Center for Educational Quality Enhancement, 2020b) specify opportunities for student and staff mobility, international cooperation in research and the arts, joint MA and PhD programs, and participation in international conferences and events. Thus, the standards tend to take an “activity approach” to internationalization (Qiang, 2003). Though Georgian administrators in this study frequently mentioned internationalization activities, they usually did so with a larger purpose in mind (e.g., developing intercultural competencies, improving university policies and practices). As Brandenburg and de Wit (2015) point out, internationalization should not be seen an end in itself; it is a means to academic quality and service to the common good. It is possible that Georgian administrators seeking to embed internationalization more deeply in the fabric of the institution through internationalization of the curriculum or internationalization-at-home may rub up against government requirements that emphasize activity approaches over ethos approaches. Administrators also run into reluctance within their own ranks. Institutions taking an “ethos approach” to internationalization (Qiang, 2003) may have fewer difficulties because new hires ideally know up front that they are working at an “international” university. However, not all Georgian universities aim for comprehensive internationalization, and not all staff are interested in participating despite Ministry of Education requirements.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

Internationalization is not a new concept (Kreber, 2009) but its development in higher education institutions has brought new challenges to university leaders and administrators (Dewey & Duff, 2009). There is no consensus on the meaning of internationalization because it lacks a one-size-fits-all approach that applies to all contexts (Knight, 2012). Each country and educational institution may have a diversity of priorities, demands, requirements, understandings, and approaches in accordance with their settings and citizens.

Because of the contextual nature of internationalization (de Wit & Hunter, 2018), it was necessary to analyze how Georgian administrators understand and practice internationalization. The administrators from Georgian HEIs interviewed for this study described several common internationalization strategies and approaches (Knight, 2004; Qiang, 2003) confirming previous research on higher education internationalization in Georgia (Chokheli & Alpenidze, 2015). Though internationalization is required of all Georgian HEIs (National Center for Educational Quality Enhancement, 2020a), each administrator applied these strategies and approaches based on their institution’s mission, reputation, and resources. The Georgian HEIs in this study are to be commended for their internationalization activities and aspirations. To make the benefits of internationalization more available



to all stakeholders, particularly those who cannot directly participate in mobility programs, it is recommended that administrators encourage internationalization of the curriculum and make the most of internationalization at home opportunities.

The universities represented in this study are in Tbilisi, the capital city. Future research including administrators from HEIs in other cities and regions of Georgia would broaden our understanding of internationalization in the Georgian context.

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