Research Strategy of the Studying Trends for Graduates' Employability of Higher Education Institutions: A Case Study

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the higher education sector in Georgia, focusing on the education system and analyzing a current policy according to graduates' employment. The research aims to find and assess trends in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and explore the importance of the challenges to ensure sustainable development under the studying programs' transformation of HEIs considering the fast development of new technologies and their effectiveness in digitalization of the research methods that foster skilled graduates to meet future demands of the competitive job market. The article considers some parts of the research process for knowledge creation that enrich the skills demanded by the modern job market: problem-solving, critical thinking, and creativity, which are responsible for the process suitable to meet the new requirements of the 21st century. Therefore, under HEIs, reform might be an efficient combination of components of scientific research in the context of students' research skills development according to the problems. From the BA level, students must understand research methods and usage concentrated on knowledge creation and have strong skills for affecting all aspects of modern education reforms. There are suggested recommendations.

Keywords: new demands of the 21st century, 'research in practice' promotion, knowledge creation, new skills, higher education.

1. Introduction

Graduates' employment plays a crucial role in any country's economic development model. A key question in this regard is: Who is responsible for graduates' employment? This question is highly relevant (Hooley et al., 2022), and the primary responsibility lies with Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), given their role in managing teaching, learning outcomes, and preparing students for future employment (Suleman et al., 2021). This issue has become even more critical today with the rapid advancement of information technology, the increasing demands of a competitive job market, and the need for new skills and problem-solving approaches in the workplace (Mekvabidze, Smietanski, 2023). Solving this problem requires a strong interrelationship between HEIs and employers. HEIs must adapt education reforms to improve students' learning outcomes in line with job market requirements. This problem-solving approach aims to regulate the 'Demand and Supply' relationship between HEIs and employers (Mekvabidze et al., 2023).

Higher education reforms are challenging due to the rapid development of information and communication technology and the global economic restructuring, which necessitate changes not only within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) but across all societal institutions (Lei, 2012). These reforms in HEIs are viewed as essential for sustaining the country's economy. Consequently, HEIs must serve as a driving force in higher education reform, playing a key role in enhancing students' professional skills and preparing them for the labor market (Jackson, 2023). To achieve this, HEIs must focus on key tasks that align with principles for creating educational frameworks and renewing learning environments. This includes integrating new technologies and study programs with research components that foster a responsible and competitive labor market (Mekvabidze, Smietanski, 2022).

The importance of digital skills and competencies for national development is highlighted in the Commission's reports for 2016-2030. Georgia is actively responding to the changing digital landscape and the increasing demand for skills in the job market for graduates. The overarching goals are to enhance the quality of higher education institutions (HEIs) (Tyght, 2023), improve graduates' competencies and skills, and collaborate with industry stakeholders to align educational outcomes with market needs. Canadian higher education is also at a critical juncture (Spooner, 2023), facing challenges regarding graduate employability. Addressing the low quality of education in Georgia's HEIs, organizational collaboration plays a crucial role in the country's socio-economic development. This collaboration is essential for improving student learning outcomes and advancing economic growth. To this end, HEIs are working to implement:

- Initiatives on possibilities to improve and introduce new curricula under the results of research or the EU projects recommendation (OECD, 2016-2030);
- Initiatives of student performance through the international mobility programs (Erasmus+ 2021-2027);
- EU Universities' best practices to support the reforms to meet the needs of the student's learning process and capacity building (Erasmus+ CBHE projects).

2. Literature Review

Graduate employment is a crucial responsibility for higher education institutions. Jinyi Lei (2012) explores the challenges graduates face in securing employment and analyzes the factors impacting their job search. In light of evolving job market demands, universities must equip students with the skills needed to meet the expectations of employers (Stojanová, Blaškov, 2014). The rapid development of information technology (IT) necessitates new approaches to skill development for graduates, as emphasized by the OECD (2016, 2019, 2021, 2022), which highlights the challenge of aligning study and work quality (Stokes, 2015). A critical oversight in this area was pointed out by A. Rothwell and F. Rothwell (2017), who examined the gaps in skill development. Jackson (2015) proposed strategies to overcome the barriers to necessary skill development. Moreover, Johnson and Stage (2018) stressed the importance of graduation rates and student success in shaping the future workforce. The transition of graduates into the labor market is a key outcome of higher education (Nunley et al., 2017) and is often viewed by employers as an indicator of productivity. Hooley et al. (2022) further explored this issue, emphasizing its impact. According to official data on the Portuguese higher education system, Tavares et al. (2023) analyzed the policy needs for a smoother transition from higher education to the labor market.

A new approach to student internships post-graduation was suggested by Baert et al. (2021), reflecting the evolving nature of graduate employability. Tight (2023) emphasized that the core responsibility for developing employability skills lies with higher education institutions, and he advocates for practical approaches to address this issue. Employability, a key concept in higher education, is essential for graduates' successful entry into the job market, as analyzed by Cheng et al. (2021). The role of higher education institutions in preparing graduates for employment is critical. Mekvabidze (2023) offers recommendations on how research-intensive teaching can help develop the skills demanded by the modern labor market, incorporating these into the educational process based on subject specialism. The inconsistency between how higher education institutions prepare graduates for employability and the labor market's needs has been described as a crisis for higher education (Marginson, 2023). However, it is noted that training in skills is more effective when conducted in the workplace. Various approaches to higher education's role in employability are being considered, with a particular focus on English language proficiency, quality teaching, and meeting societal demands for employability. Time Higher Education suggests various internship opportunities to help graduates acquire the skills necessary for the job market. However, it is critical to examine the education process in the context of higher education institutions and their collaboration with industry. The question, "What do graduates have after graduation?" raised by Noor and Shuhailie (2013) in

their master's thesis, highlights the need to address this gap. To resolve this issue, higher education institutions (HEIs) must transform study programs by integrating intensive research components that foster students' creativity, logical thinking, and problem-solving skills (Mekvabidze, 2015, 2016). This policy shift is essential in preparing graduates for the job market. Matherly and Tilman (2015) explored the relationship between employability and higher education policies, shedding light on the impact of these policies on graduates' employment outcomes. Additionally, Behle et al. (2015) considered the responsibility of higher education in shaping employment outcomes, further reinforcing the need for a robust framework to bridge the gap between education and employment.

In 2021, Behle suggested that higher education institutions (HEIs) improve graduates' employability by implementing measures that change curricula content. New trends in higher education have been explored, and barriers to employability identified by Suleman et al. (2021) have been examined, highlighting employers' willingness to engage actively. Through analyzing research articles on graduates' employability, it becomes evident that obtaining the necessary skills for the job market can be achieved through integrating research and research components into the educational process and transforming curricula (Mekvabidze & Smietanski, 2022). It is widely acknowledged that graduates in many countries possess "insufficient" employability skills. Consequently, numerous researchers have focused on improving graduates' employability, with particular attention to the relationship between higher education institutions, academics, employers, and graduate outcomes (Mekvabidze & Smietanski, 2023; Denice & Jackson, 2023). This issue raises critical questions regarding the specific skills required by employers (Halloran, 2018; Bruning, 2018; Uddin, 2021), the responsiveness of higher education institutions in preparing students for the job market (Tamrat, 2022), and how collaboration between higher education institutions and employers can be effectively regulated (Mekvabidze, 2023). Interestingly, the attention given by 21st-century researchers to employability through higher education underscores the recognition of graduates' insufficient employability skills. Upon reviewing the literature, the approaches of these researchers can be divided into three main areas:

- Graduates' skills needed for employment (OECD, 2016-2030) through higher education institutions;
- Graduates' skills demanded by employers;
- Collaboration between higher education institutions and employers.

3. Research Approach

The educational goals of higher education institutions (HEIs) are ambitious. Public HEIs, in particular, strive to develop new curricula and adopt student-centered approaches to transform education. However, these goals are often somewhat vague rather than explicitly defined. We argue that HEIs must consider the internationalization of the curriculum; however, there is insufficient research on such approaches in Georgia. The primary objective of this research is to explore the perspectives of academic personnel, students, and graduates regarding the transformation of curricula, with a focus on the influence of research and research components in knowledge creation and the development of new skills required by the competitive job market. The article outlines the following key research objectives:

- An approach to Teaching-learning for the promotion of the student-centered academic research components from the BA level;
- An Involvement in the study process of the competitive job market economic environment analysis, which is vital for graduates;
- Consideration of higher education institutions with teaching-learning and research as a driver of graduates' employability as a bridge with employers.

The exploration strategy is closely tied to the development of dissemination activities. As a result, the primary aim of this exploration is to establish a fundamental approach to facilitate the exchange of ideas

between HEIs and employers, ensuring that the results reach relevant stakeholders, including HEIs, employers, graduates, and students. The development of knowledge and the acquisition of new skills, as required by employers, would positively influence graduates' success in the job market. The main approaches are as follows:

- Ensure the sustainability of the results;
- Coordinate increasing of the new knowledge production with the needed skills for the job market;
- Encourage the target actors to provide outcomes and results;
- Provide recommendations for the results.

In Georgia, there are 73 universities, including 20 public universities. The number of BA and MA students enrolled fluctuates depending on the academic year (Geostat.ge). However, the ratio between enrollment and graduation rates is notably low. Several factors contribute to this issue: the cost of education and the low-income levels of students' families. Many students leave their studies to seek employment opportunities in Europe due to the high unemployment rate in Georgia. Additionally, even graduates struggle to find jobs in their fields of study and often end up taking positions unrelated to their specialties, as they feel unprepared for the competitive job market.

The issue of graduate employment is a recurring topic of research, as labor market requirements are heavily influenced by the rapid development of information technology. This highlights the importance of incorporating components into educational programs that enhance the level of graduates' specialization. New technologies play a crucial role in shaping the competitive demands of the modern job market and directly affect graduates' employability. As these technologies drive global changes, they foster the diffusion of key societal advancements and emphasize the need for new skills. This, in turn, requires increased collaboration between Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and employers to focus on new research and capacity development for graduates. In this context, the strategy for HEIs is to cultivate knowledge and new skills that will adequately prepare students for the competitive job market.

4. Research Methodology

The research methodology focuses on assessing the readiness of both academics and graduates (BA and MA) to transform higher education in alignment with the four key factors that influence knowledge development and the new skills required by the job market. A survey was designed with statements directed at both graduates and academic personnel, based on these factors that impact knowledge development and equip graduates with the skills necessary for employability. The survey aims to capture insights on the perceptions and readiness of both groups regarding the integration of new skills into academic curricula to enhance graduates' employability in a competitive job market.

- IT is a main factor in the transformation of the higher education process;
- Introducing the research components in the subject area of specialism;
- Knowledge development with new skills;
- Regulation of the benefits of students and graduates to the job market.

Based on the above, the questionnaire for research has been prepared. The questionnaire consists of two parts. Part one gives information about a respondent that includes three points:

- Year of graduation;
- Are you employed? (yes – no);
- Are you employed by specialism? (yes – no);
    - if " yes," is your knowledge from a higher university enough for your employment? (yes – no);
    - If "no," do you have VET education or other additional training for your workplace? For example, (VET: yes - no; other).

Based on the respondents' answers, we will find the enrollment status and, by www.geostat.ge, find the number of enrolled students and graduations accordingly.

According to the respondents' answers, the second part of the questionnaire consists of six statements that are crucial for the expected transformation of study programs. These statements are designed to capture responses in the form of 'yes,' 'no,' or 'neutral' positions. The statements are as follows:

1. An effective strategy for knowledge creation with new skills is considered as the teaching of research in practice by the subject area of specialism;

2. The interrelationship between higher education institutions and industry has to be considered more closely according to the graduates' employment in the future;

3. Research in practice with application has to be realized for the subject area of specialism;

4. HEIs are responsible for reaching the balance between knowledge with new skills and the job market requirements;

5. The fast development of IT is connected with active teaching-learning of research methods for the development of creativity, critical, and logical thinking

6. Do you believe that if the curriculum had incorporated research components within the study process for your area of specialization, it would have led to better employment outcomes? (Considering that research enhances logical thinking and problem-solving effectiveness). We prepared two types of surveys: one for students, which consists of two parts, and one for academic personnel, which consists of only the second part.

The surveys have been spread through Georgia universities. Respondents were academic personnel, students, and graduates.

5. Data Processing and Analysis

The flow of information was monitored monthly over a period of four months. Three categories of respondents were considered, and demographic factors were not controlled. BA and MA students, as well as graduates, provided data in the first part of the surveys, identifying their enrollment and graduation periods. For this, relevant information from the Geostat website (https://www.geostat.ge) was used, with the necessary data on the ratio between enrollment and graduation student numbers by year, as presented in Table 1.

Table 1: The ratio between enrolment and graduation students by years

Enrolment Year	Number of BA	Number of MA	Graduation Year	Number of BA	Number of MA	Ratio, %	
						BA	MA
2014-2015	109424	22478	2018	16959	6602	15.50	29.37
2015-2016	106130	23069	2019	17304	6771	16.30	29.35
2016-2017	109128	26410	2020	16664	6097	15.27	23.08
2017-2018	108722	30284	2021	17668	6821	16.25	22.52
2018-2019	111058	33940	2022	16296	8058	14.67	23.74
2019-2020	111867	33926	2023	15869	8399	14.18	24.76

The distribution of respondents (academic personnel, graduates (BA, MA)) based on the number of responses in the second part of the survey is presented in Table 2. The sample sizes and precision levels are as follows: for graduates (BA, MA), the precision level is ±5%, while for academic personnel, the precision levels range between ±0.5% and ±0.6%.

Table 2: Distribution of respondents by the statements of the survey (number of respondents of all categories)

Statement No	Content of the statement	Academic personnel (n=297)			Graduate -BA (n=405)			Graduate-MA (n=413)		
		Yes	No	Neutral	Yes	No	Neutral	Yes	No	Neutral
1	An effective strategy for knowledge creation with new skills is considered the teaching of research in practice by the subject area of specialism.	210	-	87	376	-	29	413	-	-
2	The interrelationship between higher education institutions and industry has to be considered more closely in terms of the graduates' employment prospects in the future.	297	-	-	400	-	5	404	1	-
3	Research in practice with application has to be realized for the subject area of specialism.	199	-	98	322	-	83	302	-	111
4	HEIs balance knowledge with new skills and the job market requirements.	201	-	96	405	-	-	400	-	13
5	The fast development of IT is connected with active teaching-learning of research methods for developing creativity, critical thinking, and logical thinking.	189	-	108	301	32	72	290	-	123
6	Would your curriculum have taken into account the research components in the studying process by the subject area of specialization, graduate would have better employment outcomes? (taking into account the fact that the research process improves logical thinking and problem-solving effectiveness).	289		8	399	-	6	406	-	7
The average value		230 .8			367, 17			369.8		
The average value, %		16. 66			16.6 6			16.69		

Table 3: Respondents' answers on the statements of all category

Statement No	Answers of respondents					
	Positive	%	Negative	%	Neutral	%
1	999	89.60	-	-	116	10.40
2	1101	98.74	-	-	1	0.009
3	823	73.81	-	-	192	17.21
4	1006	90.22	-	-	109	9.78
5	780	69.95	72	6.46	303	27.17
6	1093	89.95	-	-	21	1.88
The average value	967					
The average value, %		85.98				

By Table 3, the explanation of the positive answers, shows the following results:

- The first place takes the statement 2. This indicates that the main problem of graduates' unemployment is the lack of understanding of HEI study programs and the job market requirements.
- Statements No. 1, 4, and 6 received the most consistent responses, indicating that research in practice should be integrated into the subjects of specialization. The alignment between acquired knowledge, new skills, and job market requirements depends on curriculum transformation. All respondents agreed that involving research components in study programs could lead to better employment outcomes.
- The result of statement No. 5 reveals that the digitalization process of research methods benefits both academic personnel and students by enhancing creativity, critical thinking, and logical thinking. However, this factor is not as clearly emphasized or recognized by the respondents.

6. Conclusions

The higher education industry (both public and private institutions) is at a crucial turning point, facing new expectations driven by the rapid development of information technology. The results of this study enable us to assess the potential for transforming the approaches to regulating the link between higher education institutions and employers. The findings show that all respondents—academic personnel, graduates, and students—agree that with the fast advancement of IT and the digitalization of research methods, there is a critical need for transforming curricula by subject area of specialization. Additionally, respondents emphasize the importance of regulating the interrelationship between higher education institutions and the job market requirements, considering the context of these statements. Interestingly, the distribution of positive responses from all respondents is nearly equivalent: 16.66%, 16.66%, and 16.69%. On the other hand, the average values for all positive answers across all respondents are 96.7% and 85.98%, reflecting broad consensus. Based on these findings, the following recommendations should be considered for developing capacity-building initiatives that align knowledge with the new skills demanded by the modern job market:

- Curricula should be updated by integrating essential skills such as IT, critical thinking, problem-solving, and creativity into the subjects of specialization within Higher Education Institutions, aligning them with the evolving demands of the job market.
- To develop a program of 'research in practice' for teachers by subject area focusing on 21st-century skills;
- To develop recourse centers at HEIs for support services on using program software by subject area for the teaching-learning process;
- To create a new platform where HEIs, employers, and graduates will collaborate and analyze the problems of graduates' employment and changes in the study programs.

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