

Educational Reforms and Innovations in the South Caucasus Region

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Abstract: The focus of this article is on the analysis of some significant reforms and innovations implemented in the education sector by the governments of the South Caucasus region. During the USSR period, the SC region's education system was based on standard of soviet model which was imposed by Moscow. After the independence, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia started successfully to move forward towards the development and established the relations with different international institutions, as well as started to learn from developed countries in education and other fields. These countries started the implementation of reforms focused on the progression of education and development of international relations in the sphere of education to ensure compliance with international standards. At the beginning, they were not affluent of many resources to make the large-scale changes in education system, however, they got support from different international organizations to commence the process of modern education systems. This article provides a brief overview over various programs, processes, as well as the difficulties and impact of plans on the education system of SC countries. Nowadays, this region with the international support, is working towards providing a high quality education for its citizens.

1. Introduction

Undoubtedly, the progression of society depends on the development of education and the demand of society has been strengthening education's development. The role of education is increasing, particularly when the competition in social and economic spheres of activity intensifies ^[1]. Unsurprisingly, the United Nations Organization has announced the twenty-first century "The century of education" which means that now, the role of higher education in forming the human capital of higher intellect has received significant importance and the achievements in this field rely on social and technological changes. A 21st-century education is about giving students the skills they need to succeed and helping them grow the confidence to practice those skills. This century's skills focus more on making sense of that information, sharing and using it in smart ways. Education in the new century incorporates advanced learning tools, the development of skills, and is motivating while inspiring and preparing people for today's world. They gain the ability to adapt when needed for the changing world of tomorrow. Education is understanding how students learn with a more hands-on approach while building skills ^[2].

Education is today largely paid for and almost entirely administered by governmental bodies or non-profit institutions. A stable and democratic society is impossible without widespread acceptance of some common set of values and without a minimum degree of literacy and knowledge on the part of most citizens. Education contributes to both. From the beginning of this century, great attention has been paid to education and its development in the South Caucasus.

Since the beginning of this century, the SC has become the most dynamically developing region and post-Soviet space from the educational point of view. After these countries gained independence, the need for fundamental reforms in education as in other areas emerged. The start transition process from the Soviet education system to the modern and international standards education system started from the mid-90s of the previous century. In this part, the changes in the education system of each country of the South Caucasus will be explained.

2. Armenia

The past several decades have been transformative for Armenia, as its population, economy, and international relations have grown. Education in Armenia has historically been highly regarded as it has had consistently high literacy rates and has been a longstanding tradition. However, inequalities in access to educational opportunities remain a major problem, particularly the urban-rural division. According to UNESCO, those who live in rural places are 45 percent less likely to receive high-quality education than their urban counterparts. In addition, the needy population has a notably low enrollment rate at the preschool and secondary school levels^[3].

The Armenian government has taken some steps to improve the education system, for instance, the governmental program for 2008-2012 identified the development of human capital as one of its three top priorities^[4]. Since the end of this program, Armenia continued to pursue various measures that strengthen its education system. More progress is yet to come, as the World Bank's Education Improvement Project enters its third of five years. The project is through accomplishing four main goals: improving the readiness of primary school children entering institutions, improving the physical conditions and availability of resources to secondary schools, and increasing the relevance of higher education institutions. The project also includes a push to expand the accessibility of preschools in rural areas, with the aim of providing more education opportunities throughout the whole country. This program, along with new monitoring protocols, and also the new technology systems will allow education in Armenia to be available to all people, and ensure that future education policy best serves the needs of the citizens.

There was a conference which was held in 2021, entitled "Entrepreneurship and Innovation in Higher Education in Armenia" brought together decision-makers of Higher Education institutions, authorities, policymakers, and representatives of European organizations to share and learn from the best practices of entrepreneurial education initiatives in Armenia, barriers, and find solutions for mainstreaming innovations across the whole higher education in Armenia^[5].

3. Azerbaijan

Azerbaijan education has been changing entirely since independence from the Soviet Union, and various projects have been designed and implemented^[6]. These plans have resulted in speedy and impressive progress during the short time, particularly in preparing new training aids, and reading materials, including the transition from Cyrillic to Latin Scripts. In order to improve the education system "The Reform Program in Education" which aimed to identify strategic dimensions of reforms was introduced by the President. They had to strengthen international relations as well as mutual cooperation to make progress in education and to bring it in line with international standards. The education system in Azerbaijan now provides better quality; reforms and innovations are undertaken to improve the quality through processes based on multiple and comprehensive approaches to elementary, secondary as well as higher education systems^[7].

All these reforms get considerable governmental support; the process has been able to boost the bottom-up approach at the universities and successfully communicated to higher instances^[8]. The involvement of the students in the decision-making process became popular for promoting quality control. Students' opinion is considered in the curriculum design, they are now able to select or reject a course, also, student assessment and teacher evaluation became a significant part.

Azerbaijan has increased the volume of funds allotted by the government several times, in parallel to the economic development of education. Some part of the state budget expenditure on education is directed on the construction of new schools, for the modernization of the educational infrastructure. Now, more funds are allocated on the construction of new schools in the country, repairing, and modernization by the Heydar Aliyev Foundation and the Reserve Fund of the President of Azerbaijan^[9].

However, still, Azerbaijan lack the capacity to serve as effective dynamic hubs for higher education institutions, limiting its ability to collaborate and compete with other nations in the global economy. The government should identify the main obstacles to the advancement of research work

and to effective coordination between higher education institutions and industry to achieve innovation-led growth. The authorities should consider that undertaking strategic efforts to maximize the quality and relevance of higher education as it relates to innovation and economic competitiveness is inevitable ^[10].

4. Georgia

In recent years, Georgia has had great improvement in educational plans; nevertheless, educational plans have not been equitable across all groups and many students in Georgia still struggle to master basic competencies which reflect systemic challenges in modernizing the teaching profession. The evaluation and assessment systems need to be updated for all students ^[11].

Over the past two decades, the Georgian government has embarked upon significant educational changes which include decentralizing school governance and introducing new, competency-based curricula, and developing a teacher professional development scheme. Efforts such as these have contributed to a significant improvement in key educational indicators, including achieving near-universal enrolment in primary education and an increase in student performance on international surveys. Nevertheless, despite these improvements, still, some Georgian students continue to leave school; equity is also a concern, as outcomes between regions and ethnic groups are increasing ^[12].

Georgia is facing a rapidly shrinking population due to low fertility rates and high rates of outmigration which made challenges for the education sector. Schools that are intended to serve rural areas find themselves with fewer students.

The plan of “Unified Strategy for Education and Science for 2017-21”, concerns evaluation and assessment: developing professional standards for teachers; updating the national curriculum; improving educational resources; more approval of school textbooks, developing digital resources; updating learning infrastructures, and modernizing teachers’ professional development standards; establishing a proper mechanism for the selection, training, and retention of school members and establishing effective mechanisms to ensure that national and international assessment results are used as in policy-making.

In order to help Georgian people, the World Bank’s Board of Executive Directors approved a €90 million loan to Georgia government in 2019 for the Innovation, Inclusion and Quality Project, which support the development of human capital through greater access to higher quality education, and improved learning environments. It also tries to accelerate investments in human capital to boost innovation, entrepreneurship and productivity in a competitive global economy ^[13].

5. Conclusion

A stable society is possible with widespread acceptance of some common set of values and with a minimum degree of literacy and knowledge on the part of most people and in this regard, education contributes to both; the gain from the education of a child accrues not only to his parents but also to other members of the society; at the 30th year of the South Caucasus region’s independence educational development now is the highest priority on the agenda of the Government of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. After this region gained its independence, the need for fundamental reforms in education emerged. South Caucasus countries have implemented several initiatives to expand access and improve learning outcomes, however, still, some problems have remained and the authorities should take more measures. In some part of SC a large number of students does not master basic skills and the participation of the most vulnerable student communities are low. Nowadays, in the age of technology and information, particular attention is given to the development of media education which should be considered by the SC officials. E-resources as significant instrument could help teachers and students with facilitating the exchange of information, organizing their own communication channels, and using the effective electronic educational resources in the learning process. Innovative approaches and technologies for teachers and students should be a priority for the governments of this region as an opportunity to develop necessary skills. Digital instruments helps in educational process for the acquisition of different knowledge, or exchange of information. These

measures need to be accompanied by training teachers to educate students using modern tools. Coherent evaluation and assessment systems in a long-term reform strategy is also necessary to improve educational excellence and equity in the South Caucasus. Investments allocated in education are long-term plans and authorities take all necessary steps, through improvement of quality in education, to increase the social welfare of its people and facilitate the countries' progression.

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