

The Georgian Context: the importance of DARE for Georgia

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Naturally, it is difficult for me to cover all issues related to the importance of DARE project and the challenges our country meets in respect of higher education access in my five minute speech. For Georgia in the 21st century a serious challenge is the creation of favourable conditions for the disadvantaged groups of people in access to higher education. Notwithstanding Georgia's serious steps taken in this direction with the support of European partners, some problems still remain and they necessarily need prevention.

Georgia is a multinational country. We have gained a certain experience in living with the other nations for centuries; Although, in today's constantly changing world, the state and social relations are changing as well. The responsibility of the State towards each citizen, social, ethnic, or religious groups has increased. Hence, the relationship between the State and the citizen has changed. The State undertakes more obligations to protect the interests of its citizens. Such obligations and responsibilities have increased more since Georgia became an associate member state of the EU.

In the process of carrying out all aforementioned obligations and responsibilities it is important for our country to get the support by the EU within such programs as Tempus and Erasmus. Such assistance is significant for us, as we get a chance to familiarize ourselves with the experience which the European countries have in relation to the existed problems and at the same time, we will be able to find the solution to the problems we face in our country.

Georgian higher education institutions gained a valuable experience in the process of the curriculum reform in regard to teaching cultural diversity, culture and identity, protection and promotion of children's rights from Tempus project DOIT; And when at one of our meetings my friends and I acquainted ourselves with the issues of DARE project, we liked them and we understood that we should realize these ideas at our university, as there are enough students representing national minorities living in Georgia, socially disadvantaged students from conflict-affected regions (though not only from there). We have also students with special educational needs.

The project was interesting in other respects too. In 2009, I with my friends designed BA. degree program in inclusive education at our Faculty of Education, which has been functioning under the program accreditation regime since 2012.

So, we began to participate in DARE project from 2016, as we have already mentioned.

As the aim of the project is to improve the access to the inclusive higher education and its quality for the students with special educational needs and groups of ethnic minorities with the support of institutional instruments in Georgia and Israel, we think to make recommendations on the regulatory policy through the enhancement of students' supporting services in partner universities in Georgia and Israel.

In December, 2016 during our meeting with the leaders of the project in Tbilisi our priorities were singled out and we began to develop a work plan of the project, which we had to present and summarize at Murcia meeting in Spain. Of course, we could not develop a real work plan without the identification of the problems of the project target groups. First of all, we got to know different researches conducted on access to higher education in the country. The researches clearly showed us the problems which were connected to access to higher education. We would like to pointed out that one part of the abovementioned researches generally referred to access to higher education and the issue related to access to inclusive education was not studied thoroughly. So, we decided to conduct the research by ourselves within our University on the problems linked to students belonging to ethnic minorities, with social advantages and to the ones with special education needs. Research methodology was based on the methods of questioning and speaking. It was especially difficult to identify the problems which students with special education needs face. As you know the majority of students avoid speaking openly about their own problems. Though, with the help of the method of speaking we could identify their problems and we underlined their necessities. We worked out the tools for questioning and the method for choosing respondents. Our aim was to specify the problems which appear during getting higher education.

We already had general notion on this topic as Every day at our work we met students who had different problems while getting higher education, such as: a language barrier, being incompetent in office programs (especially socially disadvantaged students), not knowing any foreign language, having difficulties in familiarizing themselves with the required teaching materials and so on. Our views were justified by our mini-research which was conducted at some faculties of the University.

I understood that with the realization of DARE issues we could partly solve our students' above mentioned problems. So, our mini research clearly showed

To what extent DARE Project is necessary for Georgia

The researches conducted by us and the researches, generally conducted in Georgia point out the problems the aforementioned groups have in regards to the access to higher education.

These problems may be grouped so:

- Not knowing an official language,
- The second problem concerns the issue of teaching English,
- Identification of students with special educational needs and their problems.

- To acquire computing skills.
- To engage students with special education needs and students belonging to national minorities in university student events

After the identification of the abovementioned problems we drew up our work plan which we presented at consortium meeting in university. To be more correct this plan was finalized at this meeting after the consultations with our colleagues and partners.

Hence, Sokhumi State University is in two main groups in DARE project:

- 1) Supporting national minorities and
- 2) Supporting students with special educational needs. Although we have taken some steps to assist socially disadvantaged students recently.

1. Not knowing an official language-----it is one of the most important problems for national minorities. To cope with this problem 60 credit program in the Georgian Language was specifically designed. Now, it is functioning under the program accreditation regime, but it can't overcome this problem thoroughly. Referring to this issue we used DARE project very effectively as we decided to design free learning courses in the Georgian language for the students from national minorities.

2. The second problem concerns the issue of teaching English, and it does not refer to only the students from national minorities. Three target groups are singled out here: national minorities, socially disadvantaged students and the students with the special educational needs. In relation to this topic we also designed special teaching courses within DARE project and since this term we have been engaged in these courses.

3. Identification of students with special educational needs and their problems. For this purpose we had special talks in groups, we underlined the importance of privacy and confidentiality, the necessity of keeping and preserving the data, etc.; Some students contacted us and we made up our minds to help them to deal with the English language courses and office programs. For it in the nearest future a special computing class will be developed at the faculty of Education, where they can acquire computing technologies and besides that, during free time they will be able to use this classroom instead of students' university computing classes.

4. For the purpose of engaging in university activities we organized discussions, students' scientific conferences which were on the traditions of ethnic minorities, their being, the importance of the inclusive education, on charm of diversity in the modern world and so on. We have planned sporting and other events with the active participation of the target groups in them

The administrative and academic personnel are prepared within the project for their further support for the representatives with the inclusive needs and national minorities in getting higher education through the improving teaching strategies and services. We think, that DARE project is one of the important encouraging means to help representatives of national minorities, students with special educational means and socially disadvantaged ones to overcome all barriers they encounter while getting higher education.

As we see, nowadays the access to and implementation of inclusive education is one of main challenges and not only for higher education, but for at all stages of education. Today with the help of our meeting and discussion we must answer the questions which are now important: **To what extent is higher education accessible to students?**

And what should be done to make it more accessible?

Searching of introduction, research and development prospects of Inclusive Education starts in higher education institutions and continues at school level. In the higher education system two main areas should be developed for promotion of Inclusive education:

1. **Teaching, research and introduction of inclusive education in the teaching process and**
2. **Developing and implementing of strategies for supporting students with special educational needs in higher educational institutions.**

This is the aim of our project.

We think about conducting a research within our project and on its basis to make recommendations on the quality of higher education access, access barriers and on the ways to overcome them. Strategies for increasing access to higher education will be identified and the information will be given to state structures for further considering in the recommendation policy.