VOCATIONAL EDUCATION REFORM IN GEORGIA: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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Summary: Perfection of the education and science system is one of the necessary conditions for the labor force formation corresponding to the labor market requirements in Georgia, their employment and the country’s sustainable economic development. Along with basic and higher education, vocational education occupies a significant place in the education system of Georgia. Vocational education represents the most favorable opportunity for professional training and retraining of the workforce in a short period with fewer costs, which in turn ensures the reduction of unemployment and social inequality in the country and decent employment. Vocational education is a significant priority of the Government of Georgia. The system is actively being reformed, the main goal of which is to modernize the vocational education system and bring it closer to the vocational education and training structures of the European Union.

Based on the quantitative-statistical and qualitative research methods, the main challenges of the vocational education system are identified in the paper, the main priorities of vocational education reform and new regulatory legislation are analyzed, the development possibilities of the vocational education system have been evaluated, and recommendations have been developed to increase the effectiveness of vocational education.

Keywords: Georgia, unemployment, workforce, vocational education.

Introduction. Georgia is a post-Soviet country with a small economy, which, since the 90s of the last century, has been able to overcome several economic and political crises and present itself on the world economic map. During the most violent COVID-19 pandemic of recent times, in order to effectively manage the economic crisis caused by the pandemic and ensure sustainable development of the country, the socio-economic development strategy "Georgia 2020" [1] was developed, later "Vision 2030 - Development Strategy of Georgia" was approved [2], and started building an economy based on knowledge and innovation [3].

In the post-pandemic period, as a result of the reasonable macroeconomic policy of the Georgian government, the rate of economic growth increased, significant socio-economic reforms were implemented, and the country’s international ranking improved [4]. Despite significant achievements, unemployment is still the most pressing socio-economic issue and challenge that Georgia is facing. It is the main factor causing poverty in the country [5]. Thus, the need to provide the labor market with a highly qualified workforce is on the agenda.

A number of studies prove that the quality of education and skills of the workforce in Georgia do not match the labor market requirements, hindering the
possibility of doing business and converting the investments coming into the country into jobs. A challenge is also the limited opportunity for full participation in the labor market for vulnerable groups, which is accompanied by the lack of social protection during the economically passive period [2]. It is noteworthy that despite high unemployment, there are professions in the country that are in demand and short supply. It became necessary to reform the education system, especially vocational education, which, based on the principle of private and public partnership, ensures the introduction of work-based learning.

**Aim of research.** The research purpose is to analyze the stages of vocational education reform, identify the main problems, evaluate the possibilities for further development of the vocational education system, develop recommendations to bring vocational education closer to the European educational system and increase its effectiveness.

**Methodology.** The theoretical-methodological basis of the research was the vocational education reform strategies, the regulatory legal base of the vocational education system, the scientific studies carried out in the direction of general vocational education, and the analysis and evaluation of publications related to the topic and data of the National Statistical Service of Georgia.

**Literature review.** Vocational education is an exceptionally priority area for the country's development, designed for long-term results. The success of the European integration process of Georgia depends significantly on the efficiency of the education sector. The education system should ensure, on the one hand, the education of citizens with responsibility and democratic values, and on the other hand, preparing personnel corresponding to the requirements of the labor market for the development of the economy and the improvement of society [6].

Various research is going on around the world regarding vocational education development. In-depth investigations are being conducted into challenges facing the global labor market, hindering the development and utilization of human capital, ways to solve challenges in the education sector, and more. The European Training Foundation (ETF) analysis of individual countries' human capital development [7], as well as the evaluation of Vocational Education and Training (VET) policies from a lifelong learning perspective, are noteworthy. The ETF interprets human capital development as the support provision to countries for the lifelong learning systems creation. These systems provide opportunities and incentives for people to develop their skills, competencies, knowledge and attitudes throughout their lives to get employed, realize their potential and contribute to prosperous, innovative and inclusive societies [8]. Heeyoung Han (Southern Illinois University School of Medicine, USA), Seung Hyun Han (University of Illinois, USA), Doo Hun Lim (University of Oklahoma, USA), and Seung Won Yoon (Western Illinois University, USA) point to the necessity of using technology in the teaching process in the book - Handbook of Research on Educational Technology Integration and Active Learning [9].

In many countries, vocational schools are perceived as quite desirable, and there is even a demand for them. However, some problems are always present, and reforms are needed. Professor Rob Strathdee dedicated his article - The New Localism, Social Reproduction, and Reform of School-based Vocational Education in the State of Victoria to the problems of school-based vocational education in Victoria
Section I

V. MANAGEMENT, PUBLIC MANAGEMENT AND ADMINISTRATION

The demand for vocational education in Georgia has always been lower compared to higher education. However, in the last decade, the approach has changed dramatically, and today vocational education is a significant priority of the country’s strategic development.

Discussion/Results. The reform of the vocational education system in Georgia started in 2007. The need for reform was caused by the problems in this system, namely, the low prestige of vocational education, the low level of awareness of potential students, the lack of opportunities to master certain professions, the need to improve the system of professional qualifications and quality assurance. Since 2009, the Government of Georgia has implemented a number of legal and institutional reforms to develop the vocational education system and bring it closer to international standards. In 2010, the framework for quality assurance in vocational education was established. During the same year, the national qualification framework and the law on quality development were approved. In 2012-2013, with the support of the European Union, a situational analysis of the quality assurance requirements of the vocational education system of Georgia was carried out. That was followed by the 2013-2020 Strategy approval of Vocational Education Reform of Georgia [6].

In recent years, within the framework of vocational education reform, a number of activities have been implemented to ensure the promotion and attractiveness of vocational education. A new framework of national qualifications and standards for quality assurance of vocational education were created and introduced. Mechanisms for recognizing non-formal education and a systematic approach to adults’ professional training and retraining were developed. Vocational educational institutions were renovated and equipped with modern equipment. Over 150 professional qualifications have been created in active cooperation with the private sector. With the integration of the general educational component in vocational education, the opportunity to continue studies at the higher education level with a professional diploma was enabled, and forms of work-based learning were introduced, which helped to increase the interest of the private sector and the transition of graduates into the labor market. Currently, up to 40 dual-naming programs are being implemented [15].

Studying in professional programs in Georgia is free and financed by the state. Budgetary financing of vocational education is increasing every year. In particular, the vocational education budgetary financing amounted to 76.2 million GEL (actual expenditure) in 2021 and 92.6 million GEL (actual expenditure) in 2022. Nevertheless, vocational education remains a challenge. The conducted studies show, on the one hand, that young people are less interested in vocational education and, on the other hand, employers have less confidence in professional qualifications.

Despite the implemented reforms, a sharp increase in terms of transition from school to vocational schools is not recorded [16]. Against the background that the enrollment rates in higher educational institutions increased from 28% to almost
63.4% in 2012-2021 [17], the number of people wishing to receive vocational education is much less. Studies show that, compared to the increase in awareness of vocational education, attitudes toward the professional field are changing at a slower pace. In 2019, the number of those wishing to join vocational education was 19,000. In 2020 (under the conditions of the pandemic), it decreased to 14,000, and according to the data of 2021, it increased again and amounted to 19,000 [15]. The small scale is related to accessibility and inclusiveness, existing geographical, financial, informational barriers, low image and underdevelopment of support services.

In order to overcome the existing challenges, a new model of vocational education management was developed, which involves vocational education management with the active involvement of the private sector. In 2021, the Skills Agency of Georgia was established. It is the Agency of Skills that represents a new platform that will contribute to the introduction of a new model of management.

Vocational education graduates’ transition to the labor market remains a prominent challenge related to issues such as the quality of vocational education programs, compliance with labor market needs, lack of human and financial resources, development of key competencies. In 2020, the graduates’ employment rate was - 60%. In 2021, - 74%, of which the share of self-employed is 20% [15]. According to the Agency of Skills information, by 2022, the indicators of single employment (74%), employment with the profession mastered in the educational institution (43%) and self-employment have improved by approximately 9-10%. This trend is positive and reflects the post-pandemic effect. It can be assumed that the self-employment rate will continue to increase, although by relatively small amounts [18].

According to the information from the National Statistics Service of Georgia, by the end of 2022, 94 vocational educational institutions were operating in Georgia, including 42 public and 52 private ones.

**Chart No1**

![The number of educational institutions, which are conducting admission of students by vocational education programs in 2022, unit](Source: www.geostat.ge)

In 2022, 14,103 students were enrolled in vocational schools. In 2022, compared to 2021, the acceptance rate of students in vocational schools has
increased by 25.9 percent. It is significant that in 2022, 263 students with special educational needs were enrolled in vocational educational programs. According to Saxstat data, in 2022, the number of professional graduates amounted to 7,605 students. As for popular fields of study, most graduates come from engineering, manufacturing and construction (24.2%), services (20.4%), business, administration and law (13.8%), health and social welfare (13.3%) programs [19].

Vocational education in Georgia is regulated by the Law on Vocational Education (2018) [20]. The law determines the legal framework of the vocational education system, establishes the management principles of the vocational education system, and the legal bases for the implementation of activities in the field of vocational education. The new law adoption on vocational education created the basis for active work in the direction of the internationalization of the vocational education system, which includes the introduction of internationally recognized standards and sharing best international practices. Also, it created a legal basis for the joint and exchange programs implementation in vocational education. The national qualification framework was based on the requirements and principles of the European qualification framework, which contributes to the compatibility and recognition of the qualifications issued in Georgia in the European education space.

2022-2030 Unified National Strategy of Education and Science of Georgia [21] is a significant document for further vocational education development, which is based on the analysis of the achievements and challenges of reforms implemented in the education and science field. The strategy covers all areas of the education system, including vocational education. In accordance with the vision of the mentioned strategy, in 2030, the high quality of Georgia’s education and science system will give individuals the opportunity to make the best choices for developing their competencies and abilities [15].
Vocational education has a significant place in the Vision 2030 - Development Strategy of Georgia presented by the Government of Georgia [2]. A number of reforms are planned to ensure an inclusive, diverse, innovative environment for professional learning and teaching. The issues of sharing responsibility for the vocational education policy creation and implementation between the public and private sectors and the main directions of sectoral policies related to skills are presented. It is planned to implement exchange and joint programs with foreign educational institutions. Centers of excellence and international schools will be developed, which will be able to attract foreign students. Special attention will be paid to work-based learning development, the measures supporting the transition from vocational education to labor market implementation, and the introduction of career counseling practices.

Conclusion and recommendations. Thus, vocational education can have a multifaceted positive impact on the standard of living of a person, as well as on the country's economy, society and business functioning.

In order to further develop vocational education in Georgia, it is necessary to continue reforms. Introduce professional programs in demand in the labor market in educational institutions, promote the development of digital educational resources, support innovative teaching, improve competition, and create better employment opportunities with government support. It is necessary to intensify work in the direction of training and retraining of vocational education teachers. For vocational education improvement and human capital development in general, it is especially significant to strengthen the partnership between the public and private sectors in the country.

References:


