Institutionalization of Quality Assurance Culture and Organizational Learning: A Study of IQA Practices in Georgian Universities

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Forward and Acknowledgements

The inspiration for the research topic of my Master's thesis project in the field of higher education and quality is rooted in my scholarly interest of higher education quality reforms in a comparative perspective. The focus on Georgia is justified in coming from the country of the study - Georgia, as well as possessing local knowledge on the past and ongoing processes in the education system. The intention is to study the reform processes and prepare professionally for higher education research and administration.

The educational policy and institutional reforms that have been in place at all levels of education in Georgia are quite complex and not substantially studied yet, including evaluation of systematic changes and data enrichment. The present thesis is an endeavor to contribute to data enrichment and facilitate more research projects on QA in the future.

Foremost, I would like to express the deepest appreciation to my thesis supervisor, Dr. Bjørn Stensaker for his patience and insightful feedback on the initial ideas for the project and the framework for analysis, whose scholarly interests in and the depth of knowledge of the research areas are valuable in many respects.

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I. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Executive Summary

The present study intends to establish a baseline on the practices of internal quality assurance and describe quality assurance (thereafter, IQA) culture in three Georgian universities (Ilia State University (ISU), Batumi Shota Rustaveli State University (RSU), Telavi State University (TeSaU)) in the context of the changing national higher education policies and recently established quality assurance surveillance system. Namely, the institutional authorization and programme accreditation and the legislative measures that set forward the requirements to introduce IQA offices in Georgian universities. Bounded by the new national policy and QA legislative framework in Georgia, that have been considerably influenced by the Bologna process and the European assistance programs, HEIs have formally been urged to build up IQA offices that would potentially enhance the quality of the primary processes in higher education.

The focus of the study is to look at the recent developments in launching the national quality assurance agenda and its accountability requirements aiming at improving the quality of teaching and learning at universities along with other recognized external drivers for change (e.g. market competition for students, hence revenues, changing student quality - critical and self-demanding customers, etc.) and reflect on the impact they have had and/or continue to have on changing responses and behaviors, if any, at the institutional level.

Studying the organizational adaptations by looking at one of the aspects of university life, that is IQA management, at Georgian universities in response to the changing conditions and the new phase of development and imposed responsibilities, the current study aims at further developing the available literature on the internal design – the 'architecture' of teaching and learning process within academic institutions and contributing to the theoretical considerations and analytical understanding of academic learning organizations.

The study will review noticeable organizational changes – changes in organizational arrangements, i.e. organizational structure and governance in relation to setting up IQA systems in universities as a result of the recently imposed legal requirements. By examining the linkage between external requirements and internal practice for improving the quality as

well as the meso-level learning activities with respect to quality assurance management, it will address the major analytical question of whether there are elements of genuine learning within the respective academic organization, as it is expected from various stakeholders, and what sort of "learning organizations" the selected higher education institutions are becoming with respect to IQA management.

An institutional case study method of experiences of practices in IQA from selected Georgian higher education institutions aims to establish analytical understanding of the local practice and explore organizational learning in relation to quality assurance arrangements and practice in a real life setting. With the aid of data from seven interviews – two to three from each institution, the institutional responses and behaviors towards the intentions underpinning the quality movement evolving from outside and through internal structures are examined. The data solicited from the examined institutions is framed under the integrated approach of two theoretical models and an analytical framework. The study will supplement to inform the existing professional practice in the changing environment, triggered by the external drivers for change such as by the national government policies as a response to and consequence of the Bologna process, the student market forces and the emergence of new market competitors within which Georgian academic institutions have been *placed* to carry out their basic processes of teaching and learning.

In addition to obtaining empirical data from the primary sources – from three Georgian HEIs under a case study research design, the study, as a departure point, will carefully review the core national discourse shaping the rationale for quality in the existing policy papers, that is, the key policy documents on Georgia's current regulatory and QA frameworks. Highly contextual grounds of the study are to be established by giving a comprehensive overview of the recent developments of the national higher education policy and reforms in relation to quality assurance at both national (macro) and institutional (meso) levels.

The theory and research from public administration on an academic learning organization, reform and change, policy implementation as well as selected analytical literature from sociology and political science will be used to study and analyze adaptations in academic structure and governance and organizational learning patterns at the meso level.

The study starts with introducing two different theoretical models framed under the *neo-institutional* and the *resource dependence* perspectives that offer two different conceptual understandings of organizational adaptations and learning needed to adjust to a new, regulated, and more competitive environment. It will propose two theoretical traditions HEIs may be affected by the centralized national policies with respect to QA reform and the Bologna process – either they know how to please the authority and feed the principal agent and/or they develop self-directed internal responses to the larger processes. This rather broad theoretical framework will be connected to the *five* analytical indicators of organization learning proposed by David Garvin (1993) and used by David Dill (1999) in relation to the adaptations of academic organizations in quality assurance in his study, to assess what sort of responses HEIs adopt and what kind of an organizational learning model they are developing – externally-focused or internally-focused.

The proposed study is timely due to the recent introduction of the major QA initiatives and the QA surveillance plan by the Georgian government to maintain and enhance quality of higher education in the transition economy and accelerate the European integration process by engaging in the Bologna Process. The significance of the study should by no means be underestimated, because no comprehensive empirical study has been conducted either to document the recent developments in the regulatory and QA frameworks in Georgia or to establish the most up-to-date analysis on the local institutional quality management practices in recent years. Thus, the present study is one of such timely endeavors to enrich data on the local institutional practices and study the change processes in this particular dimension; hence the analysis may potentially clarify implications for better informed and data-driven policy-formation in the long-run. It can establish grounds for future studies of organizational behavior and quality assurance using the explored theoretical and analytical frameworks. Equally important is the objective to inform peer institutions, education policy-makers, stakeholders that may be concerned with institutional capacity development and promotion of internal quality assurance cultures within higher education.

1.2 Problem Statement

HEIs nowadays face challenges of external evaluations and increasing pressure and demand from various stakeholders around the world. Georgia is not an exception. Concerns for quest for quality and forms of academic accountability, designed to maintain and improve the quality of the primary processes in higher education have become an integral part of the national higher education reforms in many parts of the world, including Europe and Georgia. The traditional means of maintaining or improving quality of teaching and learning by universities were tacit and implicit, free from any form of a formal policy (Dill, 1999; Henkel, 1998; Stensaker, 2007). Out of the two established foci of quality assessment, often referred to as contradictory objectives, several scholars argue that HEIs have traditionally emphasized *quality improvement* since the Middle Ages (van Vught & Westerheijden, 1994) as part of the *unwritten* social contract between society and knowledge institutions (Clark, 1983). Quality used to be a tacit dimension of the sector as part of the unwritten social contract; the argument can be put forward that quality has always been a tradition and the key organizing principle and core features of academe (Middlehurst, 1992). It is just the outside world and the new fashion of governments that stress the need to pay attention to it nowadays (Newton, 2007), or this new trend may be framed as a 'collective formalization of quality' (Harvey, 2006; Harvey & Stensaker, 2008). It is notoriously known that universities have been distinctively characterized as 'loosely-coupled' organizations where the 'shop-floor' exercised a great degree of autonomy in their work; the shared norms and disciplinary traditions guided the quality of teaching and learning (Clark, 1983; Weick, 1976). Many contributors to the study of quality issues over the last couple of decades still consider quality to be traditional and intrinsic dimension in academia (Stensaker, 2007). However, the emerging evidence shows that universities in many countries face increasing external pressure under the influence of the new public policy instruments of the 'evaluative state'(Neave, 1998) demanding academic accountability (Dill, 1992, 1999) and evaluation may also be seen as a political process of rationalizing the policy formation (Henkel, 1998). The actions of the outside world have mostly been marked by focusing on *accountability* measures that has been an indication of 'withdrawal of trust' from institutions aiming at protecting the HE market (Trow, 1994; 1996) by creating quasi-market or regulated state-market model (Olsen, 1988). This is the new reality higher education institutions face worldwide; some systems have faced it recently, like Georgia as part of the education reforms and change in national policy discourse.

This latest drift in focus on quality issues and quality assurance by the outside world in academe has also been stimulated by international agencies such as World Bank, IMF, OECD, etc. The concept of quality in higher education has been a predominant 'meta idea over the last two decades with related spread of the new institutional quality management fads and fashion reflecting the major phenomenon in societies (Stensaker, 2007). The key element in establishing and creating the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) by the signatory countries is comprehensively the quality assurance reform agenda itself to align the outputs and facilitate recognition. As the Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research relabeled the Bologna Process in their reforms introduced in 2002-2003, the process is the Quality Reform itself. The Quality Reforms in the long time-frame perspective are to be eventually implemented throughout the Bologna signatory states.

Since the beginning of the 21st century, the context in which Georgian HEIs operate has changed considerably due to the recent engagement in the Bologna process and governmental change in 2003 as a result of the Rose Revolution. The new direction towards the regionalization of Georgian higher education and the intensified international educational assistance programs have had a considerable impact on the national HE policies to reform and restructure the system and address quality problems, mainly to improve its effectiveness and relevance. In this context, HEIs have been required to adjust to the externally-driven national quality check arrangements such as the institutional authorization and programme accreditation that aimed at checking the basic standards for administering educational services and granting education degrees, authorized and recognized by the state. This new process had a devastating consequence for many HEIs. After the legislative measures, launched in 2004 by the new law on higher education of Georgia, HEIs have been left to deal with various transitions in the organizational and program structures; the new law demanded for HEIs to build an IQA system in order to improve, meet the external QA scheme requirements, and implement the pressures in the quest for quality imposed from above (Law of Georgia on Higher Education, 2004, Article 25). In addition to the national expectations for the HEIs to be met, under the Bologna Process scheme, the Berlin Communiqué, 2003 called individual HEIs to prioritize and dedicate their institutional efforts to enhance quality by developing more effective and robust IQA systems. The ministers particularly emphasized the role and responsibility of each institution in ensuring quality as the way to develop the European dimension for QA. In support of this ambition, Standards and Guidelines for

Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ENQA, 2005) was developed which was also translated into Georgian as a guideline for employing it as a novel and recommended practice in internal quality assurance management.

The practices of QA in Georgian HEIs including the development of the QA scheme(s) in the country as a whole are in fact new at birth, accounting for about seven years. Up until 2005, institutions were not administering IQA measures as such and any formal national QA measures, so called quality assurance surveillance systems both external and institutional, were either absent, or not functional. Hence, one should only assume that there is no strong institutional culture of administering formal QA in HEIs thus far. More detailed explanation of the research problem is presented in the background and conceptual framework section below.

1.3 Purpose of the Study

The rationale of the proposed research study is to explore and describe the existing IQA practices and institutional quality culture in HEIs in the context of the external quality check and surveillance scheme and legislative framework on the processes. Particularly, the primary purpose is to provide an overview of IQA and structural adaptations relevant to the improvement of the core academic processes at three HEIs and understand the impact of the external accountability requirements on some of the noticeable changes in Georgian higher education institutions. Its aim is to study institutional adaptations and change in the light of a development of quality assurance culture within – alteration in organizational structures and governance, external and internal orientation, distribution of responsibilities, activities related to problem solving in QA, development of information system, human resource development, etc. By examining the linkage between external requirements and institutional practice, it will address how the new external policies and arrangements affected the 'inner life' of higher education institutions and whether they are becoming 'learning organizations'. Time has come to reflect on what has been happening within institutions regarding quality assurance processes.

The secondary aim is to supplement the available knowledge locally about institutional experiences of implementing QA and how they are becoming transparent to stakeholders; also, to inform and stimulate more attention from the key actors and policy-makers, general

public, etc. that may be concerned with institutional capacity development and promotion of internal quality assurance culture within higher education. Further strengthened and validated knowledge on the changing practices at the meso and micro levels, thus learning from it, and helping to embed quality culture can facilitate organizational development, may trigger positive change and enhancement of quality of higher education activities.

1.4 Research Questions

Key Question: How are Georgian HEIs affected by the national policy initiatives aiming at improving the quality of teaching and learning at universities?

Sub Questions:

(1) What are the changes in organizational arrangements, i.e., *organizational structure* and *governance* to improve quality of the primary processes at Georgian higher education institutions?
(2) How are practices in IQA in HEIs affected by *the external drivers* for change?

This will help us examine the linkage between IQA practices and external QA (EQA) – policy and practice (e.g. what is evaluated, standards of methodologies, convergence in arrangements, etc.). For instance, does the policy of EQA, whether it maybe accountability *versus* improvement focuses, evidence itself in different practices in IQA within the target HEIs?

(3) Are HEIs with regard to improving quality of *their core process* becoming 'learning organizations' or is it a matter of cosmetic change giving false impressions to the outside world on their performance?

The latter is an analytical question that aims to address the elements of building a learning organization, or where relevant, to report examples of developing a conformance or compliance culture.

The key question will explore how the national quality assurance policies – the law on higher education that is fully in line with the Bologna process recommendations act as an impetus for organizational learning using the five indicators proposed by David Garvin (1993). The sub-questions examine the following three dimensions: (1) changes in governance and structures in relation to QA; (2) external orientation and adaptations of organizations; and (3) internal dynamics with respect to QA processes in HEIs.

1.5 Significance of the Study

The key actors who are responsible for the national higher education policy formation in the country have made positive steps in recent years in reforming and modernizing the higher education system, especially in introducing legislative measures and steering mechanism to fix the pure market failures. Nevertheless, the preexisting structures and processes still remain powerful to hamper the reforms process, because the period after the communism collapse in 1989 has been marked by dramatic and unstable social, economic, and political transformations which adversely affected the education sector, including everything else.

For the newly independent state of Georgia, adequate financing of higher education appeared to be a major constraint. In addition to the structural issues and unfavorable legacy left by the 70 years of the Soviet regime and ideology, the higher education system lost its linkage to the labour market; the corresponding patterns were the collapsing economy in 1990s and deteriorating education quality. Given the harsh realities of the economic recession in 1990s, the state government found itself vulnerable to provide adequate funding and effective steering mechanism to preserve quality. Coupled with this, the demand for higher education remained unchanged and enrollment rates went up even higher reaching mass, if not universal, patterns by 2005. The Georgian society always has valued higher education and the anticipated social upward mobility prospects of education. Likewise the increasing demand for higher education, the emergence of new professions in a transition economy, such as business management, economics, public affairs and the related job skills opened the possibility to create new higher education institutions (Sharvashidze, 2005).

For this purpose, the liberal regulatory framework for higher education intensively stimulated and permitted proliferation of private HEIs in the market without giving much consideration to some of the unanticipated adverse consequences of the tension of access and quality. The

total number of HEIs, both public and private, was between this range - 244 to 300 by 2005 which may suggest a robust higher education system – the core characteristic of the post-industrial knowledge-based society where the demand is met and the participations rates are kept high. Nevertheless, behind this data lies the harsh reality of pervasive system-wide corruption, deteriorating quality, external and internal efficiency, and poor governance both at the national and institutional levels.

On the whole, the macro level factors, such as scarce funding of HE, proliferation of private HEIs and establishment of 'degree mills' over 14 years, "diploma disease", system-wide corruption (Dore, 1976; Heynemann, 2008; Janashia, 2004), and poor governance capacity within the respective structures in the HE system contributed to the overall decline of quality for more than a decade. Hence, concerns for quality of HE then naturally came to the forefront in policy discussions in Georgia. The discussion of education quality enhancement appeared at a time of rapid growth of interest amongst policy-makers and the new government officials that came into power in 2003. The change and development-oriented government authorities immediately recognized its prevailing role for social and economic development.

In this context worldwide, knowledge has emerged as an economic commodity. That being said, the national governments have intensively steered processes related to their HE systems to ensure that they are placed competitively in the international marketplace. Between the two major perspectives on HEIs, i.e. higher education as a social institution and higher education as an engine for economic growth, national governments tend to emphasize the economic dimension of higher education (Gumport, 2000; Gumport & Sporn, 1999). Therefore, their actions with respect to higher education are marked by distinct characteristics of what many scholars refer to as the rise of the 'evaluative state' (Neave, 1998). They shared the common pact and started to recognize the international evidence about higher education and its positive role to facilitate the development processes - to reposition and maintain competitiveness in increasingly globalizing knowledge-based economies. The worldwide practice shows that the more national states link HE and its outputs to economy, welfare, and market advantages, the more it is necessary for HEIs to secure quality.

In the case of the new political administration of Georgia, higher education is a vital instrument on the national socio-economic development policy agenda, including the ones of

the international aid agencies (IMF, World Bank, USAID, UN), to promote faster growth by moving towards skill-based production and services and speed up the *regionalization* prospects, i.e. the European integration process in the nearest future (Georgia Consolidated Education Strategy and Action Plan 2007-2011). Pursuing this goal in the new development strategy, Georgia became a full member of the Bologna process in 2005 (Bergen Communiqué, May 19, 2005). Joining the Bologna process in essence means that under the supra-national negotiated agreements amongst the ministers, each member state agreed to follow and reform HE in compliance with the negotiated standards and indicators. And quality of higher education is certainly the primary concern of the European family which is quite often reflected in the Bologna campaign. The Quality Reforms in the long run will be implemented throughout the Bologna signatory countries (EPPM, 2008; Glonti & Chitashvili, 2007). All these have created the context in which rationales for quality for Georgian higher educational institutions have been shaped

Regardless the demand and requirements to bet met, the Bologna process offers prospects to the Georgian HE to change and improve. Indeed, the aim of potential European integration motivates the national authorities to prioritize higher education and relevant policy instrument(s). For instance, the most vividly observed government's response to reforming the national HE is the emergence of Georgia as an 'evaluative state' that is steering the processes related to the functions and governance of HEIs (Neave, 1998). The role of state has become vigorous in how they perceive HE development and its potential contribution to the socio-economic development of the nation.

The recent reforms in HE respectively were legitimized by the introduction of the HE legal framework - the Law of Georgia on Higher Education, which is intended to regulate the transformation of higher education system. The law was a foundation of the first attempts of QA at the policy level – formal accreditation processes of HEIs in Georgia, undertaken by an independent accreditation agency – The National Center for Educational Quality Enhancement, NCEQE (formerly, the National Center for Education Accreditation (NCEA). Although the trend was a basic check of standards for HEIs, it created grounds to establish mechanisms for quality assurance in higher education. The external measures for accreditation evaluated all HEIs that emerged during the transitional period featuring high level of corruption and deteriorating quality of the educational processes (Janashia, 2004; Sharvashidze, 2005). The process revealed that a majority of HEIs were not able to meet the

basic accreditation criteria set by the Accreditation Agency. As a result, many of them failed the institutional accreditation process and out of 244 HEIs (public 26 and private 218) initial accreditation was given to 110 HEIs. However, today's data on HEIs include fewer (some of them have merged) - 58 state accredited HEIs, 20 public and 38 private, respectively.

Until this large-scale reform endeavor, HEIs enrolled a large number of students; universities were crowed and literally administered an open door policy for the mass enrollment demand. The pure interest of higher education providers in the market was financial revenues, instances documented names of students enrolled in an absentee program, but still managed to get degrees at the end. The cultural and economic aspirations were noted on the demand side. The "diploma disease" was quite pervasive among the Georgian people, which many scholars explain differently in other parts of the world for various reasons as a transition from elite to mass universities (Altbach, 2004; Maassen & Cloete, 2002; Scott, 1998; Trow, 1970).

Such expansion in size also created tensions for preserving quality. After the introduction of the accreditation programme, which assessed all existing institutions for approval to admit and offer state approved degrees, a number of students and HEIs declined more than twice and access and participation in HE became *exclusive* for those with merits screened via the high stakes university entrance examinations that is administered centrally. The shift may suggest that today's student body entering Georgia HEIs is quite different in abilities compared to their previous peers who were subject to individual university admission procedures until 2004, being part of the corrupted regime. A better-prepared and demanding type of student body adds its powerful effect to drivers for change and better performance. At least the intention of the Unified National University Entrance Examination was to screen the applicant pool and admit those who are able and prepared to study at a higher level.

Hereby, an argument can be put forth that the cut in the number of HEIs and decreasing student enrollment rates exclusive to those with merits has been compromised in order to improve quality provision of the higher education sector. The primary aim to make the HE exclusive was to enhance quality and reward able students. First time in the history of the Georgian higher education, HEIs activities are subject to formal external requirements for quality. Moreover, an institutional competitiveness through market-based coordination and input-based demand driven funding scheme will become decisive when it comes to revenues and student choice (Clark, 1983). Some of the elements of the market type of steering model

that we see in Georgia today – both institutional, i.e. increasing competition for students and labour ones, i.e. employability of graduates - will eventually regulate educational quality.

To emphasize the point more, the introduction of the high stakes examinations – the National University Entrance Examinations - directly aimed at increasing higher admissions requirements and eliminating corruption, it must also be understood as an indicator of enhancing quality of applicants to HEIs. In other words, today's student body in Georgia is assumed and tested for to be more prepared to continue studies at a higher level, accordingly greater expectations from the demand side will put more pressure on HEIs in Georgia. This brings more tensions from the demand side on the supply side, which requires both internal and external validation of quality. Increasing public and private funding of HE in recent years with corresponding higher tuition fees directly influences the degree of institutional accountability to the government, communities, students and their families. There is no free higher education for the demand-side unless one receives a full student grant given to exceptional candidates; hence, students and families considering private education investment must have confidence in the quality of Georgian HEIs and in the quality and value of Georgian degrees. This brings more tensions from the demand side on the supply side and all the demand requires both internal and external validation of quality of public and personal investments.

Regardless the rising pressures on the higher education recently to strengthen public confidence in their core activities and meet accountability and compliance to the legal framework, it must be admitted that the context appears promising largely. The previous public perceptions about the higher education system are improving and the accusations for low quality of the educational processes, poorly prepared and unqualified professoriate, and irrelevance of the HE system to the (inter)national labour-market needs, are more dominated by the public education policy discussions of opportunities to transform and enhance quality of higher education. The current government policy with respect to higher education and institutional resource support have never been so encouraging, hence the meaningful coordination amongst the key actors (the state, the market, and the HEIs) may only be complimentary to build a robust higher education system.

Putting this simply, now, the primary responsibility for quality assurance lies within each institution. In fact, change happens incrementally from grassroots (Clark, 1983) and the

distinct characteristics of bottom-heavy higher education institutions affect policy implementation as a case of change in the short-run (Musselin, 2004). Moreover, this is what the Berlin Communiqué of 2003, the European Ministers pushed for - more institutional level efforts. The communiqué argued the higher education institutions to pursue their efforts to build up a robust quality assurance system of their core activities through the systematic introduction of internal mechanisms and their direct correlation to external quality assurance. Consequently, it advocated that higher education institutions in each Bologna signatory country to build up an effective internal quality assurance system guided by the common set of European standards for internal quality assurance that is framed under the ENQA document: all Bologna signatory states were called to implement these standards by 2007. The importance of internal quality assurance capacity and culture development improvement must be on the national policy and institutions strategic agenda. Indeed, the external quality enhancement agency, in reality quality assurance check and control agency, the National Center for Educational Quality Enhancement, is not fully capable for optimum quality assurance at each university, thus it has to put sufficient focus on developing to build a robust internal quality management systems. Hence, higher education institutions in Georgia are challenged to adjust their program structures, curricula, teaching and learning methods and meet the new societal and economic demands of the country. Georgian HEIs, in recognition of this challenge, are urged to pay superior attention to establish robust internal quality assurance systems to address the current challenges of enhanced effectiveness and higher education degree relevance.

To sum up the discussion, the available literature on what Georgia has been doing to regulate and improve higher education quality - how they are implemented at the institutional level, what has been the impact of the external requirements - is scarce, if available at all. As the current context description clearly demonstrates, it demands the measures for individual HEIs to focus on this dimension. One important note before the engagement into further discussions is that the policy reforms with respect to higher education that are primarily in line with the Bologna process are at the early stage of implementation. Hence, this factor attaches the present study the special importance as well as some limitations to keep in mind. The present study is intended to draw a baseline and look at the developments analytically. It intends to map and assess data on the internal QA practices and study institutional change in response to the changing environment.

The section to follow will review the theory and research on learning organization to establish conceptual and theoretical framework for the analysis of the changes in academic structure and governance within the selected universities.

II. THEORETICAL & ANALYTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

2.1 Two Theoretical Approaches Relevant to Organizational Learning

To establish the theoretical grounds for the analytical understanding of the research questions, two major theoretical perspectives are used in the present study: *Resource Dependence Theory (RDT)* and the *Neo-institutionalism perspective*. Given the nature of the main contribution of the study that lies in its different approach of using the two rather larger theoretical perspectives in relation to the organizational learning literature, these theoretical frameworks are used and understood in an altered way in this study to conceptualize organizational adaptations and struggle for continuous improvement to better understand the analytical part within the organizational learning perspective of academic organizations.

With this in mind, the following assumptions can be made when addressing the organizational behaviors relevant to improving the core processes in higher education. There are two idealistic ways through which HEIs can be affected by the external QA policies (national policies, regional QA networks – ENQA framework, etc.) and the external drivers for change, i.e. student market competition, reputation, etc.:

(1) *Perfect Flexibility* – external-focus, fitting within the environment and/or

(2) *Internal Enhancement Measures* - organizational identity struggle and continuous development.

Neither assumption is exclusive from another, nor does either of them explain perfectly the theoretical perspectives. Nevertheless, the theoretical models help explain the assumptions.

The first assumption about organizational adaptations may be best understood and framed under the sociological view of institutions - the *neo-institutionalism* where the central thesis is that there is strong pressure from the surrounding environments, which in this study may be defined that organizations are externally- and accountability-focused searching for legitimacy and survival (Figure 2).

The second view that organizations can adapt themselves is a cornerstone assumption of the *Resource Dependence* theory. It also assumes that organizations are dependent on external forces, but emphasizes that each organization has certain strategic choice and actions left to respond to the external drivers for change that is more internal-looking, emphasizing the need

of institutional responsibility exhibiting continuous struggle for organizational identity and improvement (Figure 2).

In the following, these perspectives and assumptions are explored briefly before the analytical model is presented. The theoretical views and the analytical framework are presented as a matrix describing the indicators of organizational learning emerged in the literature from the contributions of the key thinkers like Peter Senge (1990a, 1990b), David Garvin (1993), George Huber (1991) in relation to the core theoretical perspectives (Figure 2).

Neo-institutional Theory

From the neo-institutionalism perspective, organizations are viewed to operate in an institutional environment, influenced by this environment that informs and guides appropriate or acceptable organizational forms and behaviors (Scott, 1987; Oliver, 1997). It helps us explain why organizations exhibit elements of standardization and the same organizational structure – institutionalization (isomorphism) (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Stensaker & Norgård, 2001) as a consequence and response to institutional fulfillment to fit within the environment.

The theory informs us that the main goal for institutions is to survive; so is the constant need for institutions to establish legitimacy. In terms of HEIs and quality enhancement discussion, we may interpret that it is to feed the beast and meet the expectations of the principal agent, per se the national structures/external agents for external quality validation. The presented conceptualization emphasizes the notion of the survival of the fittest organizations – the organizational conformity to the institutional milieu with 'the proper' actions and mimicry. To establish legitimacy, institutions are aware of the importance of pleasing the authority – 'playing the game', feeding the beast, developing double-standards and exercising symbolic actions; such a strategy by institutions, called the standardization – institutionalization, constitutes to develop a compliance culture, practice window-dressing, imitate actions, and contribute to convergences in institutional practices. Organizational conformity occurs when organizations practice relatively stable routine responses, symbolic actions, often ritualistic in compliance of environmental change (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Levitt & March, 1988; Mayer and Rowan, 1977). According to the neo-institutional perspective, organizational mimicry is a common mechanism in institutional behaviour – "compliance occurs in many circumstances because other types of behavior are inconceivable; routines are followed

because they are taken for granted as 'the way we do these things'" (Scott, 2001, p. 57). The neo-institutionalism suggests that organizations or individuals make certain choices, because other actions are not conceivable due to the availability of an alternative. Adopted organizational structures and practices are often reflections of the rules, policies, paradigms, etc. of the larger environment (Scott, 2001; Oliver, 1997). The neo-institutional perspective does not view organizations as self-directed, autonomously perusing their own objectives independent from their social milieu. Organizations thus act to gain certainty and legitimacy, emphasizing stability of organizations while operating in that environment. Organizational adaptation to the demands in the society is determined by external forces for reasons of legitimacy and survival (Stensaker & Norgård, 2001).

Resource Dependency Theory (RDT)

The central thesis in the Resource Dependency Theory (Pfeffer & Salancik 1978; Pfeffer 1982) is the flexibility and the reactive nature of organizations. The theory is based on the notion that organizations operate in environments that are the sources of scarce critical resources and organizations compete to secure and exploit their share, which are also fought by other contender organizations, in order to insure their own continuation and endurance in market (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978).

In comparison with the neo-institutional theory, RDT also assumes that organizations are dependents on external forces, but emphasizes that each organization has certain strategic choice and actions left to respond to the external drivers for change that is more internal-looking, emphasizing the need of institutional responsibility exhibiting continuous struggle for organizational identity and improvement while developing their own internal responses.

The resource dependence view shares the open and natural systems theories (Birmbaum, 1988, 2000) of organizations with an assumption that organizations are flexible and responsive in order to survive. Under the open systems perspective of higher education institutions, social scientists come to an agreement that organizations exist in their environment and interact with its milieu for realizing its objectives and goals. As the theory would predict, environmental transformation induces organizational change because of the active choice behavior of organizations (Oliver, 1991).

Within the resource dependence school, the departure point is that organizations' internal responses to competitive general environment as the source of scarce resources is critical for

survival. *Competition* among organizations is a distinctive assumption of the resource-based view. Accordingly, resource dependence theorists argued that in order to ensure stability and certainty of resources that are critical to an organization, for instance, revenues for HEIs from its customers, government funding both tailored and general, etc., the concepts of strategic choice and tactical management are important to develop their own responses to their external environment. From the institutional quality enhancement perspective, this would also mean to raise quality and increase and maintain institutional *reputation* in the market. Relevant to higher education institutions, institutions must secure and maintain reputation, successfully compete for its main customer core – students and markets, develop and sustain effective relationships with society at large (Clark, 1998). Within this school of thought, the internal capabilities of the organization in designing their own responses to the external demands to gain competitive advantage in the market are critical; universities are thought to innovate for survival. The theory has implications regarding many aspects of organizational strategy such as strategic choice, decision-making, divisional structure of organizations, external relations, etc.

These theoretical frameworks – the neo-institutional and RDT have been used and understood in an *altered* way in this study to conceptualize organizational adaptations and the organizational learning perspective of academic organizations. Both perspectives are rather idealistic to understand organizational adaptability, in which HEIs can be affected by the external environment in which HEIs can exhibit differentiated imposed and self-directed behaviors relevant to improving the core processes in higher education. One way to understand why these perspectives have been selected to study and analyze organizational behaviors in administering QA processes, the departure point is that both perspectives deal with organizational learning but in very different ways, for instance inward-looking and outward-looking. Ideally, both approaches facilitate the understanding of the type of learning organization each examined university may be becoming (Figure 2). The following sections will make clear why these two perspectives have been adopted in this study and what clues these perspectives offer with respect to the type of organizational learning occurring within the organizations.

2.2 Analytical Framework

HEIs as 'Learning Organizations' Approach

According to many scholars, the new public policy instruments of various governments around the world urge HEIs to improve quality of the core processes (Stensaker, 2007). The rationale found behind the internal public reforms in many parts of the world, including the national higher education policies in Georgia reflects responses to external forces (Maassen & Cloete, 2002). As already mentioned in the problem statement, higher education has become a *vital* instrument on nations' socio-economic development agendas and policies, including the ones of various multilateral and bilateral development agencies (Altbach, 2004, OECD Thematic Review, 2008; UNESCO World Conference on Higher Education, 1998). In this global context, nations are challenged to reform HE to gain and/or maintain international competitiveness. Economies that were traditionally based on manufacturing are heading towards "knowledge-based economy" in nature (Altbach, 2004; Castells, 2001; Scott, 1998). The impact of the emerging government reforms bringing higher education into the play towards development can also be seen in the rise and growth of the 'evaluative state' (Neave, 1998). The practice in many parts of the world shows that the more national states link HE and its outputs to economy, welfare, and market advantages, the more it is necessary for HEIs to secure quality (Henkel, 1998; Stensaker, 2007; Tight, 2003). HEIs activities are more formally evaluated nowadays and they are held more accountable for *performativity* than ever before. These external drivers for change and development of various quality assurance policies in a number of countries assume that universities must perform better and become learning organizations with regard to the core processes of teaching and learning.

Without question, there is a variety of frameworks that can be applied to study organizational behaviors with respect to quality management within higher education institutions as well as the need of organizational adaptations to a new and more competitive environment. One of such relevant literature would be on the learning organization.

The Learning Organization

The concept of the 'learning organization' originates from the organizational studies literature that has been recently emphasized while studying organizational behavior and learning (Tsang, 1997). The amount of relevant literature is immense characterized by writings of various pioneer thinkers who contributed to the disciplines of organizational

learning attempting to define and suggest an 'ideal model' of an organization in which learning is maximized (Easyerly-Smith, 1997; Levitt & March, 1988; March, 1991; Huber, 1991; Senge, 1990a). Contributions from the broader literature on organizational learning that studies the phenomena of learning within organizational contexts have been useful offering solid theoretical grounds for clarification and conceptualization of the learning organization. The concept of the 'learning organization' describes the purposeful and systematic quest for knowledge and the processes and structures in support of the related activities to be promoted.

As David Garvin (1993) argued in his well-known article – 'Building a Learning Organization', commitment to learning is a prerequisite for continuous improvement and organizational advancement - 'better oneself to gain an edge'; if it is absent, a repetition of old practices is present. "Change remains cosmetic, and improvements are either fortuitous or short-lived," - he adds (p. 78). He continues that the organizational learning encompasses a planned process within an organization: it is purposeful and systematic acquisition of knowledge gained internally and externally within the existing support structure of an organization.

Selected from the classic writings, Peter Senge (1990a) defines:

> learning organizations [are] …organizations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole together (p. 3).

He views learning organizations as the ones committed to the optimizing learning through carefully integrated corporate model 'component technologies' (systems thinking, personal mastery, mind-set models, shared-vision, team learning) have been criticized as being too abstract and utopian, hardly giving a practical meaning to the definition; it is neither actionable or applicable in practice (Dill, 1999; Garvin, 1993). In the similar spirit, George Huber (1991) partitioned four contracts related to organizational learning ((1) knowledge acquisition, (2) information distribution, (3) information interpretation, and (4) organizational memory). These categorizations provide applied foundations and basis for a framework within which academic organizations can be studied. Garvin articulates a similar framework for analysis that also shares more of its utilitarian orientation but the model is more extended

and practical, presenting more precise indicators for modeling the main building blocks for the learning organization.

There are differences in literature in articulation of the meaning of learning organization and organizational learning and the former is a relatively new concept that was developed from the latter. The components that describe organizational learning in very extensive literature largely derived from the business industry are relevant to the notion of the learning organization. That said, the utilization of the constructs of the learning organization derived from the business industry to higher education may be contested, but it is widely noted that the context in which universities continue to function nowadays has changed. Some of the recent developments in higher education systems in many parts of the world such as new public policies demanding performance (effectiveness and efficiency), the rise of the 'evaluative state' (Neave, 1998), the growth of managerialism and spread of management fads (Birmbaum, 2000; Boer & Goedegebuure, 2003; Stensaker, 2007), new public management (NPM), marketisation and changing competition, etc. are the developments that allow us to look at and selectively borrow some of the relevant approaches and perspectives from the business industry literature to analyze trends in higher education.

In the light of these developments, it is reasonable to expect that HEIs in general, including Georgian HEIs, may need to reconsider necessary organizational structures and adapt some of the management fads. Hence, the application of the conceptual framework below from the business industry to HEIs is relevant while addressing some of the limitations of the framework while taking the distinct characteristics of HEIs into account (Allaire & Firsirotu, 1984; Clark, 1983; Weick, 1976, 1987).

Garvin's Learning Activities: Indicators of Building a Learning Organization

As noted elsewhere, Garvin's (1993) framework for the learning organization was selected because he shares more of an utilitarian orientation of the literature on the learning organization, that is not high aspiration but drawing on practical guidelines and operational advice for organizational management. Garvin's operational advice is directed towards designing specific learning activities and methodological tools to maximize the quality of organizational learning processes.

The working definition of a learning organization should be a departure point here. According to Garvin (1993), a "learning organization is an organization skilled at creating, acquiring, and transferring knowledge, and at modifying its behavior to reflect new knowledge and insights" (p. 80). In support of the archetype of the learning organization, he proposes the following planned learning activities how to build a learning organization: (1) *systematic problem solving, (2) experimentation with new approaches, (3) learning from their own experience and past history, (4)learning from the experiences and best practices of others,* and *(5) transferring of knowledge within an organization.* These indicators (Figure 1) – the whole framework has been used by Dill's (1999), derived from Garvin (1993), when he applied them to case studies of quality assurance in universities (Dill, 1999).

Davit Garvin's (1993) learning activities:

(1) *Systematic problem solving*. This activity involves organizational approach towards issues to monitor and improve quality of products and services offered in a particular mind-set and methodology. It relies on the scientific model to diagnose problems and facilitate data-driven decision-making to understand underlying causes and existing evidence. Training component of staff upgrading skills in analytical tools and data analysis is critical in ensuring a continuous process of quality improvement. Accurate conclusions drawn from data and details in problem solving, rather than assumptions, are essential for organizational learning.

(2) *Experimentation*. It involves systematic quest for and testing of new knowledge and information, which is an impetus for development. The process is guided by opportunity to learn something new and new ideals may be tested with existing programs or demonstrations projects.

(3) *Learning from past experience*. In other words, internal benchmarking within the organization, between processes involving reflection and self-analysis – learning from failures and successes, assess them and reflect on it. A record should be made on valuable knowledge gained from previous experiences open and accessible to other colleagues.

(4) *Learning from others*. A carefully planned study process of other peers in the market – external benchmarking – outside environment can be a fertile source of ideals to improve the core processes. Uncovering others' practices and learning from them can be a powerful impetus for positive

change and maintenance of quality in a learning organization. Another source of gaining knowledge from 'outside' sources is customers, students in higher education context.

(5) *Transferring knowledge*. Gained knowledge must not remain a 'local affair'. Information on activities gained by individuals or groups has to become pervasive in various forms (Figure 1).

Learning organizations are skilled at these activities. In Garvin's (1993) view:

> Each is accompanied by a distinctive mind-set, tool kit, and pattern of behavior. Many companies practice these activities to some degree. But few are consistently successful because they rely largely on *happenstance* [italics added] and isolated examples. By creating systems and processes that support these activities and integrate them into the fabric of daily operations, companies can manage their learning more effectively *(*p. 81).

It is worth noting here that Garvin's framework is not taken as the best practice, especially in the Georgian context; it is just a good plan for interviewing and perhaps use it to frame the analytical part of the thesis in addition to various pieces of analytical literature on organizational cultures and theories.

Figure 1: Garvin's Performance Diagnosis Matrix - Learning Activities

Performance Activities	**Examples**
1. Systematic problem solving	- Relies on the scientific method for diagnosing problems such as 'Plan, Do, Check, Act' cycle, 'hypothesis-generating, hypothesis-testing, etc. - Insisting on data, using statistical tools, data-driven decision-making.
2. Experimentation	- Systematic searching and testing of new knowledge. - Guided by opportunity for growth, not by current difficulties. - Ongoing programs and one-of-a-kind demonstration programs.
3. Learning from past experience (internal benchmarking)	- Learning from reflection and self-analysis: systematic assessment of successes and failures, recording lessons and valuable knowledge available to other employees. - 'Santayana Review' –"Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." (p. 85). - Retrospective approach to studying the processes.
4. Learning from others (external benchmarking)	- Looking outside to gain a new perspective. - Borrowing of ideas: Milliken "Steal Ideas Shamelessly (SIS)". - Benchmarking: ongoing investigation and learning experience, uncovering, analyzing, adopting, and implementing best practices.
5. Transferring knowledge	- Knowledge sharing broadly throughout the organization. - Written, oral, and visual reports; site visits and tours, personnel rotation programs, education and training programs.

Source: Adopted from Garvin (1993) and Dill (1999).

2.3 Combining the Theoretical Perspectives and the Learning Activities

The figure 2 illustrates the two ideal theoretical models described above and the organizational learning activities advocated by David Garvin (1993) from the business industry that was argued to be also relevant to apply to study academic organizations – how they approach to ensure quality of the core processes within institutions.

Each learning indicator of organizational performance with regard to quality assurance processes is explained in the relevant theoretical view. For instance, the systematic problem solving indicator may be best clarified within the neo-institutional school as the condition in which a higher educational institution is informed about the quality problems from outside, *per se* by the principal agent – the government body. Certain problems are revealed by outsiders and externally-imposed initiatives are launched to fix the problems. The same learning activity under the resource-based assumption describes internally-driven problems and data-based decision-making in quality assurance processes. We are prompted by neo-intuitionalists that the neo-institutional perspective suggests standardization in organizational structures and practices, hence may offer standardized models of improving quality, i.e. copying ideas, repeating the old programs with no experimentation whereas the resource dependence view emphasizes the need of new ideas and constant search for contextualized measures and experiment projects to ensure fresh and vital fluid for organizational performance and gains in knowledge. Universities learn from the past memory of their practices and experiences and knowledgeable insiders' de novo creativity guides their behavior within the resource-based thesis. In comparison with the neo-institutional postulation of institutional behavior regarding the improvement of the core processes in which directives are generated outside, higher education institutions are likely to be dependent on the recommendations and assessments given by the outside knowledgeable bodies. Imitation of actions of peers in the market may take place in the neo-institutional perspective while more contextualization of actions to fit the purpose of an organization can be found in the resource-dependence perspective. The instances in which success story-telling reports on institutional or unit performance are developed for an outside 'inspector', one deals with externally focused accountability approach of an institution. Institutions show more institutional responsibility regarding organization learning when new knowledge gained from experiences and practices is shared broadly throughout the organization (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: **THEORETICAL MODELS & LEARNING ACTIVITIES**

LEARNING ACTIVITIES **QUALITY ASSURANCE***	**THEORETICAL MODELS**	
Types of learning organizations: Outward looking, Inward-looking	**Neo-institutional Perspective** - Necessary demands - Externally-imposed Initiatives - Accountability-focused: search for legitimacy - External Control measures - 'Feeding the Beast', 'playing the game' - EQA & adjustment to standards - Relationships between institutions and government - Standardization, institutionalization	**Resource Dependency Theory (RDT)** - Competing Demands - Internally-driven organizational responses - Improvement- and development-oriented - Enhancement measures - Increased institutional responsibility - Improving quality - Relationships intra- & intra- institutions - Strategic change, innovation, identity struggle
1. Systematic problem solving	Institutions are informed about problems from outside.	Internally-driven problems (self-evaluation, scientific way of identifying problems).
2. Experimentation	Copying ideas, standardized models of improving quality.	Experimenting new ideas and search for new knowledge – contextualized measures experimented internally.
*3. Learning from past experience (internal-benchmarking**)*	Directives generated outside (recommendations given from assessments, guidelines, etc.).	Origins of ideas internally from the past memory, knowledgeable insiders, de novo creativity.
4. Learning from others (external-benchmarking)	Imitation of action, organizational mimicry, seeking to copy practices.	Identity formation – internalization and contextualization of actions, 'fitness for purpose', reinvented behaviors within the organization.
5. Transferring knowledge	Reports developed for an 'inspector', 'a success story-telling' for outsiders.	Intra-organizational knowledge sharing. Information as a signal within the organization. Knowledge distribution and internal-benchmarking.

*An institutional policy strategy elaborated and implemented by a university administration to cope with quality problems (quality standards of the primary activities and services set by the institution or articulated benchmarks of the awarding entity) through planned and systematic approach of activities; the process aims at maintaining and enhancing standards (definition is given by the Council of Higher Education Accreditation).

**A process of comparing and measuring of educational quality assurance management processes against those of a best-in-class performance in higher education industry at home and abroad (Goetsch & Davis, 1997).

III. DATA & METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

Drawing on mainly qualitative data from semi-structured thematic face-to-face interviews at selected universities and QA office, the study employed a cross-case study approach – *qualitative field research.* Limited quantitative data is used to describe practice in numbers, whenever possible. The open-ended questions for semi-structured interviews were designed based on the analytical framework derived from organizational learning literature (Figure 1 and 2, Appendix A). The data on findings is presented in Table 1.

A case study approach of the present empirical enquiry appears most feasible and appropriate to *describe and explain* the complex phenomenon of organizational learning with respect to quality assurance processes, i.e. practices of IQA within its contemporary real-life setting that allowed pointing to common patterns and principles in relation to drivers for change. The multiple-case study approach can form the bases to do comparisons and derive common experiences from it (Babbie, 2007; Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Yin, 1994). Nevertheless, the primary aim is to construct a large picture responding to the prior theoretical assumptions of the organizational characteristics of an academic learning organization. Even though, the given methodology and data collection instruments heavily relied on the existing literature organizational learning and the learning organization, institutional response to the external drivers for change, quality assurance discussion in higher education, etc., it still involved inductive reasoning process throughout the project to allow deductive one to take place while analyzing the critical dimensions to study the phenomenon as well as while leading the discussion component of the present thesis.

The study presents brief analysis of the critical documents such as the Law on Higher Education of Georgia, Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ENQA, 2005) as secondary data analysis of external drivers of improvement and policies for QA as well. The review of the recent developments in Georgia provides a foundation to better understand the increasing legal and academic accountability measures in the country. Another strong feature of the approach lies in collecting meso and micro level empirical data from the primary sources (please, see below). The underlying

assumptions are that the results will be context-embedded that will help us establish patterns in the existing realities of administering QA activities of the primary processes.

3.2 Participants and Sample Selection

The key participants for the study were selected based on utilizing convenient sampling strategy from the selected institutions. The main initial criterion was that institutions must not be newly established to be able to document organizational relationships with the external actors, peer institutions, etc., whenever deemed necessary and helpful. As for individuals, the subset of people for interviews must have the profile of a head or unit level administering experience, for instance, the ones holding institutional responsibility for managing quality assurance activities within the respective universities. These included heads, including former heads of IQA offices, senior administrators in charge of institutional research units in relation to QA processes.

HEIs as research sites were initially planned to be selected based on the following criteria:

> Assumption that the case will illustrate major issues and serve as a good example of documenting QA practices at the meso level;
> Evidence that the case would be representative from the HE institutional market; and
> Accessibility of respondents and those who will be involved in the study sample; i.e. willingness of an institution to participate in the study.

The additional criteria intimately used for the project were due to the constraints on the way that limited the selection of private institutions. Four private HEIs and the responsible senior administrators, asked to be part of the research project, have declined to participate in interview. Hence, it hampered to include a whole case study on those HEIs regardless of the number of respondents interviewed or approached with questions. Indeed, the possible inclusion of private institutions in the case studies would have helped to separate the two ideal theoretical models to comment on the dimensions of internal looking vs. outward looking tendencies in organizational learning and differences between the types of HEIs drawn in the research case studies.

Due to these difficulties along the way and in addition to the criteria set above, the universities were selected based on the following criteria:

(1) All three universities (Ilia State University (ISU), Batumi Shota Rustaveli State University (RSU), Telavi State University (TeSaU)) have benefited from the Tempus programme projects (TeSaU benefited from 1 project: "Developing an International Quality Assurance System at Telavi State University", ISU and RSU benefited from 2 projects: "Establishing Quality Assurance in the Georgian Higher Education Institutions", Promoting Internationalization and Comparability of Quality assurance in Higher education", and "The Establishment of Academic Quality Assurance centers within Grigol Robakidze University and Batumi State University") that focused on the development of an internal quality assurance systems; as a result, it is assumed that the participating HEIs have more or less developed capacity to administer QA process internally;
(2) All HEIs are comprehensive higher education institutions;
(3) HEIs are representative of the public higher education sector representing two important regions and one central area – the capital;
(4) The criterion reinforced, i.e. the willingness of the universities – the study participants to be part of the research project.

The latter is of importance because it was difficult to motivate people working in QA offices to take part in the research project. The underlying reason, as reported by the possible participants, was that they would need to coordinate the information flow with the senior management at their universities withholding from responding to the questions in a timely manner. The response rate was relatively slow and this obstacle was overcome by providing more information about the research project and use of possible findings. HEIs and their QA offices seemed a little reluctant to participate in the study.

The respondents of the cases studies were self-selected senior administrative staff members of the case study universities' IQA offices. This indeed has both the advantages and disadvantages of involvement of the staff members of the internal QA processes and inner life of the universities. Such a selection, perhaps, one of the drawbacks of the convenient sampling, may have provided an official view given their position withholding the true perspective and critical opinions on the events that are critical to QA processes, especially exploring the inner processes and external orientation. In some of the cases, the respondents took the task to respond to the study questions without much enthusiasm or motivation, but rather committed to the principle of the 'information flow'. The length and details in given

responses by the participants varied greatly; hence some of the respondents may be quoted more than the others. This should have precautions in interpreting the findings subject to reliability and validity addressed below.

3.3 Procedures and Ethics

The interviews ensured confidentiality of participants and data by coding participants as a respondent and a numerical number, R1, R2 and so forth, unless agreed to consent and it is necessary to reveal the identity along with the position; nevertheless, none was identified in the research report as requested by the respondents; participants were fully informed about the forthcoming project and its nature prior to the scheduled interviews, accordingly, the prospective participants approved their participation in the study on a voluntary basis. The participants felt more or less comfortable with most of the questions, however, there were instances when they felt that they did not want to respond to certain question(s), especially the ones that tried to explore the external orientation and compliance nature of practices of managing internal processes.

3.4 Data Collection and Analysis

Preparation for the qualitative field research included thorough reviewing of the relevant literature and getting familiar with the target institution or a sub-unit of the study such as websites of the participating universities, strategic documents, statutes, etc. The interview agenda with the questions was designed in advance such as topics to be covered but flexibility was ensured to allow fruitful data collection, have room for interaction, and learn from the real-life setting. The data from interviews was collected between March-April, 2012.

The interview texts were prepared on the basis of respondents' answers that were sent back for comments. Sometimes, they proposed to answer the list of the questions sent to them (Appendix A). The most preferred way was that they would answer questions in a written way with the explanation that they would carefully think of the possible responses and refer to other written documents for further review.

The research data units of analysis included individuals and group practices of managing QA within an organization. The raw data was coded several times based on the indicators and selected variables and themes. It employed a cross-case variable-oriented content analysis to discover patterns themes and form data-driven conceptualization and typology. The study aimed at searching for the similarities and differences between the situations. The data was clustered around the themes and dimensions of the theoretical and analytical framework (Table 1).

In addition to the primary data collected through face-to-face interviews and visits, the secondary data - the key written internal institutional documents (mainly statutes, strategic development plan, the policies and the legislative framework, etc.) and annual reports of individual IQA offices in each university have been reviewed and the relevant information has been reported, whenever deemed appropriate and relevant, in the subsequent sections. The review of the secondary data in advance also helped to avoid unnecessary questions or ask appropriate ones for clarification and deeper exploration. The secondary data has served to be both supplementary and complementary in the preparation of tailored questions, data analysis, and reporting. The standardized set of questions has been used with all participants (Appendix A). The key written documents are referred throughout the thesis, respectively.

3.5 Validity & Reliability

Considering a small number of cases – three universities and a limited number of respondents, all from QA administering offices, likewise what critics of the case study method often refer to, grounds for establishing reliability or generalizing the results to the whole country context is indeed limited. The study explores people's perspective on experiences and practices in QA, hence reliability could be questioned as we read in the relevant literature. However, while examining the certain phenomena in context-specific settings through interviews in the interpretive paradigm, the study ensured to allow enough time to maximize the credibility of this qualitative research project. Quite understandably, the credibility and trustworthiness depends on the ability and efforts taken by the researcher. The time for the research project as well as the prior preparation and review of the relevant academic literature on QA processes, theoretical understandings, analytical framework, etc. helped to elicit quality data for the *descriptive validity* (the study participants were given enough time to check the factual accuracy of an account) and the most importantly,

pertinent, applicable, and understandable information (Babbie, 2007; Marshall & Rossman, 2006).

Concerning the *interpretive validity*, the raw data was reviewed multiple times by a single researcher to ensure consistency of data in answers and reporting of the findings that enhanced *the intra-rater reliability* (Babbie, 2007; Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Using so called 'a participatory research' design, the raw data was cross-checked with its respondents for accuracy; the respondents were given a chance to comment on their interview texts that made it possible to make the best interpretation possible based on the raw data. A good number of direct quotes and thick descriptions is presented in the data and results section that are grounded in the language using their own vocabulary and concepts of the people studied. The data collection instrument was one standardized for all participants and the protocols were consistent as well (Appendix A).

Though the study procedures attempted to provide credible and defensible results, there still may be issues related to generalizability of the findings to wider groups of HEIs and circumstances (i.e. other practices of university administration rather than QA processes) that questions the external validity. Indeed, this has not been a primary goal for this study. Neither does it mean that this does not contribute to the development of knowledge about the QA processes within Georgian HEIs. Though it is case study, it still is a multi-sites research enhancing the generalizability that is useful to understand other sites similar to the sample for this research. Some examples in the practices like changes in organizational structure and governance with respect to managing quality can be generalizable to other institutions, especially the changes that were triggered by the legislative framework.

IV. NATIONAL CONTEXT & QUALITY DISCOURSE

The contextual understanding of how the new developments in Georgia in the last seven years, i.e. (1) country's commitment to the Bologna process and (2) the state's new development agenda using higher education as an instrument towards social and economic development that have shaped rationales for quality, will be helpful before exploring the individual institutional case studies.

4.1 The New Pace for Georgian Higher Education: Underlying Forces to Emphasize Quality

The underlying forces generating the changes in Georgian HE are mainly the effects of globalization and internationalization and the Bologna process as a consequence and response to globalization. The rationale found behind the internal public reforms in many parts of the world, including the national higher education policies in Georgia reflects responses to these external forces (Maassen & Cloete, 2002). Higher education has become a *vital* instrument on nations' socio-economic development agendas and policies, including the ones of various multilateral and bilateral development agencies (Rivera-Batiz, 2006; Psacharopoulos & Patrinos, 2004).

In this global context, nations are challenged to reform HE to gain and/or maintain international competitiveness. Economies that were traditionally based on manufacturing are heading towards "knowledge-based economy" in nature (Altbach, 2004). The impact of the emerging government reforms bringing higher education into the play towards development can also be seen in the rise and growth of an 'evaluative state' (Neave, 1998). HEIs activities are more formally evaluated nowadays and they are held more accountable for *performativity*[1] than ever before.

The new administration of Georgia that came into power in 2003 prioritized to focus on higher education with a perception of its potential contribution to social and economic development of Georgia (Meel, 2006). Until then, the macro level factors, such as scarce

[1] The term *performativity* encompasses effectiveness, efficiency, and relevance of higher education.

funding of HE, proliferation of private HEIs and 'degree mills' over 14 years, system-wide corruption, and poor governance capacity within the respective structures in the HE system contributed to the overall decline of quality for more than a decade.

The quality problems appeared quite 'basic' in terms of the developmental stages but truly complex in nature, especially in its social structures, to solve. Hence, concerns for quality of HE then naturally came to the forefront in policy discussions in Georgia. The change and development-oriented government authorities started to share the widely recognized *pact* about HE and immediately recognized its prevailing role for development and the *regionalization*, i.e. the European integration process in the nearest future (Georgia Consolidated Education Strategy and Action Plan 2007-2011). Pursuing this goal in the new development strategy, Georgia became a full member of the Bologna process in 2004 (Bergen Communiqué, May 19, 2005). And quality of HE is certainly the primary concern of the European family which is reflected in the Bologna campaign. All these have created the context in which rationales for quality have been shaped.

4.2 Nature of State: Triangular Co-ordination and Dynamics of QA Development

Before engaging into further discussion on QA in Georgia, it will be useful to elaborate on Clark's triangle of coordination (1983, p. 143) in relation to Olsen's four models of steering approaches with respect to HE (1988, p. 237) and the major developments in QA governance models in Georgia. The discussion will be helpful as it is strongly assumed that QA processes have political and social dimensions that can be helpful to analyze and understand quality problems relative to QA developmental stages. In addition to clustering the key periods according to the coordination, state governing models of HE and QA, by using the two major perspectives – the Phase (Jeliazkova & Westerheijden, 2002) and Fashion (Stensaker, 2007) models of QA governance - the following section looks at the underlying rationales in the recent QA scheme development in Georgia.

One can identify three distinguishable periods of coordination among the state, market/society and institutions/academic oligarchy and state steering approaches with respect to the higher education system and QA schemes development in Georgia.

(I) Burton Clark (1983, p. 143) placed the **USSR** to the nearest extreme of the State authority corner in his triangle of co-ordination as it represents the purest case of the state control over the Oligarchical and Market interaction. This is the Soviet period Georgia - featuring clear characterizations of the Sovereign rationally-bound state model (Olsen, 1988). The Soviet era or any other parts of the world did not have QA mechanisms in place but the system stressed on tight legal and financial accountability for HEIs.

(II) **The Post-Soviet** period **(1989-2004)** has been characterized by transition from the planned economy to a market economy featuring the pulling power towards the society and market in Clark's triangle of co-ordination. There were emerging characteristics of Olsen's Supermarket state model and some features of the Institutional state model illustrating more of a hybrid of steering approaches (Gornitzka & Maassen, 2000). The period was marked by the proliferation of private HEIs and universal HE participation rates and severe consequences. The institutional autonomy was relatively strong, isolated from formal policies that were hardly pursed strictly for several reasons. Yet, negative side-effects were noted to be considerable such as abuse of institutional autonomy by HEIs which resulted in pervasive corruption (Heyneman, 2008), deteriorating quality, and so forth. The liberal legal requirements, massive corruption, and state's vulnerability to govern and steer quality in higher education did not provide favourable context to administer QA mechanisms and maintain quality. In contrast with its peers in the Easter Europe, namely the Baltic countries, Georgia did not manage to establish an accreditation system during this harsh time, so the state kept the stagnated market approach to cope with quality problems.

(III) **Rose-revolution (2003) and large-scale reforms in education since 2004** have been a hybrid of the Sovereign (Olsen, 1988) and 'Evaluative State' (Neave, 1998). The state became proactive 'watchdog' (Gornitzka & Maassen, 2000) launching various steering approaches with respect to decision-making, functions, and activities of HEIs in Georgia. As part of the education reform in general, the external accreditation procedures have been elaborated centrally. The government perceived the steering to be a necessary step to push forward. For instance, the Ministry's website under the description of the Twinning Project: "Capacity Enhancement for Implementing the Bologna Action Lines in Georgia (CEIBAL)" clearly states: "HE sector in Georgia lacks adequate steering, consulting and advising mechanisms and body/bodies" (MoES Official Website, www.mes.gov.ge).

The recent reforms respectively were legitimized by the introduction of the HE legal framework - the Law of Georgia on Higher Education 2004, which is intended to regulate the transformation of higher education system. Out of four major policy instruments, known as 'NATO-Scheme,' as finalized by Hood (1983), Nodality (information transmission/communication), Treasure (money), Authority (legal official power), and Organization (bureaucracy), the Georgian government perceived authoritative instrument - regulatory framework to be the most powerful instrument to legitimize and force change at the institutional level. Van Vught's (1989 in Gornitzka, 1999) suggestion of governance strategy as *rational planning and control model* is helpful to conceptualize the current actions of Georgian state that exercises extensive control as they perceive themselves "omniscient and omnipotent" (p. 23). It is definitely worth mentioning that several international donors were quite active in mobilizing technical assistance and drafting the law. The law was a foundation of the first attempts of QA – formal accreditation processes of HEIs in Georgia and introduction of QA measures within HEIs (Article 25). In the Phase model (*cf.* Jeliazkova & Westerheijden, 2002), the trend appears to be a pessimistic one - "Arms Race" featuring some conflicts between the national policy objectives and perceptions from below and some issues related to the capacity of and the absence of quality assurance culture in the present structures of academe. Analyzing the accreditation process's political and social dimension, it has features of both the "Catwalk" and "Random walk" categorizations of the QA governance models. For instance, management ideas and recommendations come from the international assistance groups, including what is found in the recommendations from Tempus, the Twinning team, etc. Trust in institutions has become a marginal element in the relationships amongst HE, society, and the state due to the poor institutional performance and abuse of institutional autonomy for more than a decade. The 'withdrawal of trust' (Trow, 1994) now officially from universities by shifting the power and steering core towards the state institutions over the last seven years has been a result of undermined reputation and loss of confidence in the university education. The introduction of the institutional and program accreditation and the centralized student admissions policy in 2005 that aimed at getting the 'hidden information' and learning about not so much 'hidden' but well-known corrupted behaviours of individuals and instructional leaders, perhaps fit more in the "random walk" model (Jeliazkova & Westerheijden, 2002).

4.3 Fading Institutional Autonomy and Increasing Accountability

Analyzing to what degree Jongbloed's (2003)[2] eight market conditions for institutional and consumers freedoms are met in the Georgian HE, one should look at the current national conditions under which the system operates. These conditions are: the regulatory requirements and funding scheme, the former – the legislative framework is extremely relevant to analyze the market and increasing legal and academic accountability measures. Georgia has emerged as a proactive state with its steering core that try to cope with the *pure* market limitations regarding quality (Dill, 2007) that have different explanations in different parts of the world such as a creation of an alternative related to the economic market perspective – a hybrid model of the state and market approach – the so called contracts approach to govern quality in higher education (Gornitzka et al., 2004).

All current limits set by the government have faded institutional autonomy and created a centralized system of coordination – power shifted to the state corner (Clark, 1983) that has established the Sovereign state (Olsen, 1988) in many respects. However, one may see some market elements as well. Yet, Georgian universities are viewed by policy-makers to remain unprepared for the pure market coordination so one may perceive them as quasi-autonomous institutions operating in a quasi-market system. In this case, the state comes into the game to intervene the market, fix the failures of pure market models, cope with quality problems and the 'moral hazard' dilemma, and ensure its expectations are met, which is a classic example found in the agency theory from early 1970s economic writing - the 'Principal-Agent Dilemma' in relation to higher education in which the *principal* (a government agency or an intermediate agency) tries to ensure that the *agent* (institution) acts to meet government's objectives, while taking into account the recognized challenges of monitoring and assessing the agent's activities due to the distinct characteristics of the latter (Dill & Soo, 2004). The failures of the pure market approach since gaining the independence and the Bologna process have triggered tighter state regulations and new organizational practices to govern quality in

Eight conditions for a market

'Four freedoms' for providers	'Four freedoms' for consumers
1. Freedom of entry 2. Freedom to specify the product 3. Freedom to use available 4. Freedom to determine prices	5. Freedom to choose provider 6. Freedom to choose product 7. Adequate information on prices and resources quality 8. Direct and cost-covering prices paid

Source: Jongbloed (2003). Marketisation in higher education, Clark's Triangle and the essential ingredients of markets.

Georgia, i.e. the establishment of accreditation procedures in 2004 which had severe consequences for institutions, hence implications for higher education participation rates and larger educational policies at all levels. The shift is marked by increasing legal and academic accountability measures in which HEIs and academics are opt to be alert to the state initiatives, at the same time to prepare and improve themselves for the emerging market competition by creating an internal quality assurance culture. Social authorization of the new ideas and willingness of the core of the below structure present a challenge to the government and institutions to see the external claims have led to improvement. That being said, the external stakeholders for quality governance are given the leadership and power in the vertical top-down coordination of QA processes, which encompasses more control and accountability dimensions in the national QA instruments. Let us analyze briefly the major governance instrument of quality in Georgia – the accreditation to strengthen this argument.

4.4 The National QA Instrument: Authorization and Accreditation

By applying a set of indicators – the six dimensions analytical framework elaborated by Smeby and Stensaker (1999, Fig. 1, p. 12) in their study of the national assessments in the Nordic countries, it can be argued that the accountability or quality control dimension is more emphasized in the national HE policy discourse and the most visibly, in practice in Georgia.
As it was illustrated, the rationales for quality have been shifted in the national discourse. The first indicator – the status of the intermediate agent - the existing accreditation arrangement in Georgia is the Ministry's authority itself established as an 'independent' national accreditation agency. The simple classification is difficult to draw because the agency may appear a hybrid of national authorities and professional organization. The agency remains independent but is subject to the public law and is held accountable to the Ministry. This arrangement may be perceived as realization of the external needs by the legitimate steering core at the national level, rather than needs of institutions. For instance, for another indicator for the consequences, these external needs have been devastating for many HEIs that never cared for quality but intensively practiced corruption. The results of the initial institutional accreditation in 2004 have been severe for institutions tied to sanctions: a majority of HEIs were not able to meet the basic criteria set by the agency. As a result, out of 244 HEIs, the initial accreditation was given to 110. However, today's data on HEIs includes even fewer (some of the merged), i.e. 58 state accredited HEIs (EPPM, 2008; NAEC Annual Reports, 2006-2011). Non-accredited HEIs cannot admit students and grant degrees. The increasing

accountability is justified as it will stimulate improvement of institutional behaviours in the long run.

In the agency's procedure, the general rule is that no government worker may be in the committee. The accreditation scheme remains the single QA tool but each institution is obliged to set up an internal quality assurance unit, develop relevant materials, and report on progress to the relevant body, when requested (Bologna Process Country Report, 2009). Data from the self-assessments is warehoused at the agency, but the database for transparency or public outreach measures is not developed to include any qualitative or analytical data; it only includes basic facts. Neither there have been instances when data was used against funding, incentives, or any other decisions; data is only used against sanctions – to give accreditation/authorization to institutions or individual study programs.

Such QA steps address quite 'basic quality problems' in HE such as the cut in numbers of 'degree mills', fight against widespread corruption, enhancement of quality of entering student body, giving an impetus for institutional development in the means of physical infrastructure. However, what has been in fact in practice is institutional accreditation which is a fairly simplified procedure based on a set of standards not a full-scale evaluation assessing actual quality. The methodology of external assessment is quite fixed, developed solely by the accrediting agency, and it envisions a high degree of standardization. The final decisions in the first wave of the institutional accreditation were based on comparisons of institutional data. In other words, the collected data from the visiting committees subsequently became basis for the minimum criteria that were absent initially. The agency did not have any criteria set when they announced the institutional accreditation because it did not have any information about institutions and the processes inside.

To sum up, depending on what dimension is stressed, external QA schemes have an impact on the HEIs in different ways (Stensaker, 2007; van Vught & Westereijden, 1994). However, to note a simple causal relationship between EQA and teaching and learning scholars disagree on the causal link (Stensaker & Harvey, 2006). As the national policy analysis illustrates, the external QA measures hold HEIs accountable for launching internal QA procedures by law, which could be seen as an impetus for incremental internal change in the long run. The balance between quality control and quality enhancement is *absent* in the national QA scheme in Georgia while some scholars argue that it is critical to keep a balance

between accountability and quality improvement because the underling logic of QA processes is to rationalize and stimulate enhancement of the primary processes (Stensaker, 2007). Despite the curriculum adjustments and several other enhancement-focused initiatives as well as the changes in organization, support infrastructure, attitudes of institutional leadership and academics, and redefined responsibilities to foster QA processes at the institutional level, the noted rationales to foster QA and improvement are absent in the existing national procedures. Hence, going into the institutional case studies will better illustrate the nature of the impact of external forces for quality assurance.

V. EMPIRICAL DATA & RESULTS

5.1 Case Study Universities

Ilia State University (ISU)

Ilia State University (ISU), located in Tbilisi, Georgia is a young (6-years) already preeminent public research university with the best research citation index in Georgia. It has emerged as one of the most prestigious study and research destinations at home. ISU has about 10, 717 students and 2319 personnel (989 academic and 1130 administrative staff). As of 2012 programme accreditation results, ISU offers 73 accredited programs, of which 21 Bachelor, 24 Masters, 7 Doctoral, and 21 Higher Professional. It will no longer offer Higher Professional programs in the coming years after the current students graduate from those programs. The University aims at enhancing more graduate level programs as part of the strategic development plan, continuing and strengthening the tradition of a research university. It currently has five schools and 25 research institutes and centers spread throughout the country. ISU has 61 Full Professors, 90 Associate Professors, 74 Assistant Professors, 411 researchers, 18 Emeritus Professors, and the rest visiting and centers of languages personnel engaged in teaching and research at all levels. ISU's IQA Office has two units – Institutional Research Unit and Study Programs and Research QA Unit.

Batumi Shota Rustaveli State University (RSU)

Batumi Shota Rustaveli State University (RSU) is an old (75-years) public research university in one of the most economically and socially growing regions of the Western Georgia - Adjara. RSU has about 4, 407 students and 533 personnel (244 academic and 289 administrative staff). RSU currently has 82 accredited programs, of which 37 Bachelor, 21 Masters, 10 Doctoral, 12 Higher Professional, and 2 Medical programs. It has 51 Full Professors, 100 Associate Professors, and 93 Assistant Professors engaged in teaching and research at all levels. RSU is engaged in teaching and research into several directions: natural Sciences, Humanities, Social Sciences, Law, Mathematics and Computer Sciences, Engineering, Technologies, Business and Public Health, and Agriculture. It actively cooperates internationally in international projects and higher education cooperation schemes such as the Tempus and Erasmus Mundus programmes.

Telavi State University (TeSaU)

Telavi State University (TeSaU), established in 1939 is the only accredited public higher education institution in Telavi – Kakheti Region, the Eastern part of Georgia. The University plays an important role in the regional development and gives an opportunity to offer access to higher education locally rather than moving to the capital city for obtaining higher education. TeSaU study programmes undergo improvement and accreditation. Regardless the number of graduate programs offered by TeSaU in various specializations, teacher training is an important part of the University. It has five schools and various centers dedicated to different fields of studies. TeSaU has about 1,694 students and 276 personnel (86 academic and 190 administrative staff). As result of the programme accreditation in 2012, TeSaU has 87 accredited programs, of which 30 Bachelor, 22 Masters, 18 Doctoral, 15 Higher Professional, and 2 Medical programs. It has 12 Full Professors, 49 Associate Professors, and 25 Assistant Professors.

After the introduction of the Bologna process activities in Georgian HEIs, the Institutional Authorization and Programme Accreditation and the accompanying legislative measures by the Government of Georgia, ISU, RSU, and TeSaU established the Internal Quality Assurance Offices in 2005 to meet the requirements of external QA processes that, as illustrated in the findings section below, provided stimuli to develop the procedures and administrative measures to enhance quality of the core processes within the case study universities.

5.2 Governance and Structural Adaptations

The Law of Higher Education of Georgia (2004), Article 3 - Goals of Higher Education, Item 2 stipulates that to achieve the goals set by the state, the state shall ensure "establishment of quality assurance systems including accreditation system and quality assurance services at higher education institutions" (p. 6), that is the *National Center for Educational Quality Enhancement* (NCEQE). Articles 25 and 31 of the same law define the functions of internal quality assurance units at higher education institutions, including faculty based IQA services.

The definitions and stipulations given concerning the external QA policies have special preferences as for how IQA should be developed in Georgian HEIs. For this reason, a brief

review of these policies and regulations is helpful. The summary of the policies is the following: the core activities of HEIs are subject to systematic evaluation, in which students also take part and the results are public; each HEI must establish institutional (centralized) IQA and faculty-based QA services that cooperate with similar services at foreign institutions and set the criteria for internal quality control; the university leadership nominates the head of an IQA office and regulates the IQA services; IQA offices ensure the provision of high quality teaching and prepares the institutional self-evaluation for the authorization and accreditation purposes.

In addition, a new law on Quality Enhancement in Higher Education was passed in 2010 that defined the functions of NCEQE – the institutional authorization and accreditation procedures that are integral part of quality assurance in higher education in Georgia. 'Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area' (ENQA, 2005) is the key document for an institutional action that puts individual responsibility for IQA offices to function. According to the review of the case study universities' statutes for the IQA Units, the standards and principles are considerably reflected in their regulations and action plans in all three universities (ISU, RSU, and TeSaU). A respondent from RSU (R2) reflected firmly on this point:

> All IQA offices at public HEIs in Georgia function according to the Law of Georgia on Higher Education, the ENQA document and other relevant external policies set for quality enhancement in Georgian higher education. The policies and functions set internally mirror the external policies and regulations that are indicated in our statute and are often referred to.

As the respondents reported from the participating universities, the key procedures related to self-evaluation, institutional authorization and programme accreditation are fully in line with the ENQA document. The scope of work of NCEQE and the law on quality enhancement in Georgia fully correspond with the ENQA document. It is strongly assumed in the analyzed cases that IQA offices are *obliged* to carry out the principles and recommendations specified in the document in practice. It is evident and agreed by the respondents that the external QA policies and documents indeed have particular references for the IQA services within the universities. Nevertheless, some of the principles are completely misunderstood in practice and the set-up of by individual HEIs, hence may be easily misused by HEIs that produce

adverse effects on QA, in general. The example is seen in the assessment of students as reported by the respondent from RSU:

> In the ENQA document, we read that students should be assessed using the published criteria, regulations, and procedures that should be continuous for the assessment of students. In practice, this recommendation is misused that is often used as a tool for distrusting academic personnel at our University (R1).

Another example of misinterpretation of the regulation provided by RSU, R2 refers to the statement of a study program results and competencies (general and field of study) in accordance to the National Qualifications Framework that each study program is required to state in order to receive accreditation.

> According to the descriptions of our University study programmes that we publish and are easily available to all interested persons and stakeholders (students, parents, national quality assurance officials and experts, employers), the key personnel who design those programs do not quite understand the competencies set by the National Qualifications Framework. This could be due to many factors, including the difficulty of the framework text, untrained personnel, etc. This tendency is also common in some other HEIs in Georgia, but they do not publish program descriptions on their websites, that can easily be accessed and judged using this criteria (RSU, R2).

The key structural institutional adaptation found at ISU, RSU, and TeSaU, likewise in other HEIs in Georgia is the establishment of IQA offices within universities first place. As reported in the case studies, it was the legislative measures that obliged and urged individual HEIs to have such a centralized office that would be institutionally responsible for QA processes and the focal point at HEIs for NCEQE in relation to the external QA measures. Before the legislative measures, none of the case study universities had a structural unit that would manage QA processes within intuitions; the initiative was launched vertically from the top, responded by RSU and ISU. "The ownership of establishment of IQA services in public HEIs is all theirs [authors of the legislative framework] and the views from below are poorly reflected in the external policies," assessed by RSU (R1).

According to the governance structures at the universities, the head of IQA office is nominated by the University Academic Council and approved by the Senate. The University IQA office is then accountable to the councils. Such a procedure and governance structure

allow a great degree of autonomy internally compared to other university structures. The functions and scope of IQA services are monitored and regulated by the University charter and statutes of individual IQA Units. The degree of internal autonomy of IQA offices felt by the interviewed QA administrators is high at ISU (R2) and RSU (R1, R2).

The difference found in structural arrangements in the set up of IQA offices across the case study universities is ISU's case. ISU's IQA office unites two units: Institutional Research Unit and the Program Unit. This is a distinctive characteristic to ISU that will be further explored in the consecutive section below that will describe internal practices, similarities, and differences across the cases in managing internal QA processes.

5.3 External Orientation and Drivers for Change

The participating universities ISU, RSU, and TeSaU in this study were asked about the arrangements and practices of the IQA system in their universities and their compliance with the external expectations for the practices such as the external QA policies and key documents (Appendix A). All three HEIs have passed through the institutional authorization and programme accreditation procedures that have been initial phases for the external and internal QA procedures. They have more or less met the external expectations and the criteria for institutional capacity to carry out education activities. This process has an impact on HEIs' activities concerning QA processes. "The introduction of the legal QA measures and EQA have increased the awareness of the institutional management for quality and continuous program evaluation," stressed by R2, TeSaU. The Program Evaluation Scheme at TeSaU, i.e. the external and internal evaluation of study programs is strongly influenced by the external policies and they are linked to each other. The experiences of QA personnel from the examined HEIs have shown flaws, as the procedures as well as the general HE reform are new for all HEIs in Georgia; flaws have also been common to other HEIs in Georgia as per any reform package.

All three HEIs have successfully passed the institutional authorization to carry out HE activities. As for the programme accreditation, all the programs submitted by ISU last year were accredited by NCEQE, i.e. 100 per cent success rate (ISU, R1). TeSaU's programs have also been accredited, but "there have been instances where we had to reapply for the programme accreditation for some program," said by R1, TeSaU. The respondents form

TeSaU did not disclose information about statistics of the study programs that were accredited by the agency. RSU has been quite successful in the programme accreditation as well:"only two Master's degree programs have been withdrawn because of the uncertainty to obtain the accreditation from the agency" (RSU, R2).

As mentioned elsewhere, the respondents in all three HEIs consider that the legislative measures by the Government of Georgia and the accompanying institutional and programme accreditation processes by NCEQE have obliged individual HEIs to design and develop and put in practices internal QA mechanisms. This has been the core *external stimulus* for HEIs. All respondents from the participating HEIs agree with this point. A typical response was:

> The external procedures, namely, the institutional authorization for HE services and programme accreditation have urged individual HEIs to undertake real self-evaluation efforts, because the departure point before the experts group visit to any authorization and programme accreditation seeker HEI is the preparation and review of an institutional self-evaluation report. As a result, the key impact has been the compulsory effort that any HEI has been urged to undertake that allowed self-evaluation of flaws in their institutional and programme capacity. Self-evaluations requested by the agency also included identification of prospects for improvement (RSU, R1).

NCEQE in Georgia that is in charge to implement the institutional authorization and the programme accreditation is the key external driver and 'imposer of actions' for individual universities to carry out the externally-imposed initiatives regarding the internal QA processes. This is the main agency for the external surveillance for QA; hence, universities may found themselves to feed the beast. Universities in the case studies are sometimes informed about specific problems from outside. The various externally-imposed measures and activities requested by the agency include: the annual institutional self-evaluation regardless the results of individual programme accreditation and institutional authorization and other requested questionnaires. The requested information is overwhelming and frequent that requires preparation of paperwork and reporting.

> The load of information requested by the Agency [NCEQE], for instance, the annual institutional self-evaluations and other requested forms and information appear overwhelmingly massive to focus on other measures that are more important for improvement of the core processes. It takes the majority of resources of our workers

> to respond to the agency's requests as well as prepare institutionally for the institutional and programme accreditation, which may adversely affect our efforts to focus more on internally driven organizational responses (ISU, R2).

The process of external QA measures is overwhelming itself in addition to the forms and directives coming from outside. As a result, these three universities have developed the institutional behaviors in managing QA to respond well to NCEQE's requests, and the reports, namely self-evaluation reports developed internally within the universities are addressed to outsiders, mainly developed for the 'inspector' and its experts. "The purpose of the self-evaluation then can easily be turned into a report developed for the agency and has nothing to do with the focus on improvement or intra-organizational knowledge sharing," – reported by R2 at TeSaU.

Another repeating theme among the respondents in relation to the external drivers for change is the *competition* for the prospective and quality students. Equally important is to establish and strengthen relations with secondary schools that train prospective students. A majority of the respondents feel that this is a strong stimulus as well to the institutional mission concerning quality of the core processes, but this dimension still is lagging behind. For example, one respondent reported, "This [competition among HEIs] is indeed equally important and is a key driver for change in organizational behaviors in terms of developing proper QA activities and measures for the institutional student recruitment strategy in the long run" (RSU, R1). It is strongly felt amongst the respondents that given the size of the country and the number of prospective students each year, the universities are to think of student and graduate satisfaction to ultimately generate positive attitude towards the whole institution. HEIs are often discussed with friends and families, employers, via forums, etc. Therefore, there is a lot of agreement with the importance of the quality of the core processes and the services they provide to students that determine the demand and the quality of incoming student body. For instance, a respondent from ISU (R1) said:

> The activities of our IQA office (the internal assessment instruments and mechanisms) are constantly updated in compliance with the external expectations and standards of NCEQE, labour-market needs, prospective students expectations, etc. that help improve quality of study programs, teaching and learning, and research that affect the [institutional] reputation and revenues.

Reputation is, therefore, the key to maintain the competitive edge in the higher education market and the institutional QA measures aiming at enhancement of teaching and learning and student and graduate satisfaction are of vital importance and incentives for individual HEIs for existence and revenues (ISU, R2, RSU, R1; TeSaU, R1).

5.4 Local Changes in Practices and Learning Organization

(Systematic) Problem Solving

There is an emerging tendency that the case study universities in Georgia have started to use the scientific methods such as institutional research or evaluations for observing and improving the core processes. This development is quite a novelty and perhaps, the key finding in IQA management within the examined universities.

The scientific method is used as a mean to start data-based problem identification and as the respondents from the analyzed HEIs claimed, the findings are used for data-driven decision making. This insight is indeed shared among the respondents and the data-enriched management culture is embraced by ISU's QA personnel that motivated the university senior management to establish the Institutional Research Unit within the IQA Office that is dedicated to carry out problem-based and other type of research focused on improvement of the core processes within the university. The scope of work of this unit is quite comprehensive that facilitates the encouragement throughout the university to approach QA management holistically and scientifically find solutions to problems in quality. This arrangement of working team dedicated to institutional research of problems in quality at ISU is a novel start compared to its peer HEIs Georgia, including the examined ones. According to the annual reports disclosed by ISU's IQA office, the institutional research unit has implemented up to 60 research projects over the last three years initiated internally dedicated to the issues of quality of teaching and learning and research, relevance and labour-market research, benchmarking analysis, quality of services offered to students, etc.

The other two HEIs – RSU and TeSaU have also developed an institutional responsibility towards studying quality problems using certain scientific methods to diagnose problems in quality, but it is less intensive and comprehensive compared to ISU's practice. Although RSU and TeSaU have developed QA analytical techniques to study problems, they do not

have a structural unit or a team that carry out systematic activities dedicated to research. In some cases, the research on quality is outsourced through hiring temporary consultants. Compared to RSU's and TeSaU's practice, ISU's QA activities on evidence-based problem solving are more systematic, as reported by the respondents, to improve its core processes of teaching and learning and research. Nevertheless, this approach of research culture in administering IQA processes and using the scientific methods, including at ISU, is not institutionalized, or collectively approached and worked out in teams across the different management levels and academic structures, bypassing the faculty-based QA services and remains centralized mostly implemented by the trained staff at the institutional IQA office (ISU, R1 and RSU, R1). As articulated in the case study of ISU, its IQA office is structured in a way, i.e. the availability and subordination of the Institutional Research Unit within the IQA office to encourage faculty members or deans of schools to address problems in assuring quality academic programs. ISU has made structural improvement in this direction that allows involvement of academic structure in the process to maintain quality, especially in terms of faculty and the deans of ISU schools to initiative to diagnose and to address quality problems:

> ISU's IQA office is often informed about the specific problem(s) by the Deans of ISU Schools or other concerned institutional structural unit representatives. In response, the Institutional Research Unit in our Office designs and implements problem-based research projects drawn on utilizing scientific methods. The results of the research are analyzed and relevant recommendations are developed to offer solutions to those problems raised internally (ISU, R1).

Nevertheless, the QA researcher at RSU observed that "evidence-based problem solving on academic and quality issues [at RSU] may appear to be more frequent in particular disciplines" (R1). In the examined case studies and quite common in other public HEIs in Georgia, each university has an institutional (central) IQA office, a faculty-based QA responsible person, and in some cases (e.g. RSU), Curriculum Experts Committee that illustrate elements of convergence in structural adaptations that have been thought to increase coordination within academic units. This observation suggests that data-driven problem identification varies amongst the examined case studies and within RSU considering the different cultures of disciplines.

The most comparable culture among the case study universities in their approach to evidence-based problem solving has the following forms: conducting student evaluations, undertaking annual self-evaluation, preparing for institutional authorization and programme accreditation, and developing guidelines for the implementation of external standards (ISU, RSU, TeSaU, Table 1). In all three universities, the most of the common methods distinctive to the *comparable culture* developed by the participating universities in relation to collecting data and carrying out analysis is prompted from outside, i.e. by NCEQE, the strategic documents and standards, etc. As a result, all case study universities have developed the *comparable culture* in response to the external QA preferences. This outside scheme for improving quality definitely prompts to stimulate stronger culture of self-evaluation within universities, but it is certainly externally-driven responding to the accountability measures and standardization. Hence, more or less, a similar orientation, i.e. convergence to problem solving using data is found in these three HEIs (Table 1).

In contrast to the *comparable culture* and the common methods of problem solving discussed above, an important contribution to the internally designed organizational responses in quality management has been the orientation to the improvement-and development focused activities by IQA offices at the examined universities. A number of examples of internally designed QA activities within the studied HEIs clearly supports this point. At RSU, for instance, the IQA office developed the tools of assessment of study processes, classroom observation, and analytical technique of student performance (RSU, R2) that gather data on classroom teaching and faculty as well as on student performance that made it possible to diagnose problems at the bottom level and offer recommendations for improvement (Table 1). This is an example of designing an internally-driven organizational response to improve quality at the classroom level that is beyond the formal requirements. TeSaU, as noted, has also developed a systematic QA analytical technique 'Plan, Do, Check, Act' for the continuous process of improvements within the framework of the Tempus project. "Reviews and evidence-based formal procedures in a specified area of QA at TeSaU are systematic. This allows the University to draw inferences and reflect on its own performance,"- explained by R1, TeSaU (Table 1). Labor-market research – interview with employers and alumni, conducted by RSU (at ISU it is projected), suggests how the universities think of the competitive demands in the labor-market and enhancement of the relevance of their academic programs (Table 1). In addition to the annual self-evaluation demanded by NCEQE as part of the external QA control of universities, ISU has introduced a novel strategy in administering

the internal and lower-level self-evaluation and program review mechanisms such as an annual faculty/department self-evaluation and program review criteria. It is projected that the delivery and the results of ISU degree programs are to be systematically evaluated at the faculty level.

Though varying to a great extend among the examined HEIs, these examples are the patterns of developing *inward looking* behaviors of the studied organizations and implementing beyond the directives and guidelines or what is required by law and policies of the outsiders. HEIs examined show *convergence* in the *comparable culture* framed under the *neo-institutional perspective* mostly prompted from outside, but the cases also illustrate *divergence* in IQA practices that have been developed internally focused on improvement and data driven problem solving.

Experimentation

Despite the observation from the case studies that the insight about the importance of experimentation with new approaches has been shared amongst the respondents in the study, no example of controlled experiments or one-of-a-kind demonstration programs has been found in the reviewed universities that would be truly internally-driven contextualized measures of experimenting new ideas inside the organization in relation to improving the core processes (Table 1).

ISU has started to undertake problem-based research projects discussed in the previous indicator of systematic problem solving, but it is largely guided by current difficulties, rather than by an opportunity for growth. The examined universities have reported to have mostly utilized standardized models of improving quality. According to the respondents, a typical response to the experimentation part of QA practices was that ”it is perhaps too early to introduce experimentation or demonstration programs at this stage because it requires skills, usually to be learned, to design, perform, and evaluate experiments” (ISU, R2). Nevertheless, in the other indicators of the learning organization in Table 1, especially in the examples related to systematic problem solving, one could identify elements of experimentation pushed by knowledgeable insiders, but the respondents could not easily report as such.

Learning from past experience (internal-benchmarking)

Many of the messages from the respondents confirm that some degree of learning takes place through past experiences. The institutional learning is fed by the evaluation activities and sharing of best practices across the organization in the sample case studies. The case study universities recognize the need for more reinforced activities associated with internal discovery and sharing of knowledge within the different organizational units. The organizational agenda to strengthen the coordination and cooperation among the institutional structures within the sample universities engaged in improving the quality of the teaching and learning and research has been mentioned during the interviews by the respondents from ISU and RSU (R1 and R2, respectively, Table 1).

The use of external assessment from the institutional authorization and programme accreditation and the recommendations, given by NCEQE and the Tempus program partners, has been the most prevalent process associated with the use of past knowledge in the current practices by the analyzed cases (ISU, RSU, TeSaU, Table 1). In this dimension, the past knowledge and experiences are linked to the external evaluations conducted by the intermediary body, NCEQE under the Ministry mandate. Hence, it means the application of knowledgeable outsiders' lessons under the neo-institutional perspective. The respondents reported the use of mini-projects that were fed by outsiders' knowledge and experience; the projects were designed through the capacity of IQA personnel built through the workshops and seminars conducted externally. "I have applied the experience and knowledge gained from the information activities such as workshops and seminars conducted by the Agency and our Tempus project partners in my work," mentioned by R1, RSU.

However, individual universities in the case studies reported development of internal ways to boost learning from experience and enhance internal benchmarking potential. Notably, ISU mentioned the use of data and research results as the most prevalent process to nourish organizational learning in QA management (ISU, R2, Table 1) while TeSaU emphasized the overall intuitional memory, past experiences and activities in this respect to maximize the overall institutional performance and learn from previous work and lessons learned (TeSaU, R2, Table 1). The most distinctive characteristic in terms of internal-benchmarking and

organizational learning from one's own experience was reported by RSU that is the personnel rotations practice disseminating valuable knowledge with other employees and the organizational sub-units (RSU, R2, Table 1).

Learning from others (external-benchmarking)

Universities and individual organizational units traditionally compare themselves with related structures – with their practices, and successful processes. In a small country like Georgia, the respondents feel that the looking at other HEIs and adopting successful practices from other HEIs is often practiced and encouraged by those who want to succeed, perform competitively in the market, and better fulfill their social mission.

Of these processes, i.e. external benchmarking and learning from others' experiences, the uncommon example revealed was the formal (in RSU's case) and *ad hoc* study visits (ISU, TeSaU) to the peer IQA offices more frequently at home and rarely abroad at partner HEIs, for instance, partners within the consortiums of the mentioned Tempus projects (Table 1). Compared to ISU and TeSaU, RSU was the most articulate about employing study tours as a tool to benefit from benchmarking while managing IQA processes at the University:

> By the senior management and initiative of the rector, we [RSU's IQA office] organized a specialized study visit to the Medical University in Tbilisi's IQA office and the head of the office shared its extensive experience in QA processes and delivered customized seminars on the principles and guidelines of IQA offices to RSU QA in-service personnel. We also have worked closely with other HEIs' IQA offices and NCEQE to adopt successful processes (RSU, R1).

The examples of adopting good practices form outside by the examined case studies is the benchmarking experience, gained from NCEQE trainings and workshops, the development of QA Handbooks designed via the Twinning project in collaboration with NCEQE, and ENQA document. Strong institutional links to NCEQE and the Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia have been identified as an influencing factor in organizational learning in managing IQA processes. These opportunities have been a good source to gain new knowledge and perspective to improve the core processes and working environment of the IQA offices (ISU, RSU, TeSaU, Table 1).

New approaches toward seeking new perspectives and knowledge outside the organization is somehow linked to the analyzed case study universities' systematic problem solving activities such as graduates' surveys that aim at collecting information about job experiences form alumni to inform academic curricula design and modernization (ISU and RSU). Another clearly novel approach to seeking new knowledge form international and European partners via the Tempus programme was also reported by the universities (ISU, RSU, TeSaU, Table 1). When asked about the external benchmarking strategy, one of the respondents form ISU noted that:

> While employing our benchmarking strategy, we often look at successful and highly ranked HEIs abroad rather than learning from our local peer institutions. But we take the local context into our consideration while developing recommendations for possible change and improvement in the core processes to the senior management and academic council. The experience of foreign institutions in managing IQA services is more important to consider (ISU, R3).

Transferring knowledge

In response to the question asked to all respondents on describing the mechanisms of intra-organizational knowledge sharing in their respective universities, i.e. how the relevant information on QA processes is stored and shared throughout the office, among different management levels and academic units (Appendix A), the study participants have portrayed a diverse methods of information dissemination. Transferring knowledge is related to the earlier discussion of learning from experience – internal and external benchmarking. For instance, study visits and personnel rotation programs in RSU's case facilitate knowledge sharing and information distribution within the university; these practices are relevant that have been noted to be effective and the most powerful to the practice of dissemination of knowledge internally throughout the organization (RSU Table 1). As the RSU example suggests, personnel rotations program is a powerful tool, though relatively cumbersome, for transferring knowledge.

A variety of mechanisms, such as written and oral reports, are the most popular and *manageable* methods of knowledge dissemination through the organizations in the examined

cases (ISU, RSU, TeSaU, Table 1). Nevertheless, the types of reports and audience vary across the examined universities. Common to all three HEIs examined in this study, the respondents emphasized that the information and reports developed for NCEQE are available to certain academic structures, for instance, academic council, rector, etc. upon their request that may account for information distribution on QA processes within the university (ISU, RSU, TeSaU, Table 1). The other type of reporting takes place internally when IQA offices prepare their annual reports that are published and presented to interested personnel inside the organization (RSU, ISU, Table 1). "Every structural unit at ISU, including IQA office, has to compile an annual report that is presented to authorized structures that is an effective way to diffuse knowledge and information about the QA processes and activities the office has undertaken" reflected by R1, ISU (Table 1).

RSU and TeSaU have developed an information support system to promote linkages among different levels and academic units of the universities (Table 1). A few of the specific examples of organizational responses to information transfer in the examined cases include: regular information and workshop meetings with faculty-based QA services (ISU) and individual faculties and departments (ISU, RSU, TeSaU) and the arrangement of intra-organizational working groups on studying and analyzing institutional problems related to performance the overall development of the university (RSU, Table 1).

Table 1: Findings from Case Study Universities

LEARNING ACTIVITIES IN QUALITY ASSURANCE*	**THEORETICAL MODELS**	
Types of learning organizations *Outward Looking, Inward Looking*	**Neo-institutional Perspective**	**Resource Dependency Theory (RDT)**
1. Systematic problem solving	- Annual Institutional Self Evaluation (ISU, RSU, TeSaU) - Quality Enhancement Agency requested Questionnaires (ISU, RSU, TeSaU) - Curriculum Review by Committee (ISU, RSU) - Preparation for Institutional Authorization and Programme Accreditation (ISU, RSU, TeSaU) - External Standardization (ISU, RSU)	- Student Evaluations (ISU, RSU, TeSaU) - Student Satisfaction (per degree program) (TeSaU) - 'Plan, Do, Check, Act' (TeSaU)** - Assessment of Study Processes, Classroom Observation, and Student Performance (RSU) - Labour-market Research, interviews with employers and alumni (RSU, ISU) - Annul Faculty/Department Self-Evaluation - in progress (ISU) - Problem-based Institutional Research (ISU) - Program Review Criteria – set internally (ISU)
*2. Experimentation**	- Problem-based Research, guided by difficulty (ISU, RSU, TeSaU) - Standardized Models of Improving Quality (ISU, RSU, TeSaU)	
3. Learning from past experience (internal-benchmarking)	- Institutional Authorization and Programme Accreditation Experience (ISU, RSU, TeSaU). - Recommendations given by NCEQE and the Tempus programme partners (RSU, TeSaU)	- Use of Data and Research Results (ISU) - Institutional Memory (past experiences and activities) (ISU, TeSaU) - Personnel Rotations (RSU) - SWOT Analysis (TeSaU) - Strong links with Faculties/Departments (ISU, TeSaU) - Strengthened Coordination (ISU, RSU)
4. Learning from others (external-benchmarking)	- NCEQE Trainings and Workshops (ISU, RSU, TeSaU) - QA Handbook (e.g. via the Twinning project) developed by NCEQE (RSU) - ENQA Document ((ISU, RSU, TeSaU) - Strong Links to and Cooperation with NCEQE and the Ministry (ISU, RSU, TeSaU)	- International (European) Benchmarking (e.g. via the Tempus programme) (ISU, RSU, TeSaU) - Study (Benchmarking) Tours to other Georgian HEIs' QA Centers (RSU) - Graduate Programs Review based on the World-class Research Universities (ISU) - Research Evaluation Indicators and Methods: Analysis of International Research Institutes (ISU)
5. Transferring knowledge	- Reports Developed for NCEQE (ISU, RSU, TeSaU)	- Information Support System (TeSaU, RSU) - Regular Meetings with Faculty-based QA Services (ISU) - Trainings of Curriculum Experts (ISU) - Reports: Publication and Presentation (ISU, RSU) - Intra-organizational Working Groups on Institutional Problems (RSU) - Meetings with Individual Faculties and Departments (RSU, ISU, TeSaU) - Information-sharing via Email (TeSaU)

**None of the HEIs reported examples of experimenting new ideas and search for new knowledge or contextualized measures experimented internally. Nevertheless, in other indicators in the table, one could identify elements of demonstration/experimentation programs, but the respondents could not easily report as such.*

***The Institutional Plan for QA 2010-2015 was developed in the framework of the Tempus project "Developing an International Quality Assurance System at Telavi State University."*

VI. DISCUSSION: RESPONSE TO THE MAIN QUESTION

Based on the responses of the participants explored in this study, the trend about increasing assessments and evaluations of HEIs (Henkel, 1998; Neave, 1998; Stensaker, 2007) has also been reinforced in this study. HEIs in Georgia, like in other parts of the world, face challenges of external evaluations and increasing pressure from the government and the key stakeholders to pay attention to the activities aimed at improving quality of the primary processes in academia. The main instrument for steering exercised by the government is the legislative framework itself that gives a survival venue to the examined HEIs for conformance and legitimization of activities. The new competitive environment for the participating case study universities, i.e. the institutional authorization and programme accreditation, changing student body, and institutional reputation and competition, provide an incentive and stimulus to become institutionally proactive for the quest for quality and develop organizational behaviors in support of building academic architecture of a learning organization. Changes in the practices, institutional adaptations of the internal structures and management processes, and certain features of a learning academic organization in the reviewed Georgian universities are in place. There is considerable data collected from the QA offices from the examined case study universities that backs up this point (Table 1).

Yet, a number of important limitations should be noted about the present thesis research project before exploring and conceptualizing the nature of the changes in organizational arrangements and practices of individual HEIs with respect to QA processes that would identify them as becoming active learning organizations in the terms defined by David Garvin (1993) and the type of organizational learning the examined HEIs have acquired framed under the two rather broad theoretical perspectives.

As noted in the methodology section, the respondents of the cases studies were self-selected senior administrative staff members of the case study universities' IQA offices. This has been both beneficial and hampering while exploring the internal QA processes and inner life of the universities as the views are of those directly engaged in and responsible for QA activities at the institutional level. Apart from being it advantageous to review experiences of those directly in charge, it may have hampered to reveal the true perspectives and critical opinions on the events that are critical to draw suppositions about the type of learning

organizations under the two theoretical perspectives – the neo-institutional and resource dependency views of organizational learning.

Regardless that the reviewed universities noticeably describe the processes related to QA activities and internal change in terms of the measures taken to improve the primary processes within the universities, they represent the public sector in Georgian higher education, which limits the discussion to this type. Hence, the discussion on two ideal perspectives of neo-institutional and resource dependency theories in relation to the organizational learning is also limited if one expects to draw the similarities and differences between the type of institutions under these two major assumptions of organizational learning in the terms defined in this study (Figure 2). Nevertheless, the Geographical coverage is established representing one central (located in the capital) and two regional universities offering degree programs at all three levels.

To clarify additionally concerning the nature of this study, the study did not assess effectiveness or quality of the processes designed internally by the reviewed universities to improve the core processes in academia. Neither did it attempt to collect data to evaluate improvements and changes in teaching and learning, nor did it dynamically show the subsistence of organizational learning in the examined IQA offices and universities, in general. Rather, it collected information, mainly on the self-reported basis, about the internal practices for the improvement of internal core processes. Consequently, this may give a rather broad descriptive picture on the baseline of the practices, but the framework used certainly allows to analytically assess the type of learning occurring within at the meso level.

As the study reveals, IQA offices are latecomers and relatively new structures in Georgian universities, accounting for about 7 years. Accordingly, assessing and analyzing the degree of institutionalization of quality assurance culture within the examined universities or within the system as a whole and seeking genuine organizational learning elements may naturally be contested pushing the argument forward that it may be reasonably early to expect institutional maturity and self-driven improvement focused processes at the institutional level. This may strengthen the presumptions that Georgian HEIs do not have strong quality assurance culture embedded within. Nevertheless, as one goes carefully through the empirical data and examples provided by the respondents in this study, relative to period of external

formalization of QA processes, it is still possible to draw a baseline on the degree of institutionalization of quality enhancement culture and organizational learning in this respect.

Some might contest the theoretical building blocks adopted for this study to establish theoretical grounds of the research questions – the use of the neo-institutional and resource dependency theories integrated with the learning organization indicators. The argument has already been put forward that these theoretical frameworks have been used and understood in an *altered* way in this study to conceptualize organizational adaptations and the organizational learning perspective of academic organizations. Both perspectives are idealistic that somewhat resemble each other in terms of the notion of organizational adaptability, in which HEIs can be affected by the external drivers for change and in which HEIs can exhibit differentiated externally-imposed and self-directed behaviors and organizational learning relevant to improving the core processes in higher education. The notion of organizational learning is undeniably subject of concern in both assumptions, but it has different orientation and forms in each perspective. Presumably, both approaches facilitate the understanding of what type of learning organization each examined university is becoming (Figure 2). The key idea from the analytical perspective is to develop a model analytical framework to demonstrate the differences in practices, orientation, and forms of different academic organizations while they are affected by the external drivers for change and are becoming active learning organizations.

Consistent with these points, one should be aware of these limitations while interpreting the findings and drawing conclusions. While the examined universities have developed the comparable culture of adopting certain externally imposed actions and the observed changes in organizational arrangements and practices follow certain patterns, the changes still vary from case to case and the distinctions are important to note because some of the patterns have been evolved internally in a given case in line with each university's capacity and experience.

The results of this study document some changes and adopted practices in managing internal QA processes. In addressing the first and second research questions about the changes in organizational arrangements to improve quality of the primary processes at Georgian HEIs and, whether HEIs' practices in IQA are affected by the external drivers for change, the results suggest that there is a great degree of relationship indicating impact at all institutions. Several patterns are identifiable. The evidence from the findings and data given by the study

participants confirms that Georgian HEIs are responding to the changing national policies and regulations with respect to quality enhancement in a similar manner developing the *compliance culture* and *organizational conformity* in response to the institutional milieu and the key steering instrument – the legislative framework. This type of organizational behaviors and organizational learning are outward looking and may be best understood under the neo-institutional school of organizational learning. Adopted organizational structures and practices with an exception of ISU, yet, not an absolute exception in the reviewed universities are reflections of the rules and policies of the external quality enhancement measures of the steering core in Georgian higher education and show a high degree of standardization in organizational arrangements. As observed, the definitions and stipulations given from outside concerning the external QA policies have special preferences as for how IQA should be developed in the examined cases. The analysis of the written documents of IQA offices such as statutes shows that the policies and functions adopted internally in managing IQA processes mirror the external policies and regulations. As confirmed by all respondents, the legislative measures obliged and urged HEIs in Georgia to establish IQA offices that would be institutionally responsible for QA processes internally. The *external orientation* in structural arrangements and core activities relating to programme and self-evaluation is strongly manifested amongst the case study universities. All three universities show a great degree of conformance with the external QA measures and standards and goals given from outside. An external orientation toward accountability and compliance was clearly evident in the mechanisms and practices of the participating universities in this study. For instance, in the case of ISU or RSU, whose academic programs are to be regularly assessed and accredited by NCEQE, the universities appear to have adopted an internal QA processes (e.g. faculty self-evaluation, curriculum committee records, the development of high quality documents and procedures, etc.) to mirror the external QA measures by NCEQE. Initially though, given the 'immaturity' of the system as a whole, it can be argued that this can serve to be a complimentary measure to facilitate quality reform at the meso level that may lead to organizational learning and positive outcomes of IQA processes within the organizations, but in the long-run, it may trigger the 'culture of compliance' of individual universities meaning that they may be tempted to give false impressions to the agency and authorities on their performance. This could also mean actively learning while conforming and complying the external rules by higher education organizations.

With respect to the focal analytical question of the study, i.e. whether HEIs with regard to improving quality of their *core processes* are becoming 'learning organizations' or whether there is some evidence that it is a matter of cosmetic change giving false impressions to the outside world on their performance, the findings analyzed according to the defined indicators have suggested that to some extent, they are becoming learning organizations, but the type of organizational learning they are acquiring varies amongst the cases and across the indicators of the organizational learning. According to the established propositions in this study, the organizational learning to maximize the *perfect flexibility* to fit within the environment should perhaps be understood within the neo-institutional view whereas the *internal and self-directed measures* for continuous improvement and enhancement of quality should be viewed under the resource dependence perspective. Understanding each university's experience and capacity and unique institutional cultures may help to comprehend what kind of learning is dominant in the five indicators of organizational learning with respect to IQA processes.

The results in Table 1 clearly reaffirm that there is emerging evidence of some examples of institutionalization of a culture of evidence, i.e. *problem solving* using the scientific methods in the practices of IQA offices across the examined cases. HEIs in Georgia reported that they use the evidence-based methods for observing and improving the core processes. This development is quite a novelty in management practices and culture within HEIs in Georgia. For instance, there is a considerable amount of encouragement through ISU at the institutional and academic levels towards institutional research to diagnose problems related to activities of observing and improving the basic processes. The same is true about improved coordination of IQA activities throughout the organization. Data-driven decision making is also exercised about certain institutional policies in the studied universities. Improved coordination measures are taken by the examined cases to coordinate IQA processes such as the appointment of a school- or a faculty-based QA coordinator and curriculum experts to collaborate with the institutional IQA services. This increases the potential of improved coordination. Yet, a shared evidence-based approach within the organizations to solving problems guided either by difficulty or opportunity is still absent in the examples of the examined cases, lacking the high degree of institutionalization of a culture of evidence-based QA management. This stance is natural given the distinct characteristics of academic institutions in general where management processes are extremely slow and loosely coordinated and communicated amongst the different knowledge

authorities, basic academic units, and administrative structures (Clark, 1983; Musselin, 2004; Weick, 1976, 1987).

The common methods distinctive to the *comparable culture* developed by the case study universities as a mean of managing data-driven management of IQA processes such as the administering student evaluations, undertaking annual self-evaluations, preparing for institutional authorization and programme accreditation (Table 1), are prompted from outside, per se by NCEQE. This outside scheme for improving quality based on the data collection methods support to stimulate a stronger culture of self-evaluation or a culture of evidence within the organizations, but the organizational learning is outward looking – certainly, externally-driven standardized ways to push organizational learning at the institutional level which can be categorized under the neo-institutional perspective of organizational learning while institutions are adjusting to EQA standards and what is required by law and policies of the outsiders (Figure 2). In contrast to this kind of organizational learning facilitated by knowledgeable outsiders, a number of examples of internally designed evidence-based QA activities within the studied HEIs (Table 1) clues about the organizational learning form that falls under the resource dependence theory that have been evolved internally (Figure 2). In short, in the problem-solving indicator of a learning organization, there is a good degree of balance between the external orientation and internal looking in the examined cases while designing organizational responses using the scientific methods to diagnose problems in quality at the institutional levels.

Of the indicators of building a learning organization, the least in evidence in the study was *experimentation.* The examined universities reported that they have mostly utilized standardized models of improving quality, free from internally evolved practices experimenting new ideas and searching for new knowledge, i.e. contextualized measures experimented internally whereas the resource dependency view emphasizes the need of new ideas and constant search of contextualized measures and experiment projects to ensure fresh and vital fluid for organizational performance and gains in knowledge. While carefully assessing, this indicator is least apparent within the resource dependence understanding of organizational learning and is purely outward looking from the neo-institutional perspective of organizational learning, for instance, copying ideas regarding the recognized methods of improving quality from outside.

Systematic and effective organizational learning encompasses learning activities fed by past experiences and an analysis of an organization's own experience, so the lessons are learned through the systematic review of successes and failures. Organizational coordination of learning within IQA offices is essentially embedded in the examined case, but the processes vary across the cases. The use of external tools of assessment, for instance, institutional authorization and programme accreditation documents and external feedback given to HEIs, has been the most prevalent process associated with the use of past knowledge in the current practices by the studied HEIs (Table 1). The use of outsiders' knowledge and feedback as a mean to generate useful knowledge in the concurrent processes is a clear dimension of organizational learning understood through the neo-institutional perspective. However, universities sometimes appear less proactive perceiving the main agents' ideas and recommendations without developing internally evolved approaches. As a result, the organizational learning dimension in terms of effectively and systematically using one's own experiences and employing the strategy of a regular application of internal benchmarking is less observable to fit under the resource dependence perspective which may limit the maturity and independence of IQA services. This observation responds well to the earlier discussion on the local context that universities are not ready for a high degree of autonomy, which is easily observed in the actions of the government toward steering HEIs.

In contrast of the internal benchmarking indicator and its institutionalization across the universities, the degree of *external benchmarking* dimension in the practices of the examined cases is more balanced within these two views of organizational learning in the defined terms of this study. The results suggest that seeking out knowledge outside implicitly framed under the neo-institutional perspective of organizational learning is quite evident amongst the indicators of a learning organization (Table 1). More typical in the cases, was the source of new knowledge gained through the information activities such as workshops, trainings, and seminars organized by the authorities responsible for quality in Georgian higher education. Although HEIs still immensely rely on knowledge and recommendations generated outside to carry out institutional activities in quality enhancement, they have slowly developed new approaches, for example, more specifically observed in the customized study tours employed by RSU, to systematically look at others' practices at home and abroad in administering QA in the basic processes and adopt the best practices contextualized internally. External benchmarking with peer foreign institutions through the higher education cooperation schemes was also a practice in the reviewed cases. An analysis of examples of such

internally progressed benchmarking activities allows us to draw a conclusion that this indicator of organizational learning is also present from the resource dependence perspective.

The last indicator in the results refers to the intra-organizational *knowledge sharing* indicator of a learning organization. Institutional encouragement of internal transfer of knowledge and information for improving core processes in academia is the least evident in the reviewed cases. Nevertheless, HEIs have reported some routine methods of information dissemination, including dissemination of reports developed for NCEQE among authorized internal personnel (Table 1). Correspondingly as argued elsewhere, such methods of information dissemination may serve as an effective tool to feed the outside world and respond well to external requirements. The purpose is therefore clear to be a successful story teller for an 'inspector'. The instances in which success story-telling reports on institutional or unit performance are developed for outsiders, one deals with externally-focused accountability approach of an institution. However, ineffective knowledge sharing as a weakness is distinct to HEIs in general due to the fundamental characteristics of higher education organizations, i.e. the departmentalized nature and poorly coordinated mechanisms amongst academic units and administrative structures.

VII. CONCLUSION

Having reviewed the cases of IQA practices at universities in Georgia, the study has revealed several important patterns of organizational adaptations and learning. The results of the study reconfirm the evidence on the pervasive rather general trend of increasing external evaluations and assessments in higher education by the national systems around the world, including new comers like Georgia. In the new competitive and fairly regulated context of higher education, Georgian HEIs face challenges posed by a range of stakeholders to pay attention to the activities aimed at improving quality of the primary processes.

The study carefully explored the national QA policies that are fully in line with the Bologna process and quality reform in Europe and their impact on institutional practices in QA while the analytical framework adopted specifically for this study allowed to assess the degree of organizational learning and the differentiated patterns of externally-imposed and self-directed internal responses to the larger processes across the Georgian universities. The study is indeed an important contribution to higher education and QA research within the target system as a whole and a baseline product on which further research on quality reform, current and future development of QA in Georgia can be built on. The study also contributes to our theoretical understanding of organizational learning and its key input lies in its different approach of using the two rather broad theoretical views of organizational learning.

The findings suggest that the key external drivers for change in administering IQA services within the examined HEIs have been the national legislative framework itself followed by the new competitive environment for revenues and institutional reputation. The definitions and stipulations outlined in the external QA policies have special preferences as for how IQA have been developed in the reviewed examples that highlights the impact and close linkage between EQA and IQA. An external orientation toward accountability and compliance was clearly evident in the mechanisms and practices of the participating universities in this study. In other words, the examined HEIs are conscious about how to please the authority and comply with the common rules. In response to the key research question, the concluding statement is that the universities are responding to the changing national policies and regulations with respect to quality enhancement in a similar manner developing the *compliance culture* and *organizational conformity* in response to the institutional milieu and

the key steering instrument – the legislative framework. Relevant to the cases, the legislative framework has been found to be decisive respectively that acted as an impetus to administratively launch internal QA processes while in certain cases, institutional competition and reputation provided further incentives and stimulation to become institutionally proactive for the quest for quality and according to the analytical indicators used in this study, develop recognizable self-directed responses in support of building academic architecture of the learning organization.

Concerning the key analytical question, the recognizable adopted practices in managing internal QA processes and certain features of Garvin's (1993) learning organization are in place at Georgian universities. This indicates that the reviewed universities, besides the behaviours to please the authority, have also developed self-directed internal responses to the larger processes. Nevertheless, when analyzing the organizational responses of the examined HEIs relevant to improving the core processes in higher education, variations have been observed in the two main assumptions of *perfect flexibility* - external focus to fit within the environment and *internal enhancement measures* - self-directed activities for continuous improvement. As evidenced through interviews with the selected QA administration personnel, the examined activities of HEIs by which the 'transformation' is occurring appear fairly promising to assess the examined HEIs as academic learning organizations, but the type of organizational learning they are acquiring is twofold: internally (inherently) evolved and externally (superficially) pushed. Of the organizational learning activities, the reviewed HEIs have been most effective to design internally evolved activities in systematic problem solving and external benchmarking, whereas the rest of the learning activities such experimentation, internal benchmarking, and knowledge-sharing remain relatively premature and standardized exhibiting organizational mimicry and organizational actions complying with the external policies and perceptions.

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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEWING AGENDA

Key Research Question: How are Georgian HEIs affected by the national policy initiatives aiming at improving the quality of teaching and learning at universities?

QA Mechanisms and General Description:

(1) What are the legislative requirements and procedures for internal quality assurance for the Georgian Higher Education (mainly review of the Article 25, Law of Higher Education of Georgia, any other requirements)?
(2) What are the underpinning principles of practices in the legislative arrangements that regulate quality and how it conforms the principles elaborated in the Berlin Communiqué and ENQA document?

Internal Dimension: Self-regulation

(3) Please, describe your internal quality assurance system – the major scheme and mechanism aiming at improving teaching and learning within the organization (organizational arrangements, i.e. organizational structure and governance, principles, levels & institutional units involved, scope, activities, etc.)?

External Orientation and Internal Practice:

(4) (a) How do the arrangements described above are in compliance with the external expectations for the practice?
(b) How are the practices in IQA in your university affected by the external drivers for change (quality assurance mechanisms, competition and financial revenues, reputation)?
(c) How are the institutional efforts to enhance quality different in you practice? In other words, what is the *new practice* and what is the value-added to the principles and guidelines for QA processes imposed externally?

Improving the Core Processes: Description of Key Activities and Internal Dynamics in QA

Based on Garvin's framework for the learning organization (1993)

(5) Please, describe how the problems in quality of teaching and learning and research are identified, mainly how the unit/organization is informed about a specific problem?
(6) Please, describe the ongoing and/or demonstration programs in QA, if any, in your organization.
(7) How are the past knowledge and experience used in the daily practices? In other words, how is the current practice in QA informed from the past memory and results?
(8) Are there instances to use external benchmarking, formally or informally, in managing quality in your organization? Please, provide examples.
(9) What is the mechanism of intra-organization knowledge sharing in the organization? How is the relevant information stored and shared throughout the organization?