



## REVIEW OF DIPLOMA THESIS

**Review type:** Supervisor's Review

**Author of the diploma thesis:** Mariam Gabunia

**Title:** Policy Design of the Unified National Examinations to Higher Education Institutions in Georgia

**Author of the review:** Mgr. Jan Kohoutek, PhD.

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The thesis takes up the theme of admission procedures to Bachelor study programmes within higher education in Georgia. Particularly, the thesis focuses on exploring the Unified National Examination (UNE) as a nation-wide, higher education admission scheme, using the research design of a single qualitative case study. The UNE scheme represents a valuable, pertinent and relevant kind of research that sectorally falls within the public policy field. The aims of the research are to “study the ‘side-effects’ and challenges of UNE policy in terms of student’s admission process and its anti-corruption measures, explore its organizational structure and processes, understand the main design patterns in the policy process and find the optimal solutions for current challenges“ (p. 5). The thesis’ aims as well as the corresponding research questions are relevant and provide space for added value as the UNE theme is rarely investigated in Georgian policy research.

As suggested the thesis makes use of a qualitative approach – methodologically and also with regard to its design. It takes the form of a single qualitative case. The methodology comprises, desk research into secondary sources plus collection of primary data through eight interviews “with different stakeholders, such as: representatives of higher education institutions (academics and administrators), policy experts and public officers“ (p. 20). The structure of the interviews and short precis are included in the thesis’ supplement. Conceptually, the thesis utilizes insights from policy design literature to a very sufficient extent, with the choice of the conceptual approach sufficiently argued for in the beginning of the thesis. Plus, importantly, the design approach is applied skilfully and conveniently to the case in order to draw novel insights, also a little beyond the UNE case itself.

The thesis has a logical structure, beginning with the introduction, aims, research questions and followed by the overview of the Georgian HE system, The overview could come after the conceptual and methodological part, but this is largely a matter of personal choice because also the current structure makes sense. The thesis also contains the empirical descriptive part about the UNE (mal-) functioning, supported by selected excerpts from the interviews. The excerpts help deepen one’s knowledge of UNE (re-)designs, including relevant processes and outputs.

The findings reveal new and interesting information about the UNE (faulty) redesigns in time; the policy design concept is applied as it should be, generating, factual information aside, novel knowledge about the types and spaces of UNE policy design. The application of the design concept to the empirical case is surely the thesis’ major strength. But also some factual



information is quite of relevance and interest, such as the budgetary conditions of UNE, UNE internal organisational rules and the like. The thesis is also nicely written, free of jargon, misspellings, grammar mistakes and so on. The thesis is within the tolerable text limit (the text has 73 pages including references and excluding annexes).

The minor limitation can be seen in not securing the standpoints of a Ministry of Education representative as a central “designer institution” (but the author clearly explains the political reason why the interview did not take place). Second, although the research questions are taken up in the discussion part of the thesis, their answering should have been made more explicit there. Finally, the final point/argument on the UNE deep redesign is not anticipated in the near future because the major actors (HEIs) should first be ready (p. 64) needs clarification; isn't it possible that e.g. a new minister will have UNE policy redesign as a top, short-term priority regardless actual readiness of Georgian HEIs? (this argument corroborated by some earlier unilateral steps of Georgian central HE policy-makers as also pointed out in the thesis – see the issue of the General Ability Test).

Overall, the thesis is near-to-excellent, with only quite minor limitations that are clearly outweighed by substantial empirical as well as conceptual added value.

**For the above reasons, I recommend the diploma thesis for the defence.**

**My grading is "A-B".**

Question for defence: “What future, short-term developments of the UNE design are likely – or unlikely – in relation to the recent political changes in the Ministry of Education (change of minister)? Will these changes in ministerial political seats impact the UNE design? If so, how?”

Date: June, 5<sup>th</sup> 2023

Signature: