

Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Policy at Caucasus University

*“Diversity is a fact,
Equity is a choice,
Inclusion is an action.
....”*

–ARTHUR CHAN

Preamble

Education, universally acknowledged as a cornerstone of personal and societal development, is increasingly viewed through the lens of equality and fairness. The quest for inclusivity and accessibility in higher education is an important topic on the agenda of the Universities. The idea that everyone should have the chance to learn more and do better in life is the road to a collective aspiration towards a more enlightened and equitable global society. The principles of inclusivity and accessibility in education are underpinned by a broad consensus that learning should transcend social, economic, and physical barriers, offering every individual the opportunity to achieve their potential. The United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights recognizes education as a fundamental human right. This declaration, particularly Article 26¹, posits that higher education should be accessible to all on the basis of merit, setting a global standard for educational equality.

In recent years, European countries have made promises to make college and university life more diverse and welcoming for everyone. European political pledges to enhance diversity and inclusivity in higher education have emerged, commencing with the March 2015 Paris Declaration by EU member states, promoting citizenship and values through education. The 2015 Yerevan Communiqué and 2018 Paris Communiqué of the Bologna Process further emphasized the social dimension of higher education. EU policies embraced social inclusion in 2017, integrated into the European Commission's higher education agenda, aligning with the reinforced European Social Pillar for integration. Gender equality has long been a focus in the European Research Area. On a worldwide scale, the United Nations set goals in 2015 to make the world a better place by 2030. Known as UN Sustainable Development Goals, they include the goals to make sure everyone has the same opportunities for education, to reduce the gap between rich and poor, and ensure that everyone are treated equally.

The Higher Education Law in Georgia emphasizes the concept of the Individual Study Program, tailoring study plans to accommodate students' specific interests and academic proficiency. It underscores the accessibility and openness of higher education, promoting academic freedom in teaching, learning, and research. Additionally, the law advocates for the enhancement of students' social conditions, aiming to create an inclusive environment. A specific focus is placed on facilitating studying conditions for disabled students, reflecting a commitment to diversity and inclusion within the higher education system. The legislative framework aligns with principles that foster a diverse, accessible, and supportive educational landscape in Georgia.

Furthermore, Georgia has implemented dedicated government programs to bolster support for students with social and special learning needs, as well as those residing in the border areas of occupied territories. These initiatives signify a proactive commitment to inclusivity, acknowledging the diverse challenges faced by students in various circumstances. By addressing social and special learning needs, and considering the unique circumstances of those in border regions, the government programs contribute to fostering a more equitable and inclusive educational environment. This holistic approach aligns with the broader goals of diversity and inclusion within the higher education landscape in Georgia. Georgian higher education Quality Assurance (QA) aligns with Diversity and Inclusion through institutional and program accreditation standards. Authorization (institutional accreditation)² Standard 3.2 underscores the consideration of diverse requirements, needs, and academic readiness, ensuring seamless student engagement. Additionally, Standard 7.1 highlights the adaptation of environments for individuals with special needs. The inclusion of supporting instruments for socially vulnerable and Specific Support Education Needs (SSEN) students is a crucial indicator. Furthermore, under Accreditation Standard 3.1, the emphasis is on providing integration within the university space, accommodating both local and international students. The multifaceted approach reflects a commitment to fostering diversity, inclusion, and support for all students within the higher education framework in Georgia.

¹<https://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/2021/03/udhr.pdf>

² <https://eqe.ge/en/page/parent/517/avtorizatsia>

Intense discussions on social diversity and inequality emphasize the pivotal role of education, particularly higher education, in ensuring inclusivity. At the same time, academic landscapes worldwide are evolving amidst demographic shifts and technological progress including the fast development of artificial intelligence (AI). Academic institutions face with diverse student bodies, either through increased enrollment or efforts to attract more diverse student body. Initiatives like the European Universities Initiative and mobility programs amplify cultural diversity on campuses, prompting adjustments in academic approaches. In the academic realm, inclusivity measures are actively considered, signaling a heightened focus on diversity and inclusion in academia.³

Scope

This policy applies to all stakeholders of Caucasus University including academic and administrative staff, students, alumni, etc.

CU declaration of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI)

Mission statement, Values, Strategy

Mission of Caucasus University is to prepare for local and international markets, through research-oriented teaching and learning, competitive, highly-qualified, morally-grounded professionals committed to the ideals of democracy and thus satisfy society's educational needs and requirements.

CU values are Spirit of Innovation; Diversity and inclusion; Academic Freedom; Proximity to the local and international community; Caring for the development of the country.

Diversity and Inclusion is imbedded in all university processes. CU strives to create opportunities for local community to engage, understand and respect others whose perspectives, values, beliefs, traditions, and world views have been shaped by different experiences and backgrounds. Only by exploring issues with people of different backgrounds and viewpoints CU will challenge assumptions and broaden understanding of the modern world. CU's commitment to equity and diversity is a pledge to eradicate unjust discrimination, promote human rights and social justice. The pursuit of equality involves fair and impartial treatment, cultivating learning and work environments that promote diversity, dignity, and inclusivity with a culturally sensitive perspective. This inclusive process at CU actively encourages contributions, ensuring everyone feels valued, respected, and involved, fostering cultural relations and building trust globally.

The strategic plan of Caucasus University encompasses three main directions, one of which is Internationalization that spans across multiple dimensions reflecting dedication to create a globally engaged and culturally diverse academic environment. The areas include:

- Academic programs: Joint and Double-Degree Programs; foreign language-taught courses; study abroad and exchange programs.
- Research and collaboration: international research partnerships; joint researches; participation in international conferences, etc.
- Accreditation and International Quality Assurance.
- Student, faculty and staff mobility
- International community engagement: attracting international students and faculty; cultural exchange programs, etc.

CU EDI policy is based on the following principles:

- Respect for diversity
- Commitment to equity and fair treatment
- Safeguard the inclusiveness of everyone
- Assist and encourage to reach one's full potential

Objectives

- To promote a diverse and inclusive community - implement recruitment and retention strategies that enhance the diversity of students, faculty, and staff:
 - Further develop targeted recruitment strategies to attract a diverse pool of candidates for student admissions and staff/faculty positions (e.g. balance gender, etc.)
 - Provide equal opportunities for career progression regardless of race, ethnicity, religion, gender, age and sexual orientation

³https://eua.eu/downloads/publications/web_diversity%20equity%20and%20inclusion%20in%20european%20higher%20education%20institutions.pdf

- Provide equal remuneration to personnel for work of equal or comparable value regardless of race, ethnicity, religion, gender, age and sexual orientation
- To foster an equitable learning and working environment: develop and maintain policies, procedures, and practices that promote equity, prevent discrimination, harassment and related interpersonal violence.
 - Conduct thorough assessments to identify any gaps or areas for improvement in existing policies
 - Solicit feedback from employees, students, and relevant stakeholders to ensure a diverse range of perspectives are considered in the policy development and revision process
 - Clearly communicate any updates to the policies and ensure that all members of the organization or learning community are aware of the expectations for promoting equity and preventing discrimination and harassment
- To enhance awareness about EDI: provide education and training opportunities that increase understanding and appreciation of diversity, equity, and inclusion.
 - Develop and implement regular training sessions and workshops for employees or students on equity, diversity and inclusion. Include topics such as unconscious bias, cultural competence, and sensitivity training to raise awareness about potential sources of discrimination and harassment
- To engage with the wider community: establish partnerships and collaborations that reflect our commitment to equity, diversity and inclusion in the broader society.
 - To further engage with local, regional and global partners to promote EDI principles
 - Continue collaboration with WEPs and PRME and implement best practices to further refine ecosystem within and beyond CU

CU Responsibility, Monitoring and Evaluation of EDI Policy

The monitoring and evaluation of the implementation of the EDI policy, along with necessary adjustments, are overseen by a relevant committee/Ombudsman's Office at CU. The committee conducts annual reviews of EDI activities and disseminates its findings to the university community.