# Strategies for Creating an Inclusive Civic Education Curriculum: Lessons Learned from Georgia
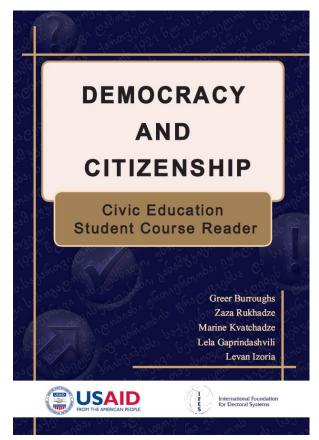
In Georgia, many young adults did not have a strong understanding of the country's system of government or why it was important to be an active citizen. With funding from the U.S. Agency for International Development in 2010, IFES and its Georgian partners created a university-level course called *Demokratia da Mokalakeoba* (Democracy and Citizenship) in order to fill these gaps. By 2014, the course was being offered in 22 universities in seven major cities, and more than four thousand students had taken the course.

Democracy and Citizenship is designed to strengthen students' understanding of governance, human rights, civic responsibility, to enhance critical thinking skills and to encourage participation in public life. It includes a course reader that provides real-world examples of the impact of active citizens, and requires students to create an "action plan" on a topic of interest to them in their communities, such as education, gender equality, or healthcare.

## Integrating Disability Rights

The course was developed to be inclusive of persons with disabilities in three different ways:

This is the cover of the English version of the *Democracy and Citizenship* civic education course taught at Georgian universities.

Source: International Foundation for Electoral Systems

1. The course book includes examples of citizens with disabilities advocating for their rights, and dedicates one section to the rights of persons with disabilities.

2. Students with and without disabilities helped to make sure that the course book and materials were available in an accessible format for students with disabilities.

3. Some students were inspired to focus on disability rights issues for their action plans, and continued to be active in this area after completing the course. Notably, two course alumni helped to create an accessible section for persons who are blind or have low vision at a major university's library, and another started a new youth-focused disabled persons' organization (DPO).

## Course Book: *Demokratia da Mokalakeoba*

*Including persons with disabilities as positive examples*

One important part of inclusion is making sure that the history and role of persons with disabilities are not ignored. At the beginning of the course reader, there are six different scenarios showing how active citizenship made a positive difference. One example focuses on the experience of persons with disabilities in the United States, where they advocated for their rights and eventually got the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), a landmark disability rights law, passed. This example of disability mainstreaming is also supported by a section in the reader that focuses explicitly on the rights of persons with disabilities, as well as chapters on the rights of ethnic minorities and gender equality.

*Ensuring that the course book is accessible for all students*

Though IFES and its partners had planned to make sure that the course book was provided in accessible formats, students from Tbilisi State University who had taken the course in its first year took the initiative to help produce an audiobook version on CD that was placed inside the back cover with a braille script. The support and active involvement of the course alumni in production allowed for the audio format of the book to be available to students much faster.



A student reads from a page of braille printed by new equipment at the accessible materials library section at Tbilisi State University.

Source: International Foundation for Electoral Systems

## Becoming Young Leaders

As part of the course, students are asked to develop action plans related to a topic of personal interest. While many interesting action plans have been developed over the lifetime of the course, at least two major plans involving inclusion of persons with disabilities were developed and later fully implemented after the course was over.

*Access to university library materials*

While taking the Democracy and Citizenship course, two university students, Tato Papiashvili and Karaman Giorgi Beridze, designed an action plan to increase access to education for persons with disabilities. After completing the course, they continued development of the concept and created an accessible education area in the Tbilisi State University library. The new library section, the first of its kind in Georgia, offers resources for students who are blind or have low vision. These resources include audio books, computers with speech programs, a braille printer, and a scanner that converts books into audio files.

*Creation of a new youth-oriented DPO*

One course alum, a student with a physical disability named Ramini Matcharashvili, used the experience and enthusiasm he gained from the course, and the subsequent support offered to him by a leader of a

disabled person's organization, to expand his own action in support of persons with disabilities. Matcharashvili established a DPO, Change for Equal Rights, to advocate for persons with disabilities in Batumi, located in the Adjara region of Georgia. Through his organization, Matcharashvili strives to create equal opportunities for persons with disabilities and to encourage youth with disabilities to become more active in civil society. Change for Equal Rights works to educate people with disabilities on their rights and responsibilities and support them in advocating for their interests. For example, they ran an effective advocacy campaign targeting public transportation. In Georgia, many buses are accessible, but bus drivers do not want to take the time to put the ramp down on the bus, making it nearly impossible for those with physical disabilities to access the bus. Change for Equal Rights conducted an advocacy campaign on this issue resulting in many drivers being sensitized to the issue and now stopping to lower their ramps.

## Supporting the Development of Active Citizens

The Democracy and Citizenship course provides all its students opportunities for important knowledge gains and skills development in civics concepts, human rights and systems of government. These themes support the idea that all citizens' input and participation are important parts of a vibrant and healthy democracy. This idea provides a platform for the consistent message of inclusion of persons with disabilities as well as other frequently marginalized populations such as women and ethnic minorities. The Democracy and Citizenship course nurtures the interests of students and encourages them to see and act on the areas of need for themselves and others in their own communities. This course and its purpose, informing and engaging young people as inclusive civic actors responsive to all members of society, can be easily transferred, customizing the materials to fit the country context.