

LABOUR AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

HIGHER EDUCATION AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

Student Social Needs Survey

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Acknowledgment

“The number of students whose studies have been suspended is higher than ever.” Every year in November and April, this saying reminds social media users of the difficult social life for students in Georgia. The reason for the suspension of status is often an inability to pay tuition fees, but what is actually behind the suspension of status? Or more generally, what socio-economic needs are associated with higher education in Georgia? This study is an attempt to evaluate access to higher education in Georgia from the student’s perspective and provide an overview of the problems that have arisen in distance education.

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Summary

This research examines higher education students' socio-economic barriers, living conditions, and social well-being. Since access to education is a complex variable, the study examines students' experiences in several areas, namely: the transition from general education to higher education, tuition fees and other daily expenses, housing policies, student employment policies and experiences, as well as barriers to learning. Primary data was collected through focus groups and expert interviews. As part of the research, 24 focus groups were conducted with students from different Georgian universities. In addition, 6 expert interviews were conducted with representatives of educational policy, political economy, higher education administration and relevant government agencies.

Research shows that housing is a major issue that negatively impacts students' social well-being in the context of access to higher education. A second important problem is the tuition fee. The combination of these two factors is the basis for the suspension of student status, especially for students who migrate from the regions to the capital. In addition, research shows that the scarcity of state resources in higher education and low income forces students to find employment mainly in the precarious, unregulated service sector. In this context, higher education has been shown to slightly increase the chances of getting a job and slightly improve salaries. The study also reveals that students' perception of distance education varies. Considering the students' socio-economic background, this format was found to be relatively effective in reducing monthly expenditures for low income students and their families.

Main Findings

SOCIO-ECONOMIC BACKGROUND OF STUDENTS AND TRANSITION INTO HIGHER EDUCATION

- There are significant differences in resources and opportunities between private and public schools. There is a difference in the number of students in classes and the attitudes of teachers, especially toward students beginning school - in public school, the student is expected to have additional tutoring in all subjects in order to be competitive in the united national exam.
- One important factor is the family - according to the students' assessments, they and their families are under social pressure and continue to go to university after school because they fear a negative attitude from the community.
- A lack of job opportunities often pushes Bachelor's degree holders to pursue a Master's degree soon after.
- For boys, the tendency to continue education is related to compulsory military service.

STUDENT INCOME AND EXPENSES: EMPLOYMENT, HOUSING AND TUITION FEES

- Research shows that there is a conflict between student employment and educational practices. Higher education does not increase the chance of employment. It does, however, create significant barriers to adjusting to learning time.
- Employment is not a matter of acquiring professional knowledge and skills, but a necessity to meet daily expenses.
- Students do not work in their profession, which also reduces the link between employment and study.

SOCIAL ISSUES AND HOUSING POLICY

- Housing is one of the main preconditions for the social exclusion of students and creates problems for access to education.
- The housing problem is especially serious for those who migrate from the regions to the capital, which puts an extra financial burden on students' families.
- Due to the high cost of living and low availability of student housing, students are forced to live in adjacent cities, which reduces their living costs.

STUDENTS' TUITION FEES IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

- Tuition, along with housing costs, is a major part of students' monthly expenses.
- The main sources of finances for covering tuition fees were the family and income from paid work. Due to the pandemic, a large proportion of students are unable to find jobs, thus the family is often responsible for all of their expenses. In this regard, a connection was identified with the forced emigration of a family member, which is related to the payment of tuition fees.
- There is a practice of using a consumer loan to pay tuition fees, however, it is mostly taken by family members and not directly by students.
- Payment of tuition fees is particularly problematic due to the existing Covid Pandemic, which is related to the loss of employment among students, and consequently a stable source of income.

ACCESS TO LEARNING RESOURCES

- According to students from state universities, the basic literature mentioned in course curricula is also available through distance learning. Similar beliefs were also reported in the pre-pandemic period.
- The content of the textbooks themselves is problematic because it does not reflect modern theoretical thinking. Students from the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences also mentioned such problems.

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON THE SOCIAL ASPECT OF HIGHER EDUCATION

- A weak internet connection in regions prevents students from properly engaging in the learning process.
- The distance learning format also proved difficult for students from large families who do not have individual spaces. Students often do not have a silent place to study.
- Students who were employed in parallel with their studies lost their jobs due to the pandemic, which increased the risk of a status suspension.
- Distance learning has increased students' frustration and anxiety about academic activities since on-site classes have been cancelled.
- Students with difficult socio-economic conditions, despite the difficulties of distance learning, would like to maintain this format of education in order to save monthly expenses.
- One of the main reasons for not attending distance learning lectures is the low quality and high price of internet access, which is especially problematic for students who live in regions.

Introduction

After the restoration of independence, Georgia became the scene of a series of political experiments. One of the most significant is the neoliberal experiment that began in the 2000s. The economic reforms introduced after the Rose Revolution led to a massive reduction of the state's supervisory and regulatory roles and the establishment of the dogma of state non-interference (Tim, 2017). The expressed distrust for the state has encouraged the reduction of legislative initiatives required for economic regulation and the abolition of several state functions (Jones, 2013). According to the World Bank, economic prosperity in Georgia is the most unevenly distributed among post-Soviet countries (The World Bank, 2019).

Reforms in the post-Soviet transition process also had an impact on higher education. Before gaining independence, Georgian higher education was part of the Soviet system, which standardized its form and content. The institutional landscape of higher education was very similar to that of other Soviet republics (Sharvashidze, 2005). Privatization was one of the most important aspects of higher education reform in the post-Soviet period (Chakhaia & Bregvadze, 2018). More than 200 private universities were established between 1990 and 2000. The most important reforms in higher education are related to the system of unified national examinations, which was introduced to eradicate previous corrupt practices in universities.

According to the Ministry of Education and Science, the number of students in higher education institutions on November 1, 2020, was 237,000. During this period, the number of students enrolled in university increased sharply. On one hand, this process was related to the economic problems that arose after the restoration of independence and, on the other hand, to the expectation that higher education would provide an opportunity to eliminate unemployment and poverty (Samniashvili, 2017) (Bakradze, 2019). Viewing state higher education systems as market-oriented can help build a better understanding of the roles of financial aid and privatization (as measured by public tuition charges).

Despite progressive legislative efforts by governments in some cases, social inequality, poverty, and institutional problems remain significant challenges. The main challenge for the population remains economic hardship, caused by

unemployment, poverty, and rising prices (CRRC Georgia, 2020). Social and economic inequality became even more evident in the wake of the global Covid pandemic. In the previous year, citizens considered unemployment to be the biggest problem, followed by the pandemic (CRRC Georgia, 2020). The existing economic inequality has also significantly impacted students, who are one of the most vulnerable groups in terms of economic well-being. Significant disparities in access to higher education are observed depending on socio-economic and demographic characteristics (DZHW, 2021).

According to the study of the International Consortium of Eurostudents - "Eurostudent VII Wave" (2018-2021), which examines the socio-economic status, living conditions, and characteristics of students at European universities, the data about Georgia points to the problem of students' over-indebtedness. The percentage of students with very serious financial problems is 40% of the total number of students in Georgia. According to the cross-cultural database from the same study, the above indicator puts Georgia in first place in terms of urgency of this problem when compared to other European countries. (DZHW, 2021). Statistics from 2013, however, show that the percentage of suspended students is increasing every year. While the percentage of suspended students was 14.7% in 2013, it increased to 30.8% in 2020. There are various reasons for suspended status, and according to 2020 data, 40% of students with suspended status had their status suspended due to financial debt (Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sport of Georgia, 2020). In addition, the assessment of the socio-economic status of students is important in the context of the global pandemic, because it has significantly changed teaching methods in the higher education system (from lecture halls to distance learning). Similarly, with the transition to distance learning, the material and technical possibilities (Internet, technical devices), access to educational resources, availability of adequate study spaces, as well as the student employment issues are relevant to the assessment of access to education.

Access to education is a complex concept and it involves many interrelated social structures (Pfeffer, 2018). In such a broad sense, student experiences potentially encompass all issues, including school and university learning experiences and needs outside the learning process.

This research is concerned with the social needs of university students. It illustrates issues that may affect their daily life, learning environment, and participation in the learning process. This research also examines the experience of learning in school as a prerequisite for admission to a higher education institution. This study similarly assesses the employment status of students. To define the socio-economic status of students, the financial sources that enable them to meet tuition and other household expenses have been analyzed. Because the coronavirus pandemic has dramatically changed everyday life, the research examined how the virus affected the students' learning, including, access to educational literature, and the extent to which they are able to participate in the learning process in the current socio-economic situation.

Thus, the main research questions for the present study were formulated as follows:

1. How do students' living conditions (employment, resources, costs, housing) affect access to education?
2. Regarding the right to higher education, what challenges and difficulties did students face due to the global pandemic?
3. What impact does the level of schooling (type of school) have on advanced education?
4. What are the reasons behind continuing education in a higher education institution?
5. What is the impact of students' employment status on their engagement in education?
6. What kind of challenges do students face when it comes to paying tuition and other household expenses?
7. What factors force students to abandon their student status?
8. What sort of obstacles do students face in accessing learning materials?
9. How has the coronavirus pandemic affected higher education?

Methodology

This research aimed to investigate the socio-economic situation of the students. To achieve this goal, three main phases were identified, namely:

- The school phase
- The transition from school to university
- The phase of higher education

The current situation of students is the result of many factors at the national level. The objective of the research at each of the above stages in relation to different variables was to assess the socio-economic status of the respondents. These include the school system, the economic system, cultural norms and values, and the higher education system. This study examines various aspects of students' lives: 1) their background (demographic characteristics and social background), 2) study conditions and experiences (access to and transition within higher education, study conditions, and quality), and 3) their living conditions (employment, resources, expenses and housing).

Qualitative research methodology, namely focus groups, were used to thoroughly explore the aim and objectives of the research. The research included 7 major cities in Georgia: Tbilisi, Batumi, Kutaisi, Gori, Zugdidi, Telavi, and Akhaltsikhe. Taking into account the specifics of the research, the selection of cities depended on the existence of a higher education institution.

Focus group participants were selected based on the non-probability sampling model (i.e., a purposive sampling principle). During the selection process, a selection matrix for research-related components was established. Twenty-four focus groups were conducted as part of the research, three of which consisted of participants with suspended student status (respondents were representatives of public and private universities in different cities). Each focus group, representing undergraduate and graduate students from both private and public universities, consisted of 6-8 participants.

See Table #1 for the distribution of the 24 focus groups by city.

Table. 1

Region	Type of higher education institution		Students Quantity
	Public	Private	
Tbilisi	4	4	55
Batumi	3	1	32
Kutaisi	2	2	36
Gori	1	-	11
Zugdidi	2	-	15
Telavi	1	-	10
Akhaltzikhe	1	-	12
With status-suspended students	3		20
Total:	24	7	191

The following limitations and assumptions were taken into account when compiling the groups:

- It was inadmissible for both public and private university students to participate in the same focus group. Discussions were divided according to the type of higher education institution.

Taking into account the current epidemiological situation, the focus groups were conducted remotely through the Zoom online platform.

The focus groups were conducted using a discussion plan (see Appendix #) that included the required questions to explore students' daily lives. At the same time, questions in the discussion plan were prepared in such a way that they covered the school level of respondents and experiences related to the socio-economic situations of their families. The present approach served to assess the research topic, identify student support groups, and explore independence in different areas. The information obtained through the focus groups was analyzed at different levels (see Appendix #). A comparison was made between the socio-economic conditions of students of private and public higher education institutions in different geographical regions. Undergraduate and postgraduate students also evaluated the research topic from their own perspectives. The views of temporarily suspended students were examined separately and in relation to the views of other students.

1

HIGHER EDUCATION AND SOCIAL JUSTICE: BARRIERS TO ACCESS (GLOBAL AND LOCAL CONTEXT)

The position of higher education institutions (HEIs) in the economy and society has a dual function that contributes to their importance as agents of change. Higher education institutions are both objects and agents of change in the economic policy context. The Bologna Process and the Europe 2020 objectives make it clear that HEIs are envisaged as objects of change in the policy process. Ultimately, stakeholders intend for HEIs (academic, public and private) to bring about change by improving the knowledge of their graduates and thereby increasing their competitiveness in the global economy. There should be little doubt that financial aid plays an important role in promoting access to higher education among low-income students (St. John, 2003).

I - Low tuition fee - low volume of public subsidies.

II - Low tuition fee - high volume of public subsidies.

III - High tuition fee - high volume of public subsidies.

IV - High tuition fee - low volume of public subsidies.

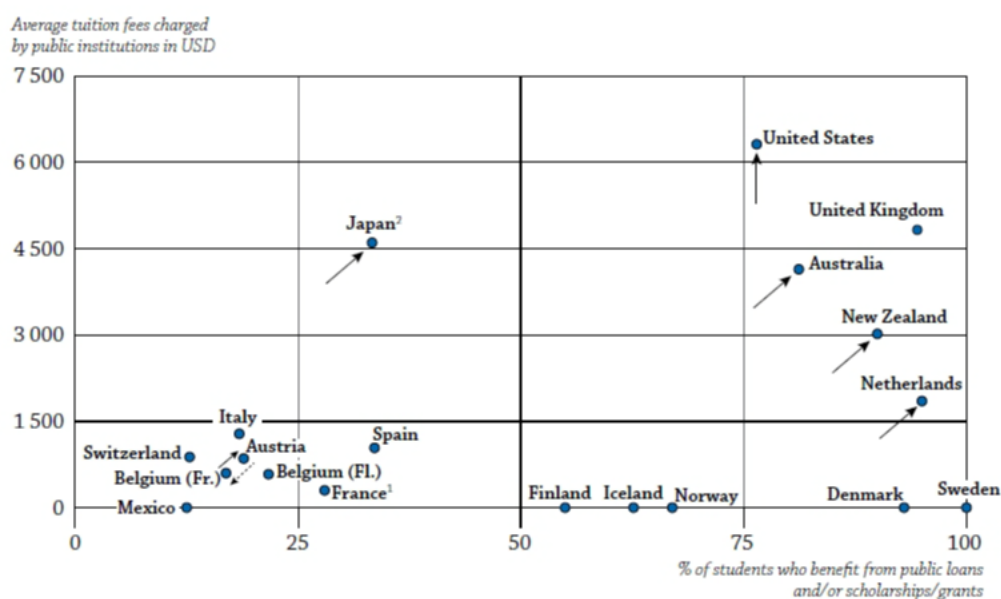
Figure (1.1) shows in detail the distribution of countries according to the average tuition fee and the amount of public subsidies received in a global context:

1.1 OVERVIEW OF HIGHER EDUCATION FINANCING MODELS: PUBLIC AND HIGHER EDUCATION POLICY IN A GLOBAL CONTEXT

In this chapter, tuition fees and subsidies in higher education are analyzed. The present review shows that the level of funding for higher education is significantly determined not only by the basic expenditure on higher education, but also by the volume of this expenditure, its forms of distribution, and its relationship to the socio-economic status of students. Research on higher education finance policy generally falls into at least two categories. The first considers higher education funding with an emphasis on structural and economic factors, while the second category considers political factors and consequently discusses the model of higher education funding (Hall, P. A., & Soskice, D., 2001).

Financing for higher education is related to factors such as the amount of the tuition fee, the subsistence level, the total expenditure on education and public or private subsidies, as well as the fees paid by students (called households) (Khelaia, 2018). Depending on the average tuition fees at universities and the share of public subsidies paid to students, researchers propose at least four models for higher education financing:

Figure 1.1
Average tuition fees of public universities and the share of students who use the public subsidy system (loan, scholarship, grant)



Notes:

1. The arrows show how the average tuition fee and the share of students receiving public subsidies have changed in 2010 compared to 1995.
2. Data are described for all students (local full-time and full-time foreign students)
3. Tuition fees on the figure refer to public institutions, but more than two-thirds of students are enrolled in private institutions.
4. If only public institutions are taken into account, the share of students who benefit from state loans and/or scholarships/grants should be 68%.

Source: OECD, Tables B5.1 and B5.2. (www.oecd.org/edu/eag.htm).

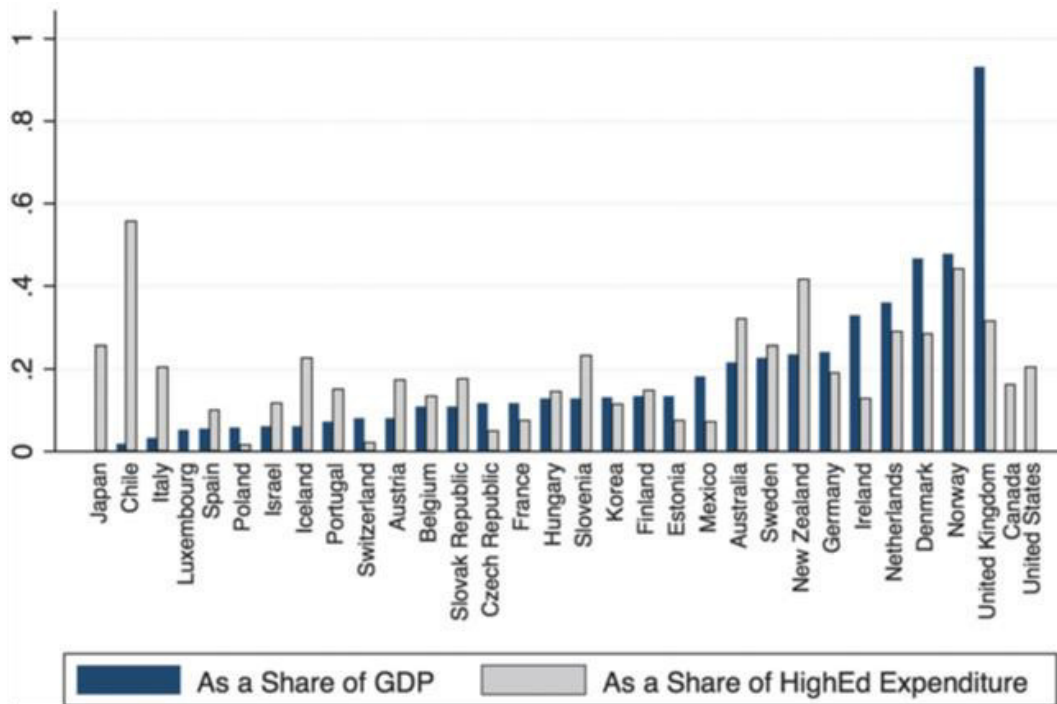
Tuition fees charged by universities vary widely from country to country. Figure 1.1 shows that the majority of students in countries such as Australia, Italy, the United Kingdom, Canada, France, Ireland, etc. have to pay tuition fees out of their own pockets, known as the 'budget'. In continental European countries like Finland, Germany and Sweden, an absolute majority of students are exempt from tuition fees. Countries with high tuition fees significantly increased their existing tax rates before 2009, while those with low tuition fees maintained or reduced existing tax rates ($r = 0.9$)¹ (Garitzmann, 2016, pp. 61-72). Household expenditures on tuition fees in secondary and tertiary education show that it is possible to divide countries into various groups according to the level of tuition fees. The first group includes countries where no tuition fees are charged, and therefore student contributions are zero. The second group includes countries where students have to pay a high amount of tuition fees (e.g. Australia, Canada, Slovenia, UK, Ireland, Greece), and the third group includes countries with very low tuition fees for higher education (e.g. Belgium, Italy, Spain, Turkey).

To determine the level and proportionality of government subsidies, researchers look at both the subsidy system in relation to the gross domestic product (GDP) and total spending on higher education. The relationship of the subsidy system to the above variables allows us to see what proportion of the state budget is spent on higher education. It may be that the government spends a lot of money on subsidies, but this amount does not represent a large share of the total expenditure on higher education. Conversely, the share in relation to the total expenditure on higher education may be large, but the total subsidy in may be small. Figure 1.2 shows in detail the ratio of subsidies to GDP and expenditures on higher education by country.

Figure 1.2 shows in detail the ratio of subsidies to GDP and expenditures on higher education by country:

¹ The author supports the mentioned data by analyzing household expenses, which are directly related to the expenses of higher education.

Figure 1.2
Subsidies in relation to GDP and total higher education expenditures.



Source: Higher education expenditures, based on 2008 OECD statistics. (Garritzmann, 2016)

Figure 1.2 shows that social democracies with liberal, prosperous economies spend more on subsidizing higher education than countries where neoliberalism or authoritarian neoliberalism prevails. This is borne out by relative data on the volume of subsidies as a share of GDP. The situation is different in parts of continental Europe and in Asian countries, where government spending is lower (Garritzmann, 2016).

There are at least two forms of government subsidies. One is a mechanism in which students have to repay the subsidy received after a certain period of time (taking the form of a loan), while in the other case, students receive the subsidy as a non-repayable scholarship or grant (Johnstone, DB, 2009). When discussing inequalities in educational research, the fact that students from low socio-economic backgrounds or low-income backgrounds are more likely to be affected by over-indebtedness than students from high socio-economic backgrounds is highlighted (Becker, R., & Hecken, AE, 2009). Over-indebtedness is one of the most important factors that prevent students from pursuing and fully dedicating themselves to higher education, as they have to spend most of their time looking for employment that pays well enough to meet their needs.² Studies on the global distribution of subsidy mechanisms show that in most countries (65-70%), subsidies are more often found in the form of grants and scholarships than in the form of government student loans (Guadilla G., 2000) (Gorski, 2018).

² Ibid., p. 246

1.2 THE POLITICS OF TUITION FEES AND SUBSIDIES IN GEORGIA – A BRIEF OVERVIEW

After the restoration of independence, about 200 universities were established in Georgia. However, as a result of the mandatory licensing requirement in 2009, the number of universities decreased significantly by 2011. In 2007, there were 19 state universities and 137 private universities in Georgia, but by 2019 the number of private universities had decreased to 43, while the number of state universities remained unchanged. Higher education in Georgia is provided by three types of institutions: Universities, Teaching Universities, and Colleges. Universities offer all three levels of higher education and research (Bachelor's, Master's, and Doctoral programs), while teaching universities offer two levels (except Doctoral programs) and colleges offer students only Bachelor's degree programs. The prerequisite for university admission is passing the Unified National Examination. Additionally, state scholarship distribution is based on the Unified National Examination results.

The enrollment rate for Georgian higher education institutions is quite high - 53% of young people aged 19-20 are enrolled in higher education (Chakhaia, 2020). However, significant differences in access to higher education are observed according to socio-economic and demographic characteristics. One of the reasons for unequal access could be high tuition fees. Universities in Georgia rely largely on tuition fees. According to the World Bank, government spending per student is low relative to GDP per capita. By

this indicator, funding for higher education in Georgia is very low (1% of GDP) compared to developed countries in Europe and around the world. Additionally, most higher education costs, including tuition fees, are paid by students and their families. The state education scholarship is distributed based on the results of the Unified National Examination, which ensures that in many cases the recipients of the scholarship are socially and economically privileged groups - those who have the financial means to study in private schools and train with tutors. Students with strong economic backgrounds are 2.86 times more likely to receive government funding. (Andguladze, 2017). In 2019, the distribution of funding sources for education in Georgia was as follows: State funding is about 23% and household spending is 77% (Word Bank, 2020). This means that only 35% of higher education expenses are funded by the state, while the remaining 65% of higher education expenses are paid by students or their families out of their own pockets (Khelaia, 2018).

1.3 ASSESSMENT OF HIGHER EDUCATION ACCESS POLICY IN GEORGIA FROM A LEGAL PERSPECTIVE

This chapter reviews the realization of the right to education in a legal context. The right to education is one of the central social rights that is an important component of the human rights corpus. Access to education is closely linked to the proper and dignified use of other rights and is essential to the development and well-being of modern society. As the Constitutional Court of Georgia notes, *“The constitutional right to education is one of the fundamental human rights and a recognized value of civilized humanity.”*³

The content of the right to education and its constitutional-legal framework are given in Articles 5 and 27 of the Constitution of Georgia. The Constitution of Georgia names education as an integral part of the welfare state and indicates that *“The state cares for [...] the development of education, science and culture.”*⁴ This norm is indeed included in the general provisions of the Constitution, but it in itself expresses the idea of social responsibility of the state in terms of exercising the right to education, increasing its quality, and increasing its accessibility.

Article 27 of the Constitution is more detailed, where the Constitution comprehensively details the area protected by the right, as well as the differentiation of persons protected by this right. In particular, this norm clearly defines the areas protected by the right to education, such as pre-school education, the right to general education, as well as higher and vocational education. The Constitution states that everyone

has the right to education and to choose its form,⁵ however, the Constitution treats the standard of access to rights differently. In particular, if the state fully funds general education and consequently provides universal access to it, in the case of higher and vocational education, the Constitution outlines the right of citizens to *“receive vocational and higher education in accordance with the law.”*⁶

According to the above norms, the obligations of the state in terms of social and financial access to higher and vocational education are not clearly defined. It is up to the law to determine the scale and extent of the exercise of the right. According to the Law on Higher Education, the Parliament of Georgia defines the main directions of higher education policy and management.⁷ In this regard, it is interesting that Parliament adopted a 2002 resolution on the main directions of higher education development in Georgia. Meanwhile, it does not resolve the contemporary challenges and problems of the higher education system.⁸ This fact, among other things, indicates that the state has not properly seen the importance of education policy framework documents, the systematic connection with general social policy, or the challenges faced by individual social groups.

The Law on Higher Education names the principle of accessibility as one of the central components of achieving the main goals of higher education.⁹ The Government of Georgia is obligated to integrate this challenge as part of its state policy.¹⁰ It is important to note that access to higher education is largely driven by the approval of study grants by the state, which is limited in terms of social and academic characteristics.

In particular, the Law on Higher Education stipulates that the sources of funding for higher education institutions are: “a) tuition fee, which is covered by the state education grant and the state master’s degree grant (only for accredited higher education programs); b) income received in the form of a grant, donation or will; c) scientific-research grants issued by the state on the basis of competitive selection; d) program funding allocated by ministries; e¹¹) funding allocated from the regional budget of the Autonomous Republic; f) other incomes permitted by the Georgian legislation, including those obtained from economic activities.”¹² These funding mechanisms differ significantly from the models of European countries. In Georgia, the amount issued by the

³ Decision #1/2/414/of the Constitutional Court of Georgia dated April 4, 2007 in the case „Georgian citizen Ivane Petriashvili against the Parliament of Georgia.”

⁴ Constitution of Georgia, Article 5, Clause 6, available at: <https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/30346?publication=36>, access date: 06.09.2021.

⁵ Ibid., paragraph 1 of Article 27.

⁶ Ibid., paragraph 2.

⁷ Ibid., paragraph 2.

⁸ Georgia Law on Higher Education, Article 5, Subsection (a), available at: <https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/32830?publication=88>, access date: 06.09.2021.

⁹ Resolution of the Parliament of Georgia on the main directions of development of higher education in Georgia, 2002, available at: <https://matsne.gov.ge/document/view/41236?publication=0>, access date: 06.09.2021.

¹⁰ Law of Georgia on Higher Education, Article 3, Clause 2, Sub-Clause „A”.

¹¹ Ibid., Article 6, Clause 1, Sub-Clause „A”.

¹² Ibid., paragraph 2 of Article 79.

state per student covers only the tuition fees covered based on the number of successful students in the Unified National Examination.¹³ Thus, access to the right to education is seen not in relation to other social needs, but only in relation to tuition fees. In addition, according to the same law, the amount of funding for state education grants under the Student Social Program (based on social needs) should range from 6% to 20% of the total annual grant funding,¹⁴ though it does not cover all economically disadvantaged students.¹⁵ Overall, the crucial component of increasing access - the share of public funding - is considerably low in Georgia compared to EU countries.¹⁶ An analysis of existing legislative and policy documents reveals that the regulatory framework for higher education in Georgia is not sufficiently inclusive. In particular, it does not show a substantial link between social vulnerability/challenges, the right to education, and ways to make it inclusive by overcoming financial barriers. State higher education in Georgia is costly, and in order to increase access to it, there is a rule for issuing a limited number (limited amount of money) of state grants. Accessibility, as a component of the right to education, is not widely thought of as part of students' social empowerment.

The right to education at the level of legislative and policy documents should be widely seen as part of a general social policy and social empowerment strategy for disadvantaged groups. The fundamental basis for this is provided by the Constitution of Georgia, which, if systematically defined, would make access to higher education one of the central components of a welfare state. In this regard, the reasoning of the Constitutional Court of Georgia is also important, which emphasizes the special importance of the right to higher education and the obligations of the state. In particular, according to one of the decisions, *“access to higher education takes precedence over all other rights, unless the reform is spontaneous and unpredictable. At the same time, the state is obliged to take all measures under the constitutional right to higher education, including at the expense of restricting other rights, if the higher education system [...] has low funding and high staffing, poor teaching and research conditions, outdated curricula, low education and pedagogical standards, narrow specialization, imperfect examination system, corruption, elitism and giving less opportunities for higher education to the elite.”*¹⁷

Furthermore, Georgia has significant commitments in the area of higher education policy reform under the Association Agreement with the European Union. Pursuant to Articles 358 and 359 of the Association Agreement, the promotion of lifelong learning, enhanced international cooperation in academia, increased international mobility, quality assurance of education, relevance and accessibility of all levels of education, and recognition of qualifications and competencies is a priority for the country.¹⁸ At the same time, the direction of fulfillment of the obligations under the Association Agreement is reflected in the “Unified Strategy for the Development of Education and Science 2017-2021” approved by the Government of Georgia.¹⁹ It should be noted that as of 2020, the implementation of the European Framework for Qualifications for Lifelong Learning (2017/C 189/03), which in turn promotes the relevance and accessibility of all levels of education, operates with significant shortcomings.²⁰ Consequently, the process of proper fulfillment of the obligations is hindered. In light of the above, it should be noted that through the joint work of the Parliament of Georgia, the Government, and the Ministry of Education, significant measures should be taken to develop a comprehensive strategy for access to higher education. The policy of access and, consequently, the right to education, should be widely seen as one of the central parts of social policy, and adequate legal, political, economic, and social solutions should be developed for its realization. It is important that this process not be fragmented, but rather that it should systematically see the role of higher education on the path to community well-being and social empowerment.

In summary, it can be said that the higher education funding model needs to be revised significantly and the important role of the social dimension of higher education needs to be recognized.

The main findings are:

- Georgia's higher education funding system has a model of high tuition fees and low public subsidies.
- The higher education system in Georgia mainly depends on household contributions.
- Existing rates of access to education are at odds with local legal instruments where equal access to education is recognized at the legislative level.

¹³ Strategic situation of higher education and science in Georgia, International Institute of Education Policy, Planning and Management, 2013, p. 9, available at: http://erasmusplus.org.ge/files/files/Strategic_Development%20of_HE_and_Science_in_Georgia-ge.pdf, access date: 07.09.2021.

¹⁴ Ibid., Article 6, Clause 1, Sub-Clause „G“.

¹⁵ Marieta Iakobadze, Foreign experience of higher education financing and Georgian practice, 2019, p. 35, available at: <https://openscience.ge/bitstream/1/422/1/samagistro%20iakobadze.pdf>, date of access: 07.09.2021.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 35.

¹⁷ Teimuraz Tughushi, Giorgi Burjanadze and others, Human rights and the litigation practice of the Constitutional Court of Georgia, 1996-2012 judicial practice, Tbilisi, 2013, p. 488.

¹⁸ Giorgi Machabeli, Tamar Sanikidze and others, evaluation of the fulfillment of obligations undertaken for the promotion of lifelong learning in the Association Agreement of Georgia with the European Union, 2020, p. 4, available at: <http://eppm.org.ge/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Report.pdf>, access date: 06.09.2021.

¹⁹ Unified Strategy for Education and Science Development 2017-2021, available at: https://www.mes.gov.ge/uploads/MESStrategy_2017-2021.pdf, access date: 06.09.2021.

²⁰ Giorgi Machabeli, Tamar Sanikidze and others, above mentioned work, p. 21.

2

ACCESSIBILITY OF EDUCATION AND STUDENTS' SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONDITIONS

2.1. SOCIO-ECONOMIC BACKGROUND OF STUDENTS AND THE TRANSITION TO HIGHER EDUCATION

THE TYPE OF SCHOOL AND ITS IMPACT ON ENROLLMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Students' socio-economic backgrounds have a particularly strong influence on their educational careers and outcomes as well as a more general influence on their later life trajectories and experiences (Avram & Cantó-Sánchez, 2017; Thompson, 2019; Mazzonna, 2014). Several instruments ensure equitable access to higher education, all with the intention of opening up entry requirements to alternative pathways and enabling access to higher education through routes that deviate from traditional and more rigid requirements. Students' socio-economic backgrounds have been shown to have a particularly strong impact on their educational trajectories and outcomes, as well as more general impacts on their later life trajectories and experiences (Hauschildt, 2021). Therefore, this chapter discusses students' educational and economic backgrounds, focusing on equity-related aspects and differences in experience. When it comes to equity and justice in a higher education system, the socio-economic status of students' families, especially the educational level of the parents, is an extremely important aspect. Socio-economic differences are also reflected in the type of school (European Commission, 2020; OECD, 2018;).

According to focus group participants, the main difference between a private and a public school involves resources and opportunities. In addition, the number of students in the class has been mentioned as an important differentiator - in private schools, the smaller number of students in each class is likely to have a positive impact on the transfer of knowledge. Several panelists spoke of varying levels of learning given the resources available. Panelists also noted that public and private school teachers have different attitudes toward the graduating class - in public schools, there is an expectation that a 12th grader will be tutored in all school subjects by private tutors.

The focus groups revealed that respondents had different experiences going to school. Some attended a public or pri-

ate school all 12 years, although there were instances in which respondents had to change from public to private or the other way around. As focus group participants noted, such a decision was related to several factors. Some respondents who had to change from a private school to a public school indicated that the change was due to the family's economic situation. In a private school, unlike in a public school, one has to pay a certain amount of money, which for some families is a large expense that they cannot afford. The respondents pointed out a similar experience when they mentioned the family's financial situation as the reason for changing schools. They noted that they would not have been able to continue their education at a private school due to their condition at the time:

"I studied in a private school until the 9th grade and then moved to a public school. Back then it was hard for my family to pay my tuition. We had a lot of other expenses and could not afford for me to finish private school. I went into public school and in the last year I only managed to have tutor only in one subject, namely skills "(Undergraduate student, state university)."

When a student had to move from a private school to a public school, an additional reason given was tutoring for all classes. Several panelists noted that although they studied in a private school, they found that in their senior year that they had to have additional lessons for several subjects to pass the Unified National Examination. As they pointed out, their family was not financially well off enough to pay for private school or for a private tutor for 4-5 subjects. Thus, they preferred to move to a public school and spend all of their financial resources on private tutors.

As it turned out, a more common practice is to move from a public school to a private school for the graduation year. The main reason for this is imperfect education in public schools. In this case, passing the Unified National Examination and receiving a scholarship was defined as an indicator of excellence in the education given and received. Some of the panelists mentioned that the knowledge imparted in public school was not sufficient to pass the Unified National Examination, and therefore they transferred to a private school in consultation with family members. According to some respondents, switching from a public school to a private

school was a financially better decision for the family than getting a tutor in all subjects. In their experience, school costs are low compared to private education.

“I studied in a public school for 10 years and finished my studies in a private school during the last 2 years. I went to a private school because I needed to train with tutors, and when I summed up the amount for tutors, it came out higher. Therefore, I preferred a private school.” (Graduate student, state university)

Respondents who did not have to change schools also participated in the discussion. In this case, two groups were distinguished: 1. those who had undergone additional preparation, particularly for the Unified National Examination; and 2. those who did not have tutors or additional preparation in any subject. Interestingly, in this case, there was no strict distinction of respondents by type of school - both groups included students who attended either a public school or a private school. Focus group participants emphasized how difficult it was financially for their families to obtain a private education in a variety of subjects. Some respondents also spoke about their experience of being unable to prepare for some subjects due to their family's economic situation, and therefore being unable to achieve the desired result in the examination.

Regardless of whether the respondent attended a private school in their final year or a public school, a large portion of the participants indicated that they were educated in English. In this regard, the geographic location of the school was also highlighted - for schools in the regions, respondents spoke of a low level of foreign language instruction. Among the respondents, only one group was prepared for all of the subjects needed for admission to a higher education institution. There were some cases in which the respondents passed the Unified National Examinations and were able to study without additional training.

The prevailing view in the discussion group was that it is possible to pass the Unified National Examination and attend university without private training, but obtaining a scholarship is fraught with difficulty. A similar sentiment was expressed, especially for public schools. According to some respondents, this is a prevailing opinion in society, but most panelists noted that the reality is similar.

In summary, the type of school has a significant impact on student preparation practices. Tutoring with private tutors has become commonplace. Research shows that English test preparation is a major barrier for students in the regions.

REASONS FOR CONTINUING EDUCATION WITHOUT INTERRUPTION FROM SCHOOL TO THE HIGHER EDUCATION LEVEL

According to the Eurostat student survey VII, the majority of European higher education students (67%) continue their

studies directly after graduation (with an interval of less than one year), with an average of 17% taking 1 to 2 years and the remaining 17% more than 2 years. Among the countries studied, Georgia ranks first when it comes to direct enrollment in higher education – with 92% of students reporting practice. Consequently, the share of students who enroll in higher education only after a certain time period does not even reach 10%.

Focus group participants paid particular attention to the reasons and environmental conditions that lead a person to enroll directly in a higher education institution after graduation.

One of the most important contexts for students was employment. In their opinion, it is impossible to work, much less succeed, in Georgia without a university education. Although one of the main factors in the decision was future employment, the students found that their expectations were not really met. As they noted, obtaining a higher education is not directly related to employment or even to a well-paying job.

“One of my main reasons for entering a higher education institution was to have a good salary in a paid job. But now that I look at it, higher education (even at the graduate level) is not necessarily related to good employment.” (Graduate student, state university)

In addition to employment, the family emerged as an important factor. Several focus group participants spoke about their own experiences, in which family forced them to continue their studies at university. Discussion participants expressed the view that it was a shame for the family if the child did not go straight on to university. Interviewees talked about the general situation that in most cases, the family does not allow a first-year student to interrupt studies for 1-2 years after graduation, to find out his/her own interests and only then to purposefully take the exam. There seem to be different societal expectations for students, especially when it comes to getting an education. In many cases, students' expectations do not match the reality they face at university, which is why they often suspend their student status and do not continue their studies.

In addition to the above reasons, some respondents focused on the Georgian cultural context, which essentially means continuing education, especially at the stage of higher education. According to the focus group participants, some freshmen do not want to continue their studies, but due to their dependence on the family and the attitude of those around them, they still decide to enroll in a higher education institution. Discussion participants talked about the stress that comes with passing exams - in this case, one has to take into account the graduation, the exams, passing the exams, as well as the attitudes of people around them. As mentioned above, during the enrollment period, everyone was interested in the points achieved, future plans, chosen profession, etc.

"People think that it is a great shame for those who cannot pass to higher education ... Everyone was asking about how I passed, what points I earned, etc. Everyone is interested in this." (Undergraduate student, private university)

Participants in the discussion talked about stereotypes around higher education as if any entrant wants to continue their studies. According to the respondents, the social environment and stereotypical societal attitudes force students to continue their studies in a higher education institution (university) immediately after school. However, they are put under so much pressure by their environment that they often cannot psychologically cope and continue their studies at university only because of what other will think.

Such an approach is problematic in the context of the profession. According to the panelists, it is rare for a first-year student to have a clearly defined idea of what he/she wants to do in the future and to choose a particular profession. According to most respondents, freshmen usually do not have a chosen profession and instead apply to a faculty they will pass or where there are more job opportunities. However, in this case, the student is punishable to study as he/she loses interest and time. The economic factor must also be considered. Panelists pointed out that freshmen are not fully prepared for exams, have not understood the exam, do not receive government funding, and are studying in a field that does not interest them. In such a case, any inconvenience the student may have is compounded by the difficult situation of the family, which in most cases is the only source of funding at the early stage of student life.

"Usually students do not know which faculty they want to pass. It's just as if it has been established that you have to pass directly after school, but they can't get a grant, so the family has to pay for the child's education. It turns out that students do not like what they learn and parents pay money in vain, because the child cannot get the education he wants and can not master his profession." (Graduate student, state university)

The discussion was also attended by individuals for whom admission to a higher education institution was the only way to escape compulsory military service.

Some panelists believe that a break after high school is necessary so that the entrant can correctly determine the direction of their studies. It is important that such an assessment is not largely based on the respondents' experience. There was only one instance in the focus groups where an individual took a one-year break and only then enrolled in university. The panelists believe that such a decision helps the student choose their profession appropriately, as they can take a variety of courses during this time and gain practical knowledge. It seems that some students in the focus group regretted their choice of profession, which is exacerbated by the environment at university, which does not match the students' expectations.

"It would be good if the entrant waits at least 1 year and finds out which profession he should enter. For example, I regret not meeting my own expectations and I would change my profession if I had the opportunity." (Undergraduate student, private university)

As it turned out, the existing social pressure is so strong that, although entrants often think differently about their education, they continue to study at university directly after school without a break. Some respondents shared the view that education in general and higher education, in particular, is not compulsory for all. Vocational education was mentioned as an alternative, however, it was noted that society views this type of education negatively. The context of the country still needs to be considered. It has been mentioned that higher education in Georgia is associated with a certain type of prestige. While it was suggested during the discussion that individuals may continue their professional education and acquire more skills than they would have managed at university, such a decision is frowned upon by society. As some of the interviewees noted, the environment does not allow individuals to abandon higher education and continue their studies in a vocational direction.

During the conversation, the Master's program students talked about the reasons behind their will to continue education from the Bachelor's level to the Master's level. Again, two dominant themes emerged: career opportunities and family. Those who want to take a break between these two steps feel that they cannot be employed in a well-paying job without a Master's degree, and are thus prevented from obtaining financial independence. The same problems emerged between these stages of study, which are followed by enrollment in a higher education institution after graduation. Students with a Bachelor's degree, due to difficult socio-economic conditions, do not have enough real opportunities to continue their studies at the Master's level. Students' motivations are triggered by the real fear of losing their jobs and financial stability.

Because of the increasing unemployment rate in the country, most students believe that graduate students have better working conditions in the workplace:

"I think that despite our desire to understand where and how we want to enroll or continue our studies, we still have to decide to continue our studies, because otherwise we may be left without a job." (Graduate student, State university)

Some of the focus group graduate students discussed **pressure from the family**. According to these respondents, if they did not acquire a master's degree after completing a bachelor's degree, they would have to leave the capital city and return to the region. Financial dependence on the family is a significant concern. In the last 3 years, 5.8% of enrollment in the undergraduate program comes from students who already have a higher education degree (National Statistics Office of Georgia, 2020). One of the main reasons for multiple entries at the undergraduate level is to avoid compulsory military service.

The main findings are:

- There is a significant difference in resources and opportunities between private and public schools. At the same time, there is a difference in the number of students in a class and in the attitude of teachers, especially toward those starting school. In public school, the student is expected to have additional tutoring in all subjects. Because the public system is semi-privatized, there is increasing inequality in the education system.
- One important factor is the family. According to the students' assessment, they and their families are under social pressure. This is one reason behind going to university after school because they fear a negative attitude from the community.
- A lack of job opportunities often pushes Bachelor's degree recipients to pursue a Master's degree soon after graduation.
- For boys, the tendency to continue education is mainly related to compulsory military service.

2.2 STUDENT INCOME AND EXPENSES: EMPLOYMENT, HOUSING AND TUITION FEES

STUDENT EMPLOYMENT: NECESSITY OR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT?

As mentioned in Chapter 2.1, one of the main motivations for entering higher education is the possibility of future employment. Unfortunately, too many young workers do not have access to decent work. A significant number of young people are underemployed, unemployed, looking for a job, between jobs, or working unacceptably long hours in informal, temporary or insecure jobs without the opportunity for personal and professional development (International Labour Organisation, 2005).

According to the focus group participants, training at a higher education institution does not provide the skills and knowledge required for employment. In this case, the focus is on employment by profession. According to the respondents, it is difficult to get a job with the knowledge acquired at university even as a trainee. Numerous respondents noted that the only solution is employment in the service sector, which does not fit their field of study. Respondents focused on the teaching of theoretical knowledge from the university and emphasized the lack of practical subjects that could facilitate their further employment.

"I think that the education received at university does not ensure that I will be employed anywhere in my profession. When I apply for an internship, I am often told that my knowledge is not enough even for an internship." (Undergraduate student, private university)

Respondents who work in a **non-governmental organization** or who freelance and therefore have to work with a relatively flexible schedule are easily able to combine their studies and employment. This is especially true if studies are remotely and in-person attendance is not required. Focus group participants **who are employed simultaneously while studying discussed issues with time management**, which in some cases had a negative impact on job performance, as well as on the learning process and its outcomes.

Although many focus group participants **find it difficult to reconcile employment and study, paid work is one way for them to pay for tuition and their daily and monthly expenses**. Because the family is actively involved in paying tuition fees, they are often unable to afford the students' daily expenses at the same time. Thus, additional fees are mainly paid by students living alone, for which employment is necessary.

"The second way is to quit my job and continue my studies, but without income, I will not be able to pay for my studies and I would not be able to cover my current expenses." (Undergraduate student, private university)

Based on the experience of some students, one way out of the current situation is to work during the summer and save money, which would allow the students to pay the tuition fee. In this case, the family is involved in covering other expenses. Employment in the service sector is considered particularly problematic because, as the participants discussed, students working in this area have no temporary benefits or incentives. Individuals with employment experience, however, indicated that without the service sector they would not be able to pay the tuition fee and would not be able to pass the postgraduate level.

"I am employed in the service sector and I have to work about 10 hours a day. I will be honest and the pandemic made this situation easier for me because I attend lectures on my phone and I still manage to work during the lecture." (Master's student, state university)

Part of the focus group respondents discussed **difficult working conditions**. In addition to the fact that it is hard to combine study and work, there is a **big imbalance between the amount of work and the salary**. Some of the employed students participating in the study have experience working overtime, which negatively impacts their daily lives, especially the learning process. Some students have experience working 8 hours a day, but do not have a fixed salary and have a monthly income of around 200 GEL. Given the working hours, the respondent worked full time, although their salary was not enough to cover monthly expenses. According to some students employed in the service sector, their job not only did not contribute to learning, but did not even offer fair working conditions during the pandemic.

"I work as a cashier in one of the supermarkets. The conditions were very difficult during the pandemic when a curfew was imposed. I had to work until the last minute and then stay in the store because I could not physically go home, since I did not have any transport or pass service. However, I still tried not to miss lectures. It is very difficult to combine study and work in Georgia." (Undergraduate student, State university)

In terms of combining learning and employment, some focus group participants **viewed the pandemic in the country in a positive light**. Because of online learning, even those employed in the service sector are able to attend lectures, although the quality of knowledge acquisition is not as good as it would be in an auditorium.

In addition to discussing employment and financial issues, the research also assessed **student or consumer loan experiences**. As it turned out, most discussion participants did not have similar experiences, however, among focus group participants, some use consumer loans. The target was mainly education, however, some students provide financial support to their families. Students using these loans are often those who, due to the university's decision, are unable to split their tuition fees, became unemployed due to the pandemic, and were thus unable to pay their tuition fees.

Respondents were asked to evaluate the statement: **"I could not be a student without a paid job."** A large part of the participants in the discussion agreed with this statement, as it was revealed in the discussion that one of the leading factors in their financial independence is paid employment.

The main findings include:

- Research shows that there is a conflict between student employment and educational practice. Higher education does not increase the chances of employment in a particular profession.
- Employment is not a matter of acquiring professional knowledge and skills, but a necessity to meet daily expenses.
- Students who do not work in their profession also reduce the link between employment and study.

SOCIAL ISSUES AND HOUSING POLICY

Housing plays an important and multifunctional role in students' lives. Depending on its characteristics and the environment, housing also fulfills a security function in both physical and psychological terms (Paltridge, 2010). Accommodation is associated with a social function, especially when it is shared with others, such as parents, partners, children, or fellow students. Some forms of housing, for example, student accommodation, may also be particularly con-

ducive to the socio-academic integration of students and may even help reduce the drop-out rate (Hauschildt, 2021).

The issue of **housing is one of the most important challenges** for the students participating in the study; especially for those who came to the capital city from different regions. The issue of housing is one of the main barriers to access to education for respondents, and at the same time, is the largest in terms of monthly expenses. This problem is also caused by the fact that the issue of student accommodation at universities has been an unresolved problem for years.

According to students at a state higher education institution, the university has student accommodation, although the **number of places is quite limited**, which often leads to the need to rank students with social scores.

"When I arrived in Tbilisi, it was unimaginable for my family to cover the cost of housing, so I had to apply to the university for a permit to live on campus. Unfortunately, I was told the places were full and since I was not registered as socially vulnerable, I was not able to live on campus. In the end, I had to live with relatives for a year before the pandemic started." Representatives of a private university also discussed issues with student accommodation. As mentioned, some private universities do not offer dormitories to students, and in some cases, such spaces are mainly reserved for international students. Often, the monthly fee exceeds the average rental price of a private apartment.

"The university was constantly advertising the student campus. When I needed housing, I applied to the administration, however, I was informed that student accommodation was intended for international students. This is a kind of trick from the university because the monthly fee exceeded 500 GEL, which is a larger amount compared to the normal rental price in the city."

The most common practice when it comes to housing is an apartment with several students **living together who each pay a monthly fee**. The study identified cases where 2, 3, or 4 students jointly rented a private apartment. According to the students' experiences, in this way, the amount of both the apartment and the monthly utility costs are reduced. **Living with relatives or family members** is also a common practice. Students who stay with someone else's family point out that similar practices prevent them from having a student life.

The housing problem is also familiar to students at regional universities. According to some respondents, a new residential building was built for students before the pandemic, but they were unable to use the space due to the pandemic. Students living in Guria or highland Adjara mostly had to share living expenses and rent together or live with relatives. Unlike respondents living in Tbilisi, renting a flat is relatively less of a problem for students living in Batumi, as the monthly rent for a private flat compared to the average market prices in Tbilisi is much lower and the scholarship provided by the university or income from paid employment is suffi-

cient to cover the monthly rent.

Regarding housing, students who use private housing were also asked how they were able to cover their monthly housing costs. According to the experience of a large part of the focus group participants, **housing costs are mainly covered by families (households)**, meaning that housing costs are very high.

Respondents report that one of their family members (mainly their mother) **was forced to emigrate to work** in order to cover their monthly living expenses as well as their current tuition fees. Respondents said that if it were not for this difficult decision by a family member, they would not have been able to come to Tbilisi and start their studies because tuition fees and living expenses significantly exceed their monthly income.

“I needed to change my residence when I arrived in Tbilisi. Although my mother is in Greece and I am employed as a warehouse manager in Carrefour, we do not have the funds to rent a private apartment. In addition to my expenses, other family members have health problems, so the money sent is mostly directed to those needs. Because of this, I had to live with my uncle”.

Focus group participants from Tbilisi universities considered the **critical discrepancy between the scholarships offered by the university and the monthly needs and expenses** as a problematic issue. As discussed, consumer loans are one of the alternatives used to cover housing costs. Such a practice is typical for students with paid employment, as the precondition for obtaining a loan is the existence of a certain amount of fixed income. It is true that the respondents were able to cover the cost of housing for several months, but the issue of repaying the loan itself is still a problem.

Housing utility bills are also a problem for students. The study revealed another practice in which students choose to live in a nearby city (mainly Rustavi) instead of the capital (Tbilisi) in order to reduce their monthly expenses.

Respondents noted that it is difficult to pay utility bills, especially from December-March, because the cost of utilities increases significantly during this time. Students stressed the need for paid employment to cover housing and related monthly expenses. Most of the students participating in the focus groups are employed in the service sector. For students whose families are unable to cover these costs, employment in the service sector remains the only solution.

According to students with housing problems, the **distance learning format has become a significant benefit**. For some respondents, such an approach is more problematic in terms of acquiring knowledge than in-class teaching and does not correspond to their epistemic perceptions of higher education. However, other students preferred to maintain the online learning format in full or in part as accommodation costs were drastically reduced. At the same time, part of

the respondents underlined the probability that for some students, their status would be suspended if in-class learning resumed, as they will not be able to cover housing and other monthly expenses.

“During the pandemic, this situation changed and I returned to my village, but I do not know how to continue in the following years. I can no longer return to my relatives and I may temporarily suspend my status if I do not continue my studies online, even though I do not want to”.

If in-class learning resumes, some students will have to return to the university from the regions and rent accommodation, which is related to the deterioration of their **financial situation** on one hand, and **psychological stress** on the other. As far as the focus group participants are concerned, the largest share of their monthly expenses is spent on housing.

It seems that the issue of housing is problematic for a large part of the respondents, especially for students from the regions. According to study participants, this issue has a negative impact on their family's financial situation and also creates an obstacle in terms of continuing their studies. If the distance learning regime has had a positive effect in terms of cost reduction, in the event in-class learning resumes, some students may be left out of higher education precisely because of their inability to cover housing costs.

The main findings are:

- Housing is one of the main preconditions for the social exclusion of students and creates a problem for access to education.
- The housing problem is especially acute in the case of migration from the regions to the capital, which puts an added financial burden on students' families.
- Due to the high cost of living and the low availability of student housing, students are forced to live in neighboring cities, which reduces their living costs.
- According to respondents, the biggest expenses are renting accommodation and paying utility bills.

STUDENTS' TUITION FEES IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

Tuition fees are individual payments required of students to participate in higher education. They can be seen as part of a larger context of cost-sharing between the public and private sectors to finance higher education. A country's macro-level fee policy affects the individual level of students through various transmission channels (Hauschildt, 2021). Annual tuition fees in Georgia are set at GEL 2,250 at public universities, while private institutions have the freedom to

set and further adjust tuition fees at the beginning of the academic year. Tuition fees are a major burden on students as students are mostly dependent on their families and government funds, while their personal income is scarce. Higher education is mainly financed by households (77% - in 2019), while state spending per student (relative to GDP per capita) is low. (National Statistics Office of Georgia, 2020)

Regarding state grants, a focus group was composed of respondents with diverse experiences. In addition to those who have received a state grant, individuals who have received funding from the university also participated in the discussion. Graduates who continued their studies at a private university where they completed a bachelor's degree also talked about the benefits offered by the university. Individuals who have to pay a certain amount said they found it **particularly difficult to repay the money during the pandemic situation**, as some jobs were closed and they were left without stable income. As it turned out, some universities did not defer payment for student fees, which is a major reason for student status suspension.

"During this pandemic, when no one works or has a job, it is very difficult to pay tuition fees. Many classmates have lost their status because of this. "(Undergraduate, Private University)

It is interesting to note, however, that the focus group participants highlighted the differences between the types of universities. As it turned out, state universities were more empathetic to students' situations and split tuition fees for a few months, in contrast to private universities. It is important to emphasize that students with full state funding also discussed issues with paying tuition fees. This problem was considered from the perspective of acquaintances and friends. State funding is an important advantage for students at state universities. Moreover, some said, without it, they would not be able to pay tuition fees.

"I have a full tuition fee scholarship. However, if I did not receive this grant, it would be really difficult for not only me, but also my family to pay this amount. In that situation, I would reconsider applying to university."(Undergraduate student, state university)

It is also important to note that almost every participant considers the **tuition fee to be inconsistent with the knowledge gained**. The socio-economic situation of students, their families, and their daily life is difficult. Participants in the discussion noted that the tuition fees at state universities, and especially at private higher education institutions are more inappropriate considering the daily expenses of students. It is in this context that the introduction of tuition fee exemptions and the existence of free faculties²¹ were discussed. While the discussion highlighted the role of the state in terms of tuition fees, some students see short-

comings in the selection of free faculties. According to some respondents, due to a lack of unambiguous criteria, the selected directions lead to an artificial redistribution of priorities. A similar approach is related to tuition fees. Children of families who are unable to pay for university due to their financial situation are in most cases forced to enroll in a free faculty, regardless of whether it suits their area of interest.

"It is necessary for tuition to be more affordable. Here it is essential to touch upon the topic of free faculties, which is selected on an incomprehensible principle and leads to a forced reassessment of priorities along with a confusion of interests. Many students are forced to study in a free program just so they do not have to pay tuition fees." (Undergraduate student, state university)

Speaking of tuition fees, the main financial sources named were **family and paid employment**. Some respondents who work also need family help to pay for their education. Moreover, several participants in the discussion highlighted the role of the family's economic status in the selection of universities and faculties. In their estimation, students often do not risk enrolling in a faculty that they might be interested in because they think they will be unable to pay the fee.

Some students participating in the study are **scholarship holders** and receive a certain amount of money from the university every month or semester. According to one student of a particular private university, 100 GEL enrolled per month over 8 months is not enough to cover student expenses. Moreover, this amount is not enough to cover food and utility bills. Among the study participants, there was only one student who received a scholarship from the Ministry of Defense, which exceeded his university fee.

"I am the son of a soldier and the Minister of Defense has announced a scholarship for high academic achievement. I have been using this scholarship for a year and a half. I receive a scholarship of 1500 GEL per year from them, which is twice as much as my tuition fee (750 GEL). It helps me to pay the tuition fee. The university scholarship is a more difficult story."(Master's student, private university)

According to the same respondent, he would not have been able to pay so much if he had received a university scholarship. In the context of scholarships issued by the university, **taxation of money** is considered a problematic issue, which further reduces the possibility of covering tuition fees or monthly expenses.

In the experience of the students participating in the discussion, because of the ongoing pandemic in the country, employment is almost impossible, which means that the family is responsible for the entire expense of the tuition fee. In the focus groups, some students also talked about their parent's migration, which is due to the fact that they and their siblings have to pay tuition fees.

²¹ These are fully state-funded educational programs (called free faculties) where students at state universities do not have to pay tuition (regardless of their scholarship grade) if they are admitted to the faculty.

The main findings are:

- Tuition, along with housing costs, is a major part of students' monthly expenses.
- The main financial sources used to cover the tuition fees were the family and income from paid work. Due to the pandemic, a large proportion of students are unable to find jobs, thus the family is often responsible for the entire expense. In this regard, a connection was identified with the forced out-migration of a family member, which is related to the payment of tuition fees.
- It is a practice to use a consumer loan to pay tuition fees, however, it is mostly taken by family members and not directly by students.
- Paying tuition fees is particularly problematic due to the ongoing Covid pandemic, which is related to the loss of employment among students and, consequently, the lack of a stable source of income.

MAIN REASONS FOR THE SUSPENSION OF STUDENT STATUS

According to the Higher Education Act, grounds for suspension of student status may include: a personal statement by the student (without giving reasons); studying in another country at a higher education institution, in addition to studying under an exchange program; pregnancy, childbirth, childcare or deterioration of health; financial debt; or other circumstances provided for in the statutes of the higher education institution. For the purposes of this study, a focus group of respondents whose status was suspended due to financial debt was selected.

Focus group participants cited several reasons for the suspension of status. As revealed in the discussion, for the suspended students, HEI tuition is not the only reason for the suspension of status. Some participants indicated that the decision was made due to a combination of several reasons:

1. Insolvency of tuition fees.
2. The issue of housing.
3. Employment problem.

"In my case, the reason for the suspension of status was not only the tuition fee. If I lived in Tbilisi, the cost of living would increase, and my university does not have student housing. In addition, lectures were mostly scheduled in the first half of the day. I had a few jobs, but none of them were arranged at the university. "Because of this, I decided to cancel my status and return home."

As other respondents noted, the **issue of housing and related monthly household expenses** is one of the main reasons for the suspension of status. As the focus group discussed, status is mainly suspended for students who moved to Tbilisi or other university cities from different regions, and therefore have significant housing costs. Focus group participants who arrived in the university city from other regions were largely dependent on family support. In the case of several respondents, it was a decrease in family assistance that led to the inability to pay university tuition.

In researching the social needs of students, it has emerged that access to education is a complex issue related to broad socio-ecological systems and social policies. This is shown by the main factors mentioned in the discussion of student status suspension, which are not only closely related to education policy, but also a systematic issue that requires a broad discussion of socio-economic issues.

ACCESS TO LEARNING RESOURCES

The issue of access to learning resources was analyzed at the next stage of the research. Initially, the main study materials mentioned in the study curricula were discussed. In this regard, significant differences were identified, both by the type of university and by the level of teaching. In particular, state university students noted that the basic literature listed in the syllabus was available both before the pandemic and after the transition to an online learning format.

During the discussion, mainly the students of the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences from state universities mentioned that the main problem is the **content of the existing textbooks/literature**. According to the students, the basic textbooks need significant revision because they do not reflect the current updated theoretical reasoning in the social sciences. Also, the teaching of forms and models of political and legal arrangements or electoral models in different countries does not take into account the transformations that the political system of each country has undergone for at least the last 20-30 years.

"I remember we studied the subject "Electoral Systems in Comparative Perspective" last year, and the main textbook published by the lecturer was dated 1984. While the subject is relevant to the modern context of these countries, textbooks published after the 2000s need to be the main teaching material." (Undergraduate student, State University)

When discussing textbooks, different problems were identified in the case of private universities. The students talked about the **forced purchase of textbooks** by the university. As the focus group participants noted, it is mandatory to purchase new books each semester. Also, some textbooks come with a workbook in which the students complete weekly "quizzes". As mentioned, the lecturer corrects completed tests/assignments in the notebook, which makes it impossible to reuse. In the experience of students, the Uni-

versity has introduced the practice of updating versions of the same textbook every year, however, with the same material presented in different chapters. In some private universities, students can be guided by “open book” exams, but the book must be the latest edition of the same textbook. Thus, students are forced to purchase “updated” literature every year, which is obviously an additional expense.

“When a student enters the university, he/she automatically acquires all the books. This is practiced in private universities. I needed 320 GEL to buy all the books in the first semester. There is no option to buy a used version of the books. It was also important that the versions of the book were changed every semester. The content is the same – nothing changes in it, it is just a new edition and if you enter the exam, the old version will not be released.” (Undergraduate student, State University)

As respondents noted, when switching to the online format, they had two choices. You could subscribe to the university and, for a specified fee, either subscribe to books in a specific region or use the electronic version of the book. Students noted that while electronic versions were posted on the study platforms of specific universities, the literature was paid for and students could only read it in the curriculum.

According to respondents, the **use of foreign language literature in study materials is problematic**. In the experience of some students, non-Georgian (mostly English) literature is used as the main guide for Georgian language programs. As the respondents mentioned, due to their level of English language proficiency, they often have difficulty processing or are unable to process and analyze academic literature. These students noted that new textbooks in their field are rarely translated or published, and existing literature is hardly replaced.

“In my case, the problem is that the necessary literature is not available in Georgian. Literature is very outdated and no one is working to update it.” (Undergraduate student from State University)

The main findings include:

- According to students from state universities, the basic literature mentioned in the curriculum of the subject is also available through distance learning. Similar experiences were also reported during the pre-pandemic period.
- According to social science students, the teaching materials in universities are outdated and do not reflect updated knowledge in the social sciences in global academic spaces. According to students from private universities, the requirement to purchase textbooks is problematic. In the experience of the respondents, it is compulsory to buy books or workbooks every semester. “Updated” books do not differ in content from the previous year’s material, and according to students, such a practice only serves to add costs.
- E-learning resources at some private universities were expensive, limiting student access to them. It was the experience of the interviewees that non-Georgian (mostly English) literature is offered as a textbook for students enrolled in the undergraduate Georgian language program, which is a barrier for some students given their level of language proficiency. It is considered problematic to translate new, modern textbooks to replace existing undergraduate literature.

2.3. THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON THE SOCIAL DIMENSION OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Numerous studies show that students were disproportionately affected by the COVID19 pandemic, which has contributed to deepening inequalities in higher education (Farnell, Matijević, & Schmidt, 2021). Due to the additional obstacles created by the COVID-19 pandemic, students are increasingly facing difficulties in adapting their learning practices. Students are studying at lower levels, lacking a supportive social network, reporting mental health problems, possessing lower levels of digital skills, and lacking a quiet place to study, a good internet connection, and material for studying on their own time. (Hauschildt, 2021)

Within the focus groups, respondents discussed **technical problems or material issues** that prevented them from being properly involved in the online learning process. The number of similar respondents in the survey is small. The majority of students **had their own electronic device**, although in some cases, they had to share equipment with another family member (pupil or student family member), which created additional problems, especially during exam periods.

It is important to note that **full access to the Internet** was particularly problematic for students living in the regions or returning to the regions from Tbilisi. Focus group participants reported that an Internet-related flaw posed a particular problem during the exam process.

“During the pandemic, I had to return to the region. I have a serious problem with the Internet, and because of this, I often lack full attendance at lectures. Also, the system was switched off several times during the exam period, due to which the midterm exams for several subjects were canceled. The university did not accept my letter regarding the internet shortage.”

The quality of online learning was assessed differently within the focus groups. For a large proportion of study respondents, **online learning is problematic** compared to in-class learning, as different forms of proactive techniques cannot be used in the knowledge-sharing process. The disadvantage of this approach, according to students, is most clear in relation to practical subjects. Some focus group participants attribute the decline in learning quality to a lack of communication between the lecturer and the student. A similar re-

sult may be because in some universities, it is not necessary to turn on cameras during lectures-seminars. Thus, the lecturer is unable to hold a lively discussion as long as student involvement is low.

“Online learning has a great impact on me because I cannot get the same quality of education. Discussion and reasoning during online learning is not possible, so the quality of teaching has deteriorated a lot.”

According to some focus group participants, the root cause of the learning problem is not the online format. According to these respondents, there are general **systemic problems** with the quality of teaching in universities. They claim that education at this stage occurs in an auditorium, with the lecturer imparting knowledge to students. With the introduction of the online mode, nothing has changed because the learning process is still flawed. Thus, for this group, the difference between the quality of distance and physical learning is blurred. Students also discussed their **mental and psychological state** during the distance learning process, focusing on a lack of social communication and excessive reliance on technology.

Although a large proportion of students sees the online learning regime negatively in terms of the degree of knowledge shared, a similar format within focus groups was relatively positively assessed in terms of cost reduction. Some respondents consider such a format to be favorable, as they are able to return to the regions, which drastically reduces the amount of the expenses incurred for housing and daily necessities. The position was stated by students who study in Tbilisi, but who do not have a place of residence in the capital city - those who are particularly concerned about the housing problem.

“The quality is very low; we just listen to the lecture. There is no interaction or involvement during the class, however it is more convenient in the sense that I was able to reduce costs. I went back to the region and no longer pay the rent, which is really a relief for me.”

Some of the focus group participants were positive about the online learning format. A similar attitude was expressed regarding **time management** - students noted that they could more easily combine study and work with a distance learning format. Additionally, some students claimed that a distance learning format is more acceptable for lectures. Part of the respondents indicated that due to various psycho-social factors, they avoided group activities while attending class, while they were more open during distance education activities, and their **involvement increased**.

“Online learning turned out to be more convenient for me because during university lectures in a physical space, I was very reluctant to get involved in a group. Online learning helped me overcome this obstacle.”

The online learning format was positively assessed by employed students in terms of time management, however,

the quality of knowledge acquired was identified as a particular problem. As it turned out, in the epistemic representations of a large part of the focus group participants, higher education is not only related to knowledge transfer, it is mainly associated with the transformational nature of knowledge, socialization, and the strengthening of social capital. According to these students, such a perception cannot be provided by the online learning format. Distance learning has increased students' frustration and anxiety about academic activities since on-site classes have been canceled.

Internet access was mentioned as one of the problems of online learning. This issue was mainly raised by students who live in the regions, where internet disruptions significantly hinder the learning process. The problem in some regions is a lack of optical internet, which prevents students from fully engaging in the online learning process. In addition, due to a lack of internet speed, some students use a mobile internet service, which comes with additional costs. Focus group discussions revealed that one of the main reasons for missing lectures is an inadequate internet connection.

The main findings of this chapter are:

- Having an unreliable internet connection in the regions prevents students from properly engaging in the learning process.
- The distance learning format also proved difficult for students who are from large families and who do not have individual spaces (students often do not have a quiet place to study).
- Students who were employed parallel to their studies lost their jobs due to the pandemic, which increased the risk of status suspension.
- Distance learning has increased students' frustration and anxiety about academic activities since on-site classes have been canceled.
- Students with difficult socio-economic conditions, despite experiencing difficulties with distance learning, would like to maintain this format in order to save on monthly expenses.
- One of the main reasons for not attending distance learning lectures is the low quality and high price of internet access, which is especially problematic for students who live in the regions.

3

CONCLUSION

In assessing the socio-economic status of the students in the study, attention was paid to employment status, and it was found that employment by occupation is problematic. According to the students, however, employment without education is almost impossible. The solution is usually employment in the service sector, where the combination of work and study is particularly problematic. Despite this situation, it seems that without these jobs, students would not be able to pay tuition fees and continue their studies. An imbalance was found between the work performed and the salary. Considering the economic condition of the students, their income is not enough to cover monthly expenses. Despite the experiences analyzed in the study, students believe that "without paid work, they would not be able to be students."

Given their difficult socio-economic backgrounds and situations, students use consumer loans to cover tuition fees and housing costs, as well as to provide financial support for their families.

According to the students, the tuition fees and the daily/monthly income and expenses, as well as the quality of the knowledge acquired, are insufficient. Due to the socio-economic situation caused by the pandemic, the practice of deferring or redistributing taxes has emerged in public universities, unlike in private universities.

The family and income from paid work are the main sources of income for students to cover both tuition fees and other household expenses. In some cases, an out-migrating parent was revealed to be a source of income used to cover the above-mentioned expenses.

Housing costs make up the largest share of monthly expenses. While there are dormitories at some universities, they may be only for students enrolled in international programs. It is common for several students to rent a private apartment together, which reduces monthly utility costs as much as living with family members.

The study revealed that even the learning process itself can have a negative impact on a student's socio-economic status. In this regard, the practice of private universities is problematic – students claim that buying new books and work-

books every semester only serves to add costs. Clearly, such a need has a negative impact on the economic situation of students.

The pandemic caused by the coronavirus was considered in a negative context in the study in terms of employment and consequently tuition fees. The spread of the coronavirus caused students to lose their paid employment, which for some was their only source of income. The loss of this income placed a particular burden on the family. The pandemic situation was viewed positively when assessing housing-related problems - the switch to distance learning became a significant financial advantage. A similar effect was also observed in the combination of work and study.

RESEARCH RECOMMENDATIONS:

GENERAL RECOMMENDATION:

When considering access to education in the political agenda, it is necessary to consider initiatives to address this problem not only at the Ministry of Education but also at the government level, in order to develop coordinated social and educational programs between sectors.

TO THE MINISTRY OF EDUCATION, SCIENCE, CULTURE AND SPORT OF GEORGIA:

- Complete an in-depth analysis of reasons for the suspension of student status and take immediate measures to ensure equal access to higher education by adequately supporting students who are unable to pay tuition and living expenses due to their economic situation.
- Develop systemic and long-term policies to reduce the negative consequences of the pandemic in the higher education system and to ensure equal opportunity.
- Increase direct budget funding for higher education institutions.
- Improve the state policy related to housing and take into account the needs of students in relation to housing.

TO HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS:

- Consider the Coronavirus pandemic, take into account the social-financial situation of students, and split tuition fees.
- Ensure the digitization of all study materials and equal access to all resources.
- Private universities should determine the cost of student accommodations based on the local context.

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HIGHER EDUCATION AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

Student Social Needs Survey



A weak internet connection in regions prevents students from properly engaging in the learning process.



Due to the high cost of living and low availability of student housing, students are forced to live in adjacent cities, which reduces their living costs.



For boys, the tendency to continue education is related to compulsory military service.

More information under this link:
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