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ECONOMIC AND SOCIOECONOMIC BARRIERS OF HIGHER EDUCATION: A CASE STUDY OF AUTONOMOUS REPUBLIC OF ADJARA, GEORGIA

Abstract. The given paper studies the key socioeconomic factors that influence young people to access and complete higher education (HE) in Georgia. The research focuses on regional context, mainly on Adjara, Georgia. Even though all citizens are equal to receive HE in Georgia, in practice, many students face invisible barriers long before they apply to university and during their studies too. This research examines how background social and economic conditions shape access to higher education, focusing on income level, family background, gender, place of residence etc.

The study is based on a quantitative research design, using a structured questionnaire administered among 315 undergraduate students across six municipalities of Autonomous Republic of Adjara: Batumi, Kobuleti, Khelvachauri, Keda, Khulo and Shuakhevi.

Based on these quantitative research methods and structured questionnaires, the study analyzes how the above-mentioned factors affect students' educational choices and their opportunities to complete HE without delays.

The findings show that financial constraints, family background and the regional disparities remain a major barrier to accessing HE. The problem is particularly evident among low-income households. The majority of respondents belong to low or lower-middle income households and students from these groups allocate a disproportionately large share of households' income and education-related costs.

Limited financial resources limit students to from fully engaging in their education, instead they combine studies with employment or search for other financing sources to support themselves. As a result, this process increases the risk of delayed graduation or dropout. It must be mentioned that students with full time job tend to have less time and available energy for academic work.

Gender differences are also evident as female students rely more heavily on state-finance funding programs, while male students are more frequently self-finance through employment.

Recent government reforms to restructure the HE system have caused controversial arguments. In this context, the findings of the paper underline the need for targeted policy measures aimed at reducing educational inequality, strengthening social mobility and supporting students in need. The study provides practical implications for HE managers, policymakers and local stakeholders that are involved in educational planning and social development.

Keywords: *Human Capital, Higher Education, Education and Inequality, Education and Gender, Equality of Opportunity.*

JEL Classification: I23; I24; I25.

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Introduction. Access to HE is considered one of the most important socio-economic issues in modern society. It is directly related to the development of human capital (Becker, 1993), to the International Labour Organization, (2022)¹, and people's social mobility opportunities (World Bank, 2019)².

Today, higher education represents the potential for a country's economic development, social equality, and economic growth, which in turn reduces economic inequality and poverty between social classes (Bennett et al., 2024). International experience shows that limiting access to higher education increases polarization between different social classes, especially in countries where economic inequality is already a problem (OECD, 2019, 2020)³⁴.

Equal access to Higher Education (HE) in Georgia is legally strengthened by the Georgian Constitution and special legislative framework. The Constitution of Georgia recognizes the right to HE as one of the fundamental social rights (Constitution of Georgia, 2018)⁵.

Accordingly, every Georgian citizen is entitled to receive HE and the state is obliged to ensure equitable access and equal conditions for all. This constitutional provision establishes a legal foundation that prohibits any form of preferential treatment based on social, economic or other related factors.

The Ministry of Education, Science and Youth of Georgia regulates the practical implementation of this principle. The Ministry is in charge of development and structural organization of higher education system in the country (Law of Georgia on Higher Education, 2024)⁶. The law establishes an equal and competitive environment, transparent admission procedures and social accessibility for all.

To reduce financial barriers for student, a range of funding mechanisms was introduced. These primarily included State Education Grants, State Master Grants, and Program (Priority) Funding. These financial instruments covered Bachelor's, Master's, and integrated Bachelor-Master degree programs, as well as accredited medical, teacher and other academic educational programs.

It should be noted that this was not the exhaustive list of available grants. Additional funding opportunities were also available through regional and municipal authorities as well as other state-supported initiatives.

All above mentioned grant schemes were in effect until the end of 2025. Since 2026, significant educational reforms have been introducing, and the previous list of grants is no longer applicable. However, as the research covers the period up to 2025, the analysis focuses exclusively on the policies and financial support mechanisms that were effective within the timeframe.

Despite the all-recognized benefits, access to tertiary education and finishing any type of degree (BA/MA/PHD) on time, remains the problem in Georgia. The background of students plays a huge role to enrolment and completion degrees. Direct and indirect costs, such as tuition fees, accommodation, transportation, and other expenses creates serious financial pressure on families. At the same time, background factors, such as parental education, gender norms and other cultural or religious aspects shapes the HE aspirations, which is very common factor (Fitzgerald et al., 2025). As a result, system that aims to ensure equal access and opportunities to all, may still replicate socioeconomic inequalities (Gopinath et al., 2025).

The aim of the study is to examine the economic and socioeconomic barriers that influence on young people's access to complete higher education institutions in Georgia. Hence, to provide evidence-based policy recommendations for reducing educational inequality.

The subject of the research is the socioeconomic determinants of higher educational accessibility, including: household income, education-related costs, family background characteristics, gender differences and inequalities in HE participants based on place of residence across the municipalities of Adjara.

The object of the research is undergraduate and prospective students enrolled in or preparing to enter HEI's. Research focused on 6 municipalities: Batumi, Kobuleti, Khelvachauri, Keda, Khulo and Shuakhevi.

1 International Labour Organization. (2022). Global Employment Trends for Youth 2022. ILO Publishing, Geneva. URL: <https://www.ilo.org/publications/major-reports/global-employment-trends-youth-2022> (date of access: 19.02.2026).

2 World Bank. (2019). *World Development Report 2019: The Changing Nature of Work*. Washington, DC: World Bank. <https://doi.org/10.1596/978-1-4648-1328-3>

3 OECD. (2019). *Education at a Glance 2019: OECD Indicators*. OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/f8d7880d-en>

4 OECD. (2020). *Education at a Glance 2020: OECD Indicators*. OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/69096873-en>

5 Constitution of Georgia, Legislative Herald of Georgia § rtitle 27: Right to education and academic freedom (2018). URL: <https://matsne.gov.ge/en/document/view/30346> (date of access: 19.02.2026).

6 Law of Georgia on Higher Education, Legislative Herald of Georgia (2024). URL: <https://matsne.gov.ge/en/document/view/32830?publication=121> (date of access: 19.02.2026).

The given article examines following research objectives within the context of Autonomous Republic of Adjara, Georgia:

- analyzes the impact of economic factors, including household income, direct and indirect education costs on accessing to HE in the Autonomous Republic of Adjara, Georgia;
- investigates the financial burdens associated with tertiary education;
- examine the effects of gender inequality on accessibility of HE;
- assess the regional and social inequalities in HE participation regarding the place of residence and family background characteristics;
- evaluate how the interaction of socioeconomic factors contributes to unequal access to higher education across to deferent socioeconomic groups.

Literature Review. Human capital theory is one of the most important economic frameworks, according to which education is considered as an investment that increases the income of an individual creates the economic capital of a country. According to this theory, the investment in education, time, finances and effort, will be repaid in the form of income in the future. The development of human capital theory began with these foundations. Schultz noted that economic backwardness in developing countries is associated with low investment in human capital. Education increases the ability of individuals to acquire and use knowledge for the benefit of themselves and the country. The relationship has been further examined in more recent empirical literature. Xu et al., (2023) demonstrated a non-linear and asymmetric relationship between higher education and income inequality, showing that expansions of HE alone does not automatically reduce income disparities without accompanying structural policy support.

The further development of human capital theory is associated with (Becker, 1993), who was the first to include education and professional skills in classical models of economic analysis. According to Becker, the decision to obtain an education is based on a cost-benefit analysis, according to which an individual compares the direct and indirect costs of education with the expected income.

Mincer, (1974) earnings function is one of the most widely used empirical models of human capital. According to the model, each additional year of education increases an individual's income by 7-10% on average. This finding is supported by studies conducted in many countries, indicating the universal economic impact of HE. Despite its unique theoretical approach, the model has its shortcomings. It takes less account

of social inequality, structural barriers, and other institutional factors that uniquely affect access to HE. The model has also been developed in the Georgian context, but unlike other countries, investment in HE in Georgia does not resonate in individual income (Tsiklashvili & Poladashvili, 2022).

The relationship between higher education and social equity has been widely studied in the social and economic sciences (Choudhury & Kumar, 2026; Naim, 2025; Shavit and Blossfeld, 1993) followers of the classical theory consider HE as an individual's ability to overcome low socio-economic barriers. Bourdieu et al., (1986) in his famous work "Forms of Capital" discusses the family environment and resources that directly affect individuals' involvement in education. According to the work, children from low-income families find themselves in a non-competitive environment with other peers and in a relatively weak position to obtain HE. This observation is discussed by Strand, (2024), who demonstrated that exposure to multiple socioeconomic risk factors has a compounding negative effect on educational achievement, with students facing more than three risk factors attaining outcomes close to one standard deviation below their more advantaged peers. The issue is especially relevant when introducing the regional context, where, compared to large cities, the economic and educational infrastructure is less developed. Several studies confirmed that students from rural and peripheral areas are significantly less likely to access HE compared to the urban peers. It is usually linked with geographical concentrations of educational resources and institutions (Lessky, 2025; Maheshwari & Koria, 2025a;).

In Georgia, this theoretical approach is gaining relevance. Based on National Statistics Office of Georgia the probability of obtaining higher education varies significantly depending on family income and place of residence. The evidenced has been found by many years of research. Based on the same data, the share of the population with HE is significantly higher in cities, especially in Tbilisi, which is explained not only by financial barriers, which obviously place a heavy burden on students from the regions, but also by the ability to access cultural and educational institutions, which are mainly concentrated in the capital and several large cities throughout the country (National Statistics Office of Georgia, 2017)¹.

¹ National Statistics Office of Georgia. (2017). *Statistical Yearbook of Georgia; Higher Education Statistics*. [Dataset]. URL: <https://www.geostat.ge/en/modules/categories/61/higher-education> (date of access: 19.02.2026).

International experience also confirms similar trends. According to the OECD Country Study Report, representatives of low-income families are significantly less represented in higher education than families with high incomes (OECD, 2019, 2020, 2023)^{1,2,3}. This trend continues in 2025 (OECD, 2025)⁴. According to the report, children from families with economic and social needs have fewer chances to get higher education. One of the main factors is considered to be the level of education achieved by their parents. On average across OECD countries only 26% of young adults whose parents did not complete HE attain a tertiary qualification, compared to 70% of those who have at least one parent completed HE.

This integrational pattern has been confirmed across a wide range of country contexts. Maheshwari & Koria (2025) using PISA data across OECD and non-OECD countries, show that parental education and per capita income are the most robust determinants of educational inequality globally. The effects are stronger in lower-income country settings.

Supporting equal access to higher education is very important, because educational achievements have a significant impact on the labor market. Although higher education does not directly guarantee employment and high incomes, most highly skilled and well-paid jobs require a corresponding higher level of qualification. Fitzgerald et al., (2025) identify six key factors that influence on educational inequality: socioeconomic status, parental education, ethnicity, previous schooling experiences, gender and geographical location. Their systematic review underlines that these factors do not operate in isolation and require adaptive, multifaceted policy responses.

In recent decades, participation rates in higher education have increased significantly in Georgia, but access does not mean equal opportunities. Individuals' social background, family economic status, geographic location, religious or cultural affiliation often play a decisive role in who will be able to participate in HE on the one hand and successfully complete it.

A particularly important dimension of this issue is the combination of work

and study among financially constrained students. (Nidogon Višnjić et al., 2024a) in a systematic review of 347 papers, show that the primary driver of student enrollment is the need to meet financial obligations and that more hours devoted to work consistently reduces the academic performance. This finding is directly relevant to the Georgian context, where a significant share of students from low-income households combine employment with full-time study.

Given the relevance of the issue, the opinions of scientists and researchers also vary. Altbach et al., (2017) focus on the massification of education, especially against the background of unequal distribution of quality and resources. Prestigious universities are usually accessible to high-income and academically better prepared students, while low-income and/or less prepared applicants are mainly concentrated in institutions with lower rankings, which clearly affects their future career outcomes and income.

The responsibility for the above issue rests entirely on the state and education administrators. The lack or scarcity of financial support systems (scholarships, grants, loans, etc.) significantly increases the barriers to higher education for some social groups. Empirical evidence confirms that need-based financial aid and well-targeted grant mechanisms positively influence student retention and degree completion, particularly among low-income households (Liu, 2025; Moores & Burgess, 2023; Naim, 2025; Nidogon Višnjić et al., 2024b; Vesperi & Gagnidze, 2019). Gender also plays an important role in HE financing patterns. Evidence from emerging market contexts shows that female students are more likely to depend on state funded programs, while male students frequently finance their studies through personal employment (Blossfeld et al., 2023; Zhong et al., 2025)

In turn, the issue is structured around two main questions:

1) What instruments can reduce the barriers to higher education (grant, loan, zero tuition fees, housing subsidy, etc.)?

2) What side effects can accompany each instrument (budget burden, mass "graduation", excess workforce, etc.)?

While we were working on economic and socioeconomic accessibility of HE, The National Concept of Higher Education System Reform were recognized by the state. New approach questions all existing benefits for the students and some concepts might create inequality risks.

Research Methodology. The given research adopts a quantitative research design

1 OECD. (2019). *Education at a Glance 2019: OECD Indicators*. OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/f8d7880d-en>

2 OECD. (2020). *Education at a Glance 2020: OECD Indicators*. OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/69096873-en>

3 OECD. (2023). *Education at a Glance 2023: OECD Indicators*. OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/e13bef63-en>

4 OECD. (2025). *Education at a Glance 2025: OECD Indicators*. OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/1c0d9c79-en>

to examine the economic and socioeconomic barriers that influence young people's access to and completion of higher education in the Autonomous Republic of Adjara, Georgia. Primary data were collected through a structured questionnaire distributed among 315 undergraduate students from six municipalities: Batumi, Kobuleti, Khelvachauri, Keda, Khulo and Shuakhevi (Adjara, Georgia). The questionnaire involved income level, monthly education related expenditures, funding sources, influence of tuition fees on program choice, gender, place of residence and family background characteristics. The majority of questionnaires were administered face-to-face, allowing researchers to clarify questions and improve response accuracy. It should be noted that data collection in the mountainous municipalities of Khulo and Shauakhevi proved particularly challenging due to their remote geographic location and limited accessibility. Despite these difficulties, efforts were made to ensure representation from all six municipalities. The uneven distribution of respondents across the region largely reflects objective demographic realities, as the main urban center is located in Batumi, also HEIs. That explains the largest share of the student population, which is directly mirrored in the sample composition.

Main Results. The empirical analysis were based on survey data that were collected among 315 students in Adjara, Georgia. Female students represent 71% of the sample, while male respondents accounted 19%. In terms of geographic distribution, the majority of respondents reside in Batumi 61.6%, as there are concentrated main HE institutions in the region. Statistics were followed with other municipalities, Kobuleti – 12.3%, Khelvachauri 11.9%, with smaller shares from Keda – 7.7%, Khulo - 4.2% and Shuakhevi – 2.3%.

Household characteristics indicate that the majority of respondents come from families with three to six members. Which is typical family structure in this region. In most cases households rely on one or two employed members, that increases the financial dependency of student to only some family members and at the same time limits available resources for educational investments.

In terms of socioeconomic status, the majority of respondents belong to low and lower-middle income group (80.6%). In this region income is around 1200Gel, which is around 444USD. Only small number of respondents reported higher income level (19.4%). Based on this distribution, significant share of students faces financial constraints, which directly affect their ability to access and finance higher education.

We asked about educational preparation patterns as well. Results shows that respondents rely partially or fully on private tutoring before National Examination Process, which takes place annually. A fewer number of students depend on school-based preparation. Monthly education related expenditures are reported within the range of 200-400 Gel. So, we can see that households allocate a substantial share of their income to exam preparation. This finding highlights the growing importance of the shadow education system in achieving academic success.

Regarding the access to information about higher education opportunities, more than 50% of students reported that they do not receive sufficient information about higher education opportunities, admission requirements and other funding mechanisms. Usually, this type of information is obtained from teachers, rather than through structures institutional support systems, like, schools, university representatives and other structural units in charge.

As mentioned above, this distribution reflects the concentration of HE institutions in urban center-Batumi. Household composition varies across respondents, most students reported that they are from medium-sized families and multiple employed in household members. Overall, the sample demonstrates sufficient demographic variation to support in depth research analysis.

To answer the research objectives, how household income shapes the financial burden of higher education, we decided to a take cost burden comparison approach. In this framework, education affordability is measured as the share of household income that is spent on education-related costs. Differences across income groups are evaluated by descriptive statistics and group comparison tests. Our measurement in household expenditure on higher education includes all associated costs, it can be housing, transportation, living costs and etc.

$$\text{Education Cost burden} = \frac{\text{Monthly Education Costs}}{\text{Monthly Household Income}}. \quad (1)$$

The results show a strong inverse relationship between income level and HE affordability. Mean and median values show that low-income families allocate a substantially larger amount of income to education related costs. The burden declines as household income are increases. In the lowest income categories, education costs often exceed reported household income. It's mainly connected to family support, borrowing or other types of external resources.

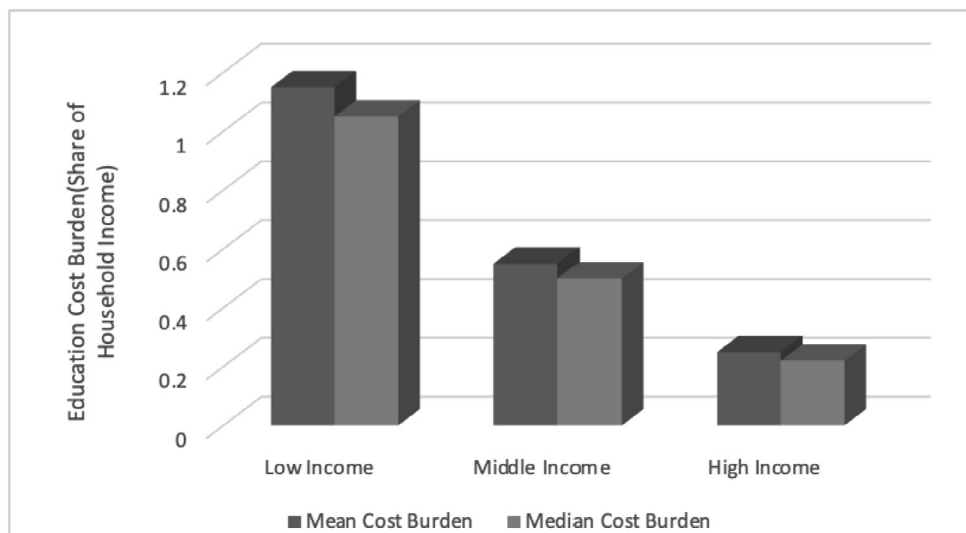


Fig. 1. Education cost burden by household income group

Source: Author's own calculations based on primary survey data collected in Adjara, Georgia

To examine education cost burden among household income groups we applied a group comparison test, specifically to a one-way ANOVA. The results show that education cost burden varies significantly by income level ($p < 0.01$). This finding indicates that household income is a key factor that influences affordability of HE. At the same time, median comparison follows the same pattern as the mean results. It confirms that students with low-income families consistently experience higher financial burdens compared to medium and higher income families.

Education cost burden is calculated as the ratio of monthly education-related costs to monthly household income.

Values above 1 indicated that education costs exceed reported household income.

In order to examine how socioeconomic status effect access to HE, we proceed a chi-square test. The analysis assessed the association between household income category and whether tuition fees influenced students program choice. Because both variables were categorical the chi-square test was an appropriate statistical method.

The results show statistical significance relationship ($\chi^2 = 19.68$, $p = .006$, Cramér's $V = .25$). There is moderate association between income level and tuition influence. Consequently, the null hypothesis was rejected and the research hypothesis were confirmed. In another words socioeconomic background plays a significant role in shaping access to HE. Students with low and lower middle-income households more often report that tuition influenced to their educational decision.

To examine whether financial status is associated with students' willingness to change their university or academic program in case of

improved economic conditions, chi-square test was conducted. Respondents reported that they would definitely or probably enroll in another university or program in case of better financial conditions ($\chi^2 = 32.71$ $df = 21$, $p = .049$).

The next objective of the given article is to analyze how source of funding for HE differ across genders. A Chi-square test of independence were conducted to examine association between gender and funding source ($\chi^2 = 15.66$, $p = .0035$, Cramér's $V = 0.225$). Although the strength of association is moderate, results explained that male students more frequently finance their studies through personal employment, rather female students. They are more often rely on state funding educational programs. From the policy perspective this is very important finding. It explains that state scholarship programs are very important mechanism for female students while it supports them to access higher education, particularly in the sense that combination of work and study may be more challenging to female students in the region.

All the above-mentioned findings address HE policy makers. It raises the opinion that grants, student loan programs, tuitions subsidies, zero tuition policies, supporting in housing and living costs are especially important with students of low-income families. These instruments help expand access to higher education particularly for this segment. However, each policy may produce unintended consequences and it is the subject of further research.

Conclusion. The given paper examined socioeconomic factors that influence young people to access HE. Survey data among students were collected in the Autonomous

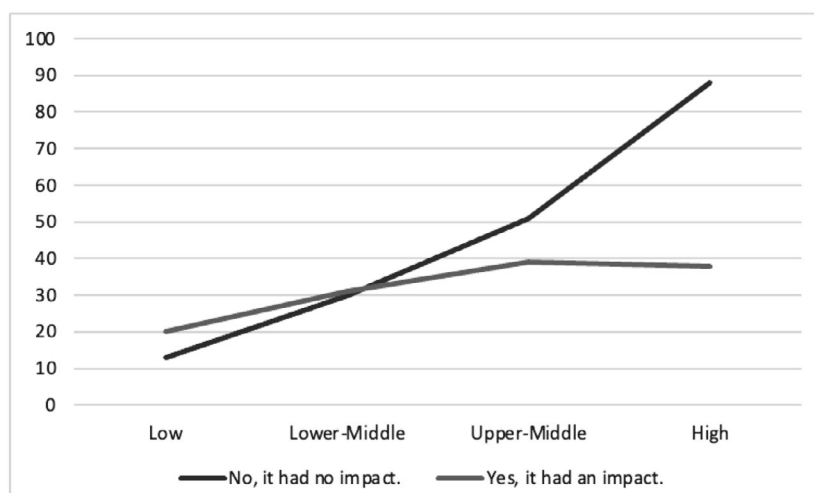


Fig. 2. Household income and student's educational choice

Source: Author's own calculations based on primary survey data collected in Adjara, Georgia

Republic of Adjara, Georgia. The analysis explored how household income, education related costs, family background and gender impact students' educational opportunities and decision-making processes on educational programs.

The research outcomes demonstrate that economic factors represent one of the most important determinants of accessing the HE. Students from low-income households allocate a substantially larger share of their financial resources to education and related costs compared to students with moderate and high income.

The analysis of gender differences shows that female students rely more frequently on state funded programs, while male students report a major tendency to finance their studies through personal employment.

This trend underlines the need and importance of public funding mechanisms in HE.

It can be concluded that educational inequality emerges from interaction of multiple socioeconomic factors rather than from a single determinant. Students from financially disadvantaged households with limited parental educational capital face the highest level of financial constraints when accessing the HE. The process is in contract to high-income families.

In conclusion, the findings emphasize the importance of targeted policy interventions aimed to reduce financial barriers and improve equal access to higher education. Expanded scholarship programs could significantly reduce socioeconomic disparities in HE participation.

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ЕКОНОМІЧНІ ТА СОЦІАЛЬНО-ЕКОНОМІЧНІ ПЕРЕШКОДИ У ДОСТУПІ ДО ВИЩОЇ ОСВІТИ: КЕЙС-СТАДІ АУТОНОМНОЇ РЕСПУБЛІКИ АДЖАРІЯ, ГРУЗІЯ

У даній статті досліджуються ключові соціально-економічні чинники, що впливають на можливість молоді отримати доступ до вищої освіти (ВО) та завершити її в Грузії. Дослідження зосереджується на регіональному контексті, зокрема на Аджарії (Грузія). Хоча в Грузії всі громадяни мають рівні права на отримання ВО, на практиці багато студентів стикаються з невидимими бар'єрами задовго до вступу до університету, а також під час навчання. У цьому дослідженні аналізується, як соціальні та економічні умови походження визначають доступ до вищої освіти, з особливим акцентом на рівні доходу, сімейному походженні, гендерній приналежності, місці проживання тощо.

Дослідження базується на кількісному підході та використовує структурований опитувальник, заповнений 315 студентами бакалаврських програм у шести муніципалітетах Автономної Республіки Аджарія: Батумі, Кобулеті, Хелвачаурі, Кеда, Хуло та Шуахеві. На основі цих кількісних методів дослідження та структурованих анкет у дослідженні аналізується, як вищезазначені фактори впливають на освітній вибір студентів та їхні можливості завершити вищу освіту без затримок.

Результати дослідження показують, що фінансові обмеження, сімейне походження та регіональні розбіжності залишаються основною перешкодою для доступу до вищої освіти. Ця проблема особливо гостро стоїть серед домогосподарств з низьким рівнем доходу. Більшість респондентів належать до домогосподарств з низьким або нижчим середнім рівнем доходу, і студенти з цих груп витрачають непропорційно велику частку доходу домогосподарства на витрати, пов'язані з освітою.

Обмежені фінансові ресурси не дають студентам можливості повністю присвятити себе навчанню; натомість вони поєднують навчання з роботою або шукають інші джерела фінансування, щоб забезпечити себе. Як наслідок, цей процес підвищує ризик затримки з отриманням диплома або відрахування зі навчання. Слід зазначити, що студенти, які працюють на повну ставку, зазвичай мають менше часу та енергії для навчальної роботи. Гендерні відмінності також є очевидними: студентки в більшій мірі покладаються на програми державного фінансування, тоді як студенти-чоловіки частіше самостійно забезпечують своє навчання за рахунок заробітної плати. Нещодавні урядові реформи, спрямовані на реструктуризацію системи вищої освіти, викликали суперечливі дискусії. У цьому контексті висновки даної роботи підкреслюють необхідність цілеспрямованих політичних заходів, спрямованих на зменшення освітньої нерівності, посилення соціальної мобільності та підтримку студентів, які цього потребують. Дослідження надає практичні рекомендації для керівників закладів вищої освіти, політиків та місцевих зацікавлених сторін, які беруть участь у плануванні освіти та соціальному розвитку.

Ключові слова: людський капітал, вища освіта, освіта та нерівність, освіта та гендерні питання, рівність можливостей.

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