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## THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC DIMENSIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION: TRENDS, CHALLENGES, AND TRANSFORMATIONS IN GEORGIA

**Abstract.** Higher education systems worldwide are undergoing profound and accelerating structural transformation, driven by the simultaneous macroeconomic pressures of massification, technological disruption, changing labor market demands, and evolving public and private financing models. This article presents a comprehensive literature review and empirical analysis of tertiary education trends, exploring their socio-economic challenges, structural shifts, and system-wide transformations. The study integrates a systematic engagement with international scholarly and economic policy literature with original statistical data drawn from the Georgian national higher education and vocational education and training (VET) sectors for the 2025/2026 academic year.

This dual focus facilitates a rigorous dialogue between globally theorized human capital dynamics and contextually specific empirical realities, contributing to a comparative literature in which post-Soviet and South Caucasian educational economies remain significantly underrepresented. The literature review component critically examines six thematic domains: access and equity; institutional quality assurance and market accountability; governance and cost-sharing models; internationalization and global student mobility networks; digital pedagogy infrastructure; and graduate outcomes relative to the higher education-labor market nexus.

The empirical findings from official statistical data reveal robust institutional expansion alongside persistent structural distortions. Key trends include an 8.0% year-on-year increase in new admissions, a 19.7% surge in international student enrollment—which generates substantial revenue and positions Georgia as a regional educational exporter—and a dynamic 15.3% growth in VET enrollment. Conversely, a 16.0% decline in doctoral completions and a sharp geographic concentration of educational infrastructure in the capital city of Tbilisi present major systemic risks to regional human capital development and long-term economic sustainability. The paper concludes with policy recommendations focused on optimizing financial resource allocation, mitigating regional economic imbalances, and enhancing the efficiency of public investments in tertiary education.

**Keywords:** *Higher Education, Vocational Education and Training, Georgia, Equity, Digitalization, Graduate Outcomes, The Economics of Higher Education.*

**JEL Classification:** I21; I22; I23; J24.

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**Introduction.** Higher education has undergone substantial transformation over the past five decades, evolving from an elite institutional system serving a narrow stratum of society into a mass – and increasingly universal – enterprise of considerable social, economic, and cultural significance (Marginson, 2016). This transition has been

accompanied by a proliferation of research examining the purposes, structures, outcomes, and governance of tertiary institutions across diverse national and regional contexts.

The contemporary higher education literature is characterised by a productive tension between competing paradigms:

those emphasising the intrinsic humanistic and civic value of university education (Nussbaum, 2010) and those foregrounding its instrumental role in human capital formation and economic productivity (Becker, 1964; OECD, 2023)<sup>1</sup>. This tension permeates debates on curriculum design, funding models, institutional differentiation, and the purposes of research. A coherent literature review must therefore navigate these divergent perspectives while remaining attentive to the contextual factors – historical, political, and cultural – that shape higher education systems in different settings.

The present review is structured thematically, addressing six interconnected domains that have attracted sustained scholarly attention: (1) access, participation, and equity; (2) quality assurance and institutional accountability; (3) governance and funding; (4) internationalisation and globalisation; (5) digitalisation and pedagogical innovation; and (6) graduate outcomes and the higher education–labour market nexus. Each section synthesises the principal theoretical contributions and empirical findings, identifies areas of consensus and contestation, and notes lacunae warranting further investigation.

The aim of the present review is to provide a systematic and critical synthesis of the contemporary higher education literature, mapping the principal theoretical frameworks and empirical findings across key thematic domains in order to identify areas of scholarly consensus, ongoing contestation, and gaps warranting further inquiry.

The tasks of the review are as follows: (1) to delineate the principal theoretical paradigms informing scholarship on higher education; (2) to examine the empirical evidence concerning access, equity, quality assurance, governance, internationalisation, digitalisation, and graduate outcomes; (3) to assess the degree of convergence and divergence across national and regional contexts; and (4) to identify significant lacunae in the existing body of research and to propose directions for future investigation.

The object of the research is higher education as a social institution – encompassing its structural, organisational, and policy dimensions – as it has developed across diverse national systems over the past five decades.

The subject of the research is the body of scholarly literature addressing the key thematic dimensions of higher education –

namely access and participation, quality assurance, governance and funding, internationalisation, digitalisation, and the relationship between higher education and the labour market – with particular attention to the theoretical frameworks, methodological approaches, and empirical findings that characterise this field.

**Literature Review.** The study of higher education has generated a rich and multidisciplinary body of scholarship over the past five decades. The present literature review synthesises key theoretical contributions and empirical findings across six thematic domains that have attracted sustained scholarly attention: access, participation, and equity; quality assurance and institutional accountability; governance and funding; internationalisation and globalisation; digitalisation and pedagogical innovation; and graduate outcomes and the higher education–labour market nexus.

A foundational tension runs throughout this literature between humanistic and instrumental conceptions of the university. Scholars in the tradition of Nussbaum (2010) emphasise the intrinsic value of higher education for cultivating critical citizenship, democratic participation, and personal flourishing. By contrast, human capital theorists following Becker (1964) foreground the economic productivity gains associated with tertiary credentials, a perspective that has profoundly shaped policy discourse and funding rationales in many national systems (OECD, 2023)<sup>2</sup>. Navigating this tension is essential for any comprehensive assessment of higher education policy and practice.

On the question of access and equity, massification – the rapid expansion of participation from elite to near-universal levels – has been the defining structural trend (Marginson, 2016). Yet expanded enrolment has not straightforwardly translated into equalised opportunity. Lucas's (2001) concept of Effectively Maintained Inequality demonstrates that as quantitative access widens, qualitative stratification by institutional prestige, field of study, and programme type intensifies. Financial, cultural, and informational barriers continue to mediate participation along dimensions of socioeconomic background, ethnicity, gender, disability, and geography (Callender and Jackson, 2005).

Scholarship on quality assurance has highlighted the growing influence of

<sup>1</sup> Education at a glance 2019: OECD indicators. OECD Publishing. OECD. 2019. <https://doi.org/10.1787/f8d7880d-en>

<sup>2</sup> Education at a Glance 2023: OECD Indicators. OECD Publishing, Paris. 2023. <https://doi.org/10.1787/e13bef63-en>

neoliberal governance frameworks, including performance metrics, audit regimes, and global university rankings, on institutional behaviour and academic culture (Ball, 2003; Hazelkorn, 2011). Critics have documented dysfunctional consequences such as the gaming of indicators, the bureaucratisation of academic work, and the marginalisation of dimensions of educational value that resist quantification (Nussbaum, 2010). The European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ENQA, 2015)<sup>1</sup> represent an influential normative framework for quality governance in the European context, with growing adoption across the Bologna Process signatory states.

Research on governance and funding has examined the transformation of higher education institutions under New Public Management principles, with particular attention to the tension between institutional autonomy and state accountability. The near-universal trend towards cost-sharing – shifting a portion of higher education costs from the state to students and families – has been theorised by Johnstone (2004) and subjected to empirical scrutiny across diverse national contexts (Dearden et al., 2014).

The internationalisation literature has documented the rapid growth of cross-border student mobility, transnational education provision, and international research collaboration, while raising critical questions about the geopolitical power asymmetries and equity implications embedded in global mobility networks (Teichler, 2017). For emerging and transitional higher education systems, internationalisation simultaneously represents an opportunity for integration into global knowledge networks and a challenge in terms of brain drain, institutional mimicry, and the subordination of local knowledge priorities.

The digitalisation literature has moved from early enthusiasm for e-learning and MOOCs towards more contextualised assessments of the conditions under which technology-enhanced learning produces meaningful improvements in student outcomes (Selwyn, 2024). The COVID-19 pandemic served as an unprecedented natural experiment, revealing both the resilience and the deep inequalities of digital higher education infrastructure (Hodges et al., 2020; Aristovnik et al., 2020).

The graduate outcomes literature has

examined private and social rates of return to higher education, the growing problem of qualification mismatch and credential inflation, and the contested concept of graduate employability (Psacharopoulos and Patrinos, 2018; Yorke, 2004). These debates are particularly salient for rapidly expanding systems such as Georgia's, where the alignment between educational output and labour market demand is a critical policy challenge.

Taken together, the literature reveals a higher education sector navigating deep structural tensions: between expansion and equity, between market accountability and academic autonomy, between global convergence and national particularity. A significant gap in this scholarship concerns post-Soviet and South Caucasian systems, which remain comparatively underrepresented in mainstream higher education research despite their distinctive historical trajectories and contemporary reform challenges. The present study seeks to contribute to this emergent comparative literature through empirical analysis of the Georgian case.

**Research Methodology.** This study employs a quantitative, descriptive-analytical research design to examine the structure and recent dynamics of Georgia's higher education and vocational education and training (VET) sectors. The analysis is based on secondary data obtained from the National Statistics Office of Georgia (Geostat)<sup>2</sup>, covering the 2021–2026 period, with particular emphasis on the 2025/2026 academic year.

The research adopts a macro-level approach, focusing on system-wide indicators rather than institutional or individual-level data. Key variables include the number of higher education institutions, student admissions, total enrollment, international student mobility, graduate output, academic staff, and doctoral education indicators. In addition, parallel indicators from the VET sector – such as institutional distribution, admissions, graduate output, and participation of students with special educational needs (SEN) – are incorporated to enable cross-sectoral comparison.

The analytical strategy is based on descriptive statistical methods, including trend analysis and proportional distribution. Year-on-year (YoY) growth rates are calculated to identify short-term dynamics,

1 Standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG). EURASHE. ENQA (2015). URL: [https://www.enqa.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/ESG\\_2015.pdf](https://www.enqa.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/ESG_2015.pdf) (date of access: 20.02.2026).

2 National Statistics Office of Georgia (Geostat). URL: <https://www.geostat.ge/en> (date of access: 20.02.2026).

while percentage shares are used to examine structural composition (e.g., public vs. private institutions, gender distribution, and field-of-study allocation). Graphical representations (charts and tables) are employed to enhance the clarity of observed trends and facilitate comparative interpretation across time and sectors.

To strengthen interpretative depth, the empirical findings are contextualized within established theoretical frameworks from the higher education literature, including human capital theory, employability frameworks, and perspectives on internationalization and system expansion. This enables the study to move beyond descriptive reporting and provide analytically grounded insights into structural imbalances, efficiency concerns, and policy-relevant challenges.

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of the study. First, the analysis relies exclusively on aggregate secondary data, which constrains the ability to establish causal relationships or capture micro-level dynamics such as student decision-making, institutional quality, or labor market outcomes. Second, while the data provide robust coverage of quantitative indicators, they do not include qualitative dimensions such as teaching quality, research productivity, or student experience. As such, the findings should be interpreted as indicative of structural patterns rather than definitive causal explanations.

Despite these limitations, the study provides a comprehensive and up-to-date empirical overview of Georgia's post-secondary education system and offers a reliable basis for policy discussion and future research.

#### **Quantitative Data Sources and Analysis.**

The empirical component of the study draws exclusively on official statistics published by the National Statistics Office of Georgia (Geostat) for the 2025/2026 academic year and the calendar year 2025. These data encompass indicators on higher education institution numbers, student admissions, total enrolment, international student populations, graduate output, academic staff, and doctoral education, as well as corresponding indicators for the vocational education and training sector. Data are disaggregated by institutional type (public/private), gender, geographic region, field of study, and student category (including those with special educational needs) where available.

Analytical procedures consist primarily of descriptive statistics, including frequency distributions, percentage shares, and year-on-year rates of change. Where appropriate, findings are benchmarked against

international indicators from the OECD (2023)<sup>1</sup> and UNESCO (2021)<sup>2</sup> to contextualise national trends within broader global patterns. Causal inference is not claimed from cross-sectional administrative data of this type; rather, the analysis is interpretive and exploratory, seeking to identify salient patterns, anomalies, and policy-relevant findings that can inform future longitudinal and quasi-experimental research designs.

**Limitations.** Several limitations of the present study merit acknowledgement. First, the reliance on administrative statistical data limits the depth of analysis possible with respect to student experience, institutional processes, and the qualitative dimensions of educational quality. Second, the cross-sectional nature of the data precludes causal attribution; observed trends and associations may be confounded by factors not captured in the available indicators. Third, the literature review, whilst broad in scope, necessarily reflects the dominant languages and publication contexts of internationally indexed scholarship and may underrepresent Georgian-language and Russian-language research relevant to the post-Soviet context. Future research should address these limitations through primary data collection, longitudinal tracking, and more inclusive bibliographic scope.

#### **Main Results.**

**Access, Participation, and Equity in Higher Education.** The concept of massification – the rapid expansion of higher education enrolment – has been a defining structural trend in the sociology of higher education (Marginson, 2016). Globally, gross tertiary enrolment ratios have risen dramatically, from approximately 19 percent in 1990 to over 40 percent by 2020, with considerable variation across income groups and regions (UNESCO, 2021)<sup>3</sup>. This expansion has been driven by a confluence of factors including demographic growth, rising aspirations, state policy incentives, and the perceived economic returns to tertiary credentials.

Scholars have examined massification through multiple lenses. Sociologists of education have interrogated the extent to which expanded access translates into genuine democratisation

1 Education at a Glance 2023: OECD Indicators. OECD Publishing, Paris. 2023. <https://doi.org/10.1787/e13bef63-en>

2 Global education monitoring report 2021/2: Non-state actors in education. UNESCO. URL: <https://www.unesco.org/gem-report/en/2021> (date of access: 20.02.2026).

3 Global education monitoring report 2021/2: Non-state actors in education. UNESCO. URL: <https://www.unesco.org/gem-report/en/2021> (date of access: 20.02.2026).

of opportunity or merely reproduces existing inequalities in more complex forms (Lucas, 2001). The concept of Effectively Maintained Inequality (EMI), advanced by Lucas (2001), posits that as quantitative access becomes more widespread, qualitative differentiation – in terms of institutional prestige, field of study, and programme type – increasingly stratifies educational outcomes along socioeconomic lines.

A substantial body of research has examined the structural, cultural, and financial barriers that mediate access to higher education. Financial barriers have received particular attention in the context of shifting funding models. The introduction and progressive expansion of student tuition fees in contexts such as the United Kingdom, Australia, and the United States has generated extensive debate regarding the deterrent effects of debt on participation among lower-income groups (Callender & Jackson, 2005; Dearden et al., 2014). Whilst the empirical evidence on the direct enrolment effects of fee increases is mixed, research consistently demonstrates that loan aversion is disproportionately concentrated among students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and minority ethnic communities.

Cultural and informational barriers have also been extensively theorised. Research has demonstrated that familiarity with higher education norms, expectations, and application processes – often transmitted intergenerationally – confers significant advantages on students from educated family backgrounds. First-generation students, by contrast, frequently experience what Yosso (2005) terms a deficit in dominant cultural capital, though Yosso argues persuasively for recognising the distinct community cultural wealth such students bring to university.

Research on equity in higher education has expanded considerably to encompass intersectional dimensions of disadvantage, including gender, ethnicity, disability, and geographic location. With respect to gender, a widely documented reversal of the historical male advantage in enrolment has occurred across most OECD countries, with women now constituting the majority of undergraduate students in many national systems (OECD, 2023)<sup>1</sup>. However, significant gender stratification persists at the postgraduate level and in particular fields, notably science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), and in senior academic and leadership roles.

Ethnic and racial inequalities in higher education participation and attainment

have been extensively documented in Anglo-American contexts. Research has consistently identified awarding gaps between majority and minority student groups, disparities that persist even after controlling for prior attainment and socioeconomic background. The mechanisms underlying these gaps remain contested, with explanations ranging from curriculum content and assessment design to interpersonal discrimination and the psychological effects of stereotype threat.

The concept of quality in higher education is notoriously contested. Scholars have identified multiple conceptualisations – quality as exceptional, as perfection, as fitness for purpose, as value for money, and as transformative – each carrying distinct implications for policy and practice. Subsequent scholarship has largely endorsed the view that quality is an essentially contested concept whose meaning is shaped by the perspectives and interests of different stakeholder groups, including students, employers, academics, institutional managers, and governments.

The dominance of fitness-for-purpose and value-for-money conceptualisations in contemporary policy discourse reflects the broader shift towards neoliberal governance frameworks in higher education (Ball, 2003). Critics have argued that the reduction of quality to measurable outputs and economic returns marginalises important dimensions of educational value – critical thinking, civic engagement, personal development – that resist quantification (Nussbaum, 2010; Williams, 2016).

The institutionalisation of quality assurance (QA) in higher education accelerated significantly from the 1990s onwards, driven by the expansion of national QA agencies, the Bologna Process in Europe, and analogous reform agendas in other regions (Westerheijden et al., 2007; Stensaker and Harvey, 2011). The European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ESG), first adopted in 2005 and revised in 2015, have provided a widely referenced normative framework for QA across the European Higher Education Area, emphasising institutional self-evaluation, external review, and the central role of students as partners in quality processes (ENQA, 2015)<sup>2</sup>.

Research on the effects of formal QA processes has yielded nuanced findings. Whilst external review and accreditation can stimulate

1 Education at a Glance 2023: OECD Indicators. OECD Publishing, Paris. 2023. <https://doi.org/10.1787/e13bef63-en>

2 Standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG). EURASHE. ENQA (2015). URL: [https://www.enqa.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/ESG\\_2015.pdf](https://www.enqa.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/ESG_2015.pdf) (date of access: 20.02.2026).

productive institutional reflection and improvement (Stensaker and Harvey, 2011), critics have documented a range of dysfunctional consequences, including the bureaucratisation of academic work, the gaming of performance indicators, and the displacement of intrinsic professional motivations by compliance-oriented behaviours.

The proliferation of global university rankings, led by the Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU), the Times Higher Education World University Rankings, and the QS World University Rankings, has introduced a powerful – and widely critiqued – mechanism of international comparison and reputational stratification. Rankings have been shown to influence institutional strategy, government policy, student choice, and academic labour markets (Hazelkorn, 2011). However, scholars have extensively documented their methodological limitations, including the over-weighting of research output relative to teaching quality, the privileging of English-language publication, and the self-reinforcing nature of reputational surveys.

**Governance and Funding of Higher Education.** The governance of higher education institutions has been substantially reshaped since the 1980s by the principles of New Public Management (NPM), which introduced market mechanisms, performance management, and managerial authority into sectors previously characterised by collegial self-governance. The resulting managerial university (Trow, 1994) has attracted critical scrutiny from scholars concerned about the erosion of academic autonomy, the subordination of scholarly values to institutional branding imperatives, and the intensification of academic labour under audit regimes.

Governance research has also engaged extensively with the concept of institutional autonomy and its relationship to both academic quality and state accountability. Evidence suggests that greater institutional autonomy – particularly in staffing and budget allocation – is positively associated with research output, though the causal mechanisms remain debated.

Higher education funding represents one of the most contested policy domains within the field. The relative merits of public grant funding, tuition fees, research commercialisation, and philanthropy as revenue sources have been extensively analysed in comparative perspective. The concept of cost-sharing – the shifting of a portion of higher education costs from the state to students and families – has been

theorised by Johnstone (2004) as a near-universal policy trend, driven by fiscal constraints and the argument that private beneficiaries of higher education should contribute to its costs.

The financial sustainability of higher education institutions has emerged as a critical concern, particularly in the context of demographic change, competitive internationalisation, and the capital-intensive demands of digital infrastructure. Dougherty and Natow (2015) examine performance-based funding systems adopted in numerous US states, finding limited evidence of their effectiveness in improving graduation rates or degree quality, whilst documenting unintended consequences including mission drift and the exclusion of at-risk student populations.

### Internationalisation and Globalisation of Higher Education

Internationalisation has become one of the defining features of contemporary higher education, encompassing international student mobility, transnational education provision, curriculum internationalisation, cross-border research collaboration, and institutional partnerships (Teichler, 2017). The conceptual distinction between internationalisation ‘at home’ – embedding international and intercultural dimensions within domestic curricula and campus environments – and internationalisation ‘abroad’ – involving physical mobility – has gained traction as a more inclusive framework that extends benefits beyond mobile students.

The drivers of internationalisation are multiple and variously weighted across national and institutional contexts. Economic rationales – including revenue generation from international student fees and the cultivation of globally competitive graduates – have become increasingly dominant in institutional strategy documents, though cultural and academic rationales retain normative salience (Teichler, 2017). The geopolitical dimensions of internationalisation have attracted growing scholarly attention, with researchers examining how patterns of student and scholar mobility reflect and reproduce global power asymmetries (Altbach & de Wit, 2021).

### Student Mobility and Its Effects

International student mobility has grown substantially, with UNESCO (2021)<sup>1</sup> reporting

1 Global education monitoring report 2021/2: Non-state actors in education. UNESCO. URL: <https://www.unesco.org/gem-report/en/2021> (date of access: 20.02.2026).

approximately 6.4 million internationally mobile students globally in 2019. Research on the academic and non-academic outcomes of student mobility has generally found positive effects on intercultural competence, language proficiency, and graduate employability, though the magnitude of these effects varies with the duration, destination, and institutional support structures of mobility experiences (Teichler, 2004). Importantly, participation in formal mobility programmes – particularly the Erasmus programme in Europe – remains strongly stratified by socioeconomic background, gender, and field of study, raising equity concerns that have informed policy reforms (European Commission, 2020)<sup>1</sup>.

### Digitalisation and Pedagogical Innovation

The integration of digital technologies into higher education has generated an extensive and rapidly evolving body of literature. Early enthusiasm for e-learning and virtual learning environments gave way to more critical and contextualised assessments as researchers examined the conditions under which technology-enhanced learning (TEL) produces meaningful improvements in student outcomes (Selwyn, 2024). The evidence base broadly suggests that technology is most effective when integrated within pedagogically coherent frameworks that prioritise active learning, formative feedback, and collaborative knowledge construction, rather than as a mechanism for content delivery alone.

The emergence of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) from approximately 2012 onwards prompted wide-ranging debate about the potential disruption of traditional higher education models. Initial claims regarding the democratising potential of MOOCs – enabling free, open access to high-quality instruction for learners globally – were subsequently tempered by empirical evidence demonstrating low completion rates, the concentration of participation among already-educated populations, and the persistence of digital access inequalities (Selwyn, 2024; Reich & Ruipérez-Valiente, 2019).

### The COVID-19 Pandemic and Emergency Remote Teaching

The COVID-19 pandemic constituted an unprecedented natural experiment in large-

scale digital education, compelling virtually all higher education institutions to transition to emergency remote teaching (ERT) within weeks. Hodges et al. (2020) drew an important conceptual distinction between ERT – a crisis response characterised by improvisation and constraint – and intentionally designed online learning, cautioning against conflating the two in assessments of online education's efficacy. Subsequent research has documented significant variation in student experience and outcomes during the pandemic period, with students from disadvantaged backgrounds, those with caring responsibilities, and those without reliable digital access disproportionately affected (Aristovnik et al., 2020; Crawford et al., 2020).

The post-pandemic literature has engaged with questions of what the 'new normal' of higher education might entail, with hybrid and blended learning models attracting particular attention as potentially combining the flexibility of online provision with the social and pedagogical benefits of face-to-face interaction (Bozkurt and Sharma, 2020). Scholars have cautioned, however, that the institutionalisation of hybrid models risks exacerbating existing inequalities if digital infrastructure and faculty development support are not equitably distributed.

### Graduate Outcomes and the Higher Education-Labour Market Nexus

The economic returns to higher education have been extensively examined using both aggregate and individual-level data. The private rate of return – the income premium accruing to degree holders relative to non-graduates, net of costs – remains positive across most national contexts, though it varies substantially by field of study, institution type, gender, and socioeconomic background (Psacharopoulos and Patrinos, 2018; Walker and Zhu, 2011). Social rates of return, which account for the costs borne by the public and the non-market externalities of higher education, are more difficult to estimate and the subject of ongoing methodological debate.

The concept of graduate over-education or qualification mismatch has attracted growing scholarly attention as credential inflation and the rapid expansion of graduate supply have outpaced the growth of graduate-level employment in many economies (McGuinness et al., 2018). Research suggests that over-education is associated with lower job satisfaction, reduced productivity, and wage penalties, and that its incidence is

<sup>1</sup> Erasmus+ programme annual report 2019. Publications Office of the European Union. European Commission (2020). URL: <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/resources-and-tools/statistics-and-factsheets> (date of access: 20.02.2026).

unevenly distributed across gender, ethnicity, and field of study – dimensions that intersect with broader equity concerns.

Graduate employability has emerged as a central preoccupation of higher education policy and institutional strategy, driven by government demands for accountability and student expectations of labour market returns on their educational investment. Yorke's (2004) influential definition frames employability as a set of achievements – skills, understandings, and personal attributes – that enhance graduates' likelihood of securing meaningful employment and performing effectively throughout their careers. Critically, scholars emphasise that employability is not reducible to employment outcomes, as the latter are shaped by structural labour market conditions beyond institutional control.

Research has examined the role of higher education curricula, work-integrated learning, and co-curricular activities in developing graduate employability. The evidence broadly supports the value of work placements, internships, and other forms of experiential learning in enhancing graduate employment prospects, though access to such opportunities is itself inequitably distributed (Tomlinson, 2012). The 'soft skills' discourse – emphasising communication, teamwork, critical thinking, and adaptability – has permeated employer surveys and institutional curricula, though scholars have critiqued its conceptual vagueness and the extent to which higher education institutions can or should take primary responsibility for attributes shaped by broader socialisation processes.

The literature reviewed above reveals a higher education sector navigating a complex and sometimes contradictory set of demands: to expand access whilst maintaining quality; to demonstrate economic relevance whilst preserving academic autonomy; to embrace internationalisation whilst addressing local equity concerns; and to harness digital innovation whilst protecting the relational dimensions of learning and scholarship.

Several cross-cutting themes emerge from this synthesis. First, the pervasive influence of neoliberal policy frameworks has restructured institutional governance, funding, and the definition of quality in ways that have generated significant critical scholarly response. Second, inequality – in its multiple intersecting dimensions of socioeconomic background, gender, ethnicity, disability, and geographic location – remains a persistent and inadequately resolved challenge across all thematic domains reviewed. Third,

the accelerating pace of technological change, amplified by the COVID-19 pandemic, has raised fundamental questions about the purposes and modalities of higher education that existing theoretical frameworks are only beginning to address.

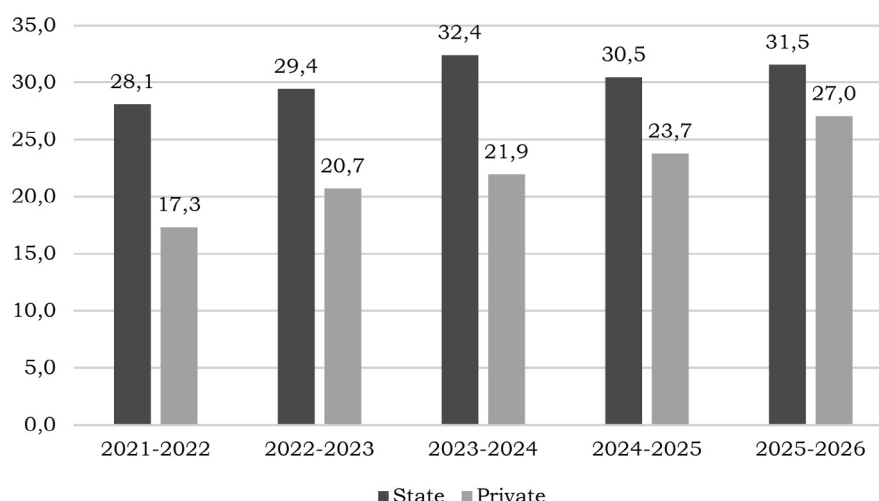
Several gaps in the existing literature warrant particular attention in future research. First, whilst much of the foundational scholarship has been generated in Anglo-American and Western European contexts, the comparative literature on higher education systems in the South Caucasus, Central Asia, and other post-Soviet regions – including Georgia – remains underdeveloped relative to the distinctiveness of these systems' historical trajectories and contemporary challenges. Second, longitudinal studies tracking the long-term outcomes of higher education participation – including civic engagement, health, and subjective wellbeing, beyond labour market indicators – are insufficiently represented in the evidence base. Third, the intersection of internationalisation with domestic equity agendas demands more integrated analytical frameworks than have typically been applied.

#### Indicators of Education Statistics of Georgia

As of the commencement of the 2025/2026 academic year, Georgia's higher education sector comprised 64 accredited institutions, consisting of 19 public universities and 45 private institutions. A notable concentration of higher education infrastructure is observed in the capital: 64.1 percent of all higher education institutions are situated in Tbilisi, underscoring the city's continued dominance as the primary locus of tertiary educational activity within the country.

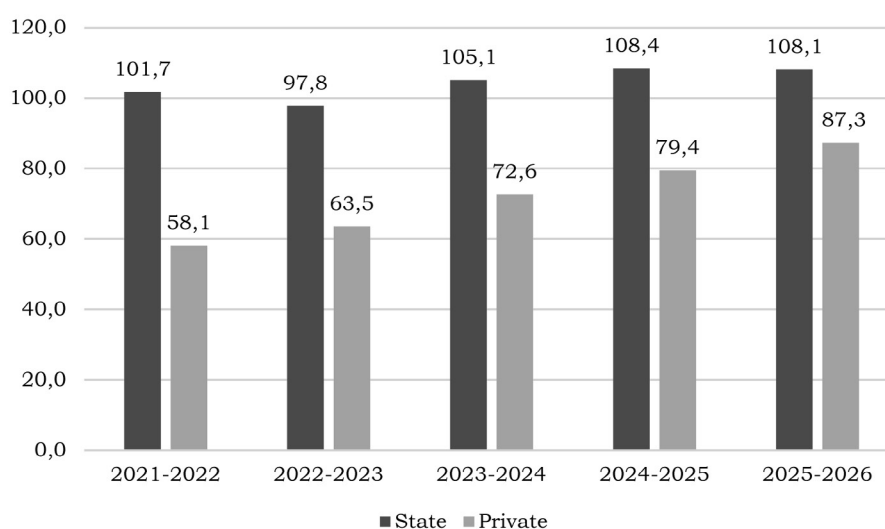
A total of 58,500 students were admitted in Georgian higher education institutions at the outset of the 2025/2026 academic year. Of this cohort, 31,500 students were admitted to state universities, while 27,000 were registered at private institutions. New student admissions recorded a year-on-year increase of 8.0 percent relative to the corresponding period of the preceding academic year, reflecting continued growth in demand for higher education.

The aggregate student population across Georgian higher education institutions reached 195,400, representing a 4.1 percent increase compared to the previous academic year. State higher education institutions accommodated the majority of students, accounting for 55.3 percent of the total, while private institutions enrolled the remaining 44.7 percent. With respect to gender



**Fig. 1. Number of students admitted to higher education institutions (thousands)**

Source: National Statistics Office of Georgia (Geostat)<sup>1</sup>



**Fig. 2. Number of students in higher education institutions (thousands)**

Source: National Statistics Office of Georgia (Geostat)<sup>1</sup>

distribution, female students constituted 52.1 percent of the total student body, and male students accounted for 47.9 percent.

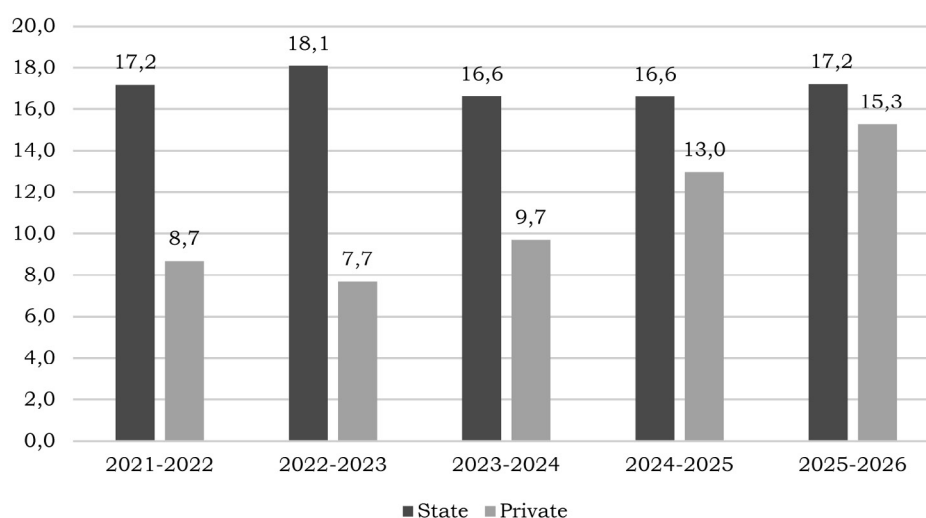
The number of foreign students enrolled in Georgian higher education institutions reached 44,400, marking a substantial increase of 19.7 percent compared to the preceding academic year. This growth reflects the rising international attractiveness of Georgian higher education and the expanding inbound student mobility into the country.

In 2025, a total of 32,500 students successfully completed their degree programmes and graduated from higher education institutions, representing a year-on-year increase of 9.9 percent. Among

graduates, women constituted the majority at 58.8 percent, while men accounted for 41.2 percent. The number of graduates from state higher education institutions exceeded that of private universities by 12.7 percent, indicating a comparatively higher throughput rate within the public sector.

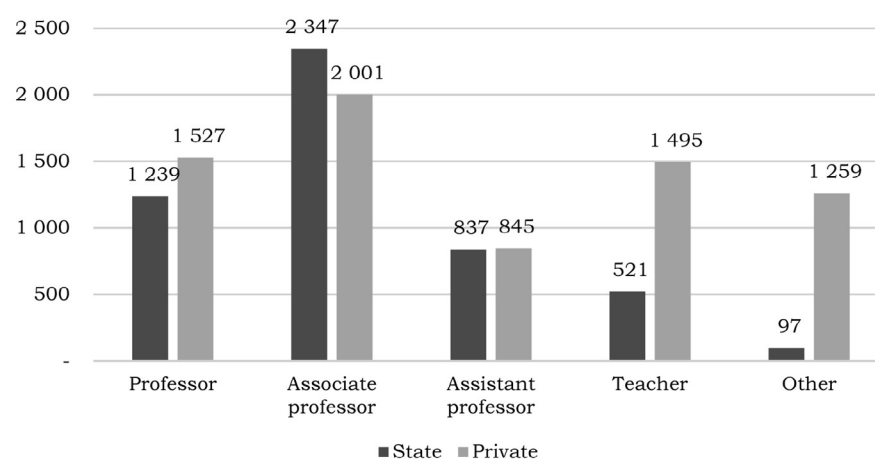
The total number of professors and academic staff employed across Georgian higher education institutions stood at 12,200, an increase of 6.2 percent relative to the corresponding indicator for the previous academic year. This growth in academic personnel is broadly consistent with the observed expansion in student enrolment and institutional capacity.

<sup>1</sup> National Statistics Office of Georgia (Geostat). URL: <https://www.geostat.ge/en> (date of access: 20.02.2026).



**Fig. 3. Number of graduates from higher education institutions (thousands)**

Source: National Statistics Office of Georgia (Geostat)<sup>1</sup>



**Fig. 4. Number of professors in higher education institutions (2025/2026 academic year, persons)**

Source: National Statistics Office of Georgia (Geostat)<sup>1</sup>

In 2025, 720 candidates were admitted to doctoral programmes at Georgian universities, representing a 2.9 percent increase over the previous year. The total number of active doctoral students registered

a marginal increase of 0.1 percent, reaching 3,025 persons.

Table 1 presents the distribution of doctoral students by field of science for the reference year 2025. The largest concentration

**Table 1. Number of Persons Enrolled in Doctoral Programmes by Field of Science, 2025**

| Field of Science                            | Number (Persons) | Share (%) |
|---------------------------------------------|------------------|-----------|
| Total                                       | 3,025            | 100.0     |
| Education                                   | 70               | 2.3       |
| Humanities and Arts                         | 430              | 14.2      |
| Social Sciences, Business and Law           | 1,356            | 44.8      |
| Natural Sciences                            | 384              | 12.7      |
| Engineering, Manufacturing and Construction | 205              | 6.8       |
| Agriculture                                 | 53               | 1.8       |
| Health and Welfare                          | 480              | 15.9      |
| Services                                    | 47               | 1.6       |

Source: National Statistics Office of Georgia (Geostat)<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> National Statistics Office of Georgia (Geostat). URL: <https://www.geostat.ge/en> (date of access: 20.02.2026).

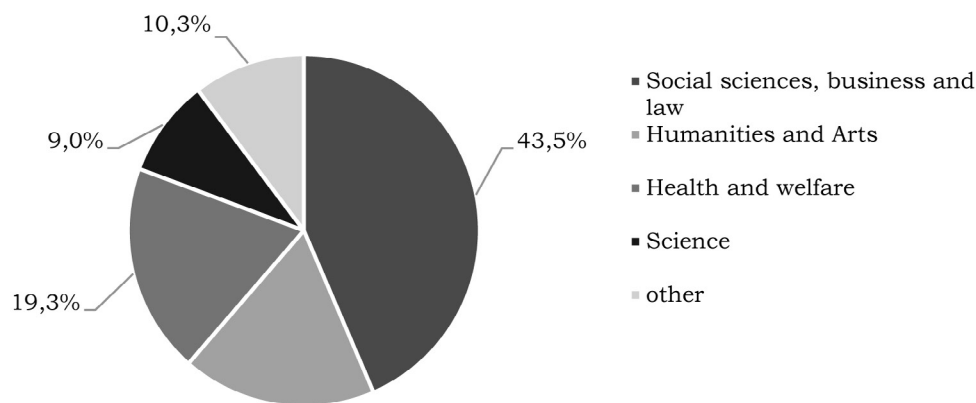


Fig. 5. Distribution of persons who completed their work for doctoral degrees in 2025 (%)

Source: National Statistics Office of Georgia (Geostat)<sup>1</sup>

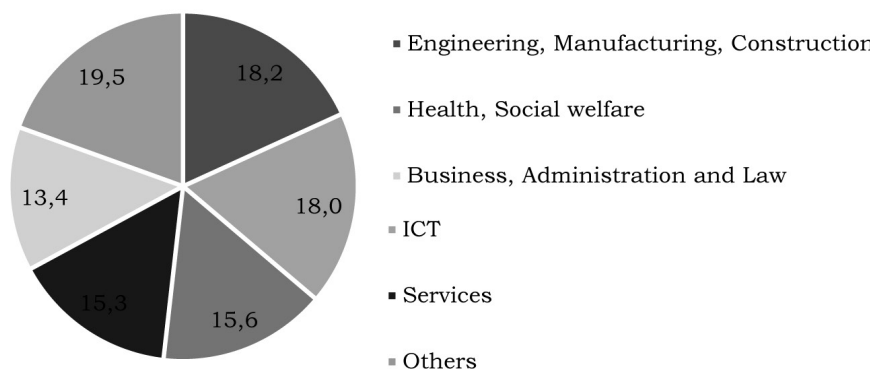


Fig. 6. Distribution of admitted students by programs, 2025 (%)

Source: National Statistics Office of Georgia (Geostat)<sup>1</sup>

is observed in the field of Social Sciences, Business and Law, which accounted for 44.8 percent of all doctoral students, followed by Health and Welfare (15.9 percent) and Humanities and Arts (14.2 percent).

The number of persons who successfully completed their doctoral work in 2025 amounted to 368, representing a decline of 16.0 percent relative to the previous year. This reduction may warrant further investigation in the context of evolving doctoral programme structures and completion timelines.

#### Vocational Education and Training (VET) Sectors

In the reference year 2025, a total of 191 vocational education institutions were operational in Georgia and conducted student admissions. Of these, 140 institutions were publicly administered and 51 were privately managed, reflecting a predominantly public institutional structure within the VET sector.

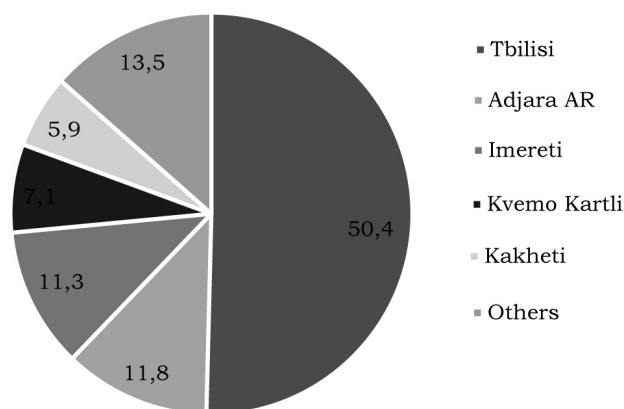
In 2025, 19,700 students were admitted to vocational education programs across Georgia. Female students constituted the majority of new admissions at 53.7%, while male students accounted for 46.3%.

Compared to the preceding reference year, total student admissions increased by 15.3%, indicating rapid, accelerating demand for vocational pathways.

Analysis of admissions data by administrative region reveals a pronounced geographic concentration. The city of Tbilisi recorded the highest share of admitted students, accounting for 40.1% of the national total, followed by the Autonomous Republic of Adjara (19.3%), Imereti (11.5%), Kvemo Kartli (10.0%), Samegrelo–Zemo Svaneti (7.4%), and Kakheti (4.1%). The remaining regions collectively accounted for the balance of admissions.

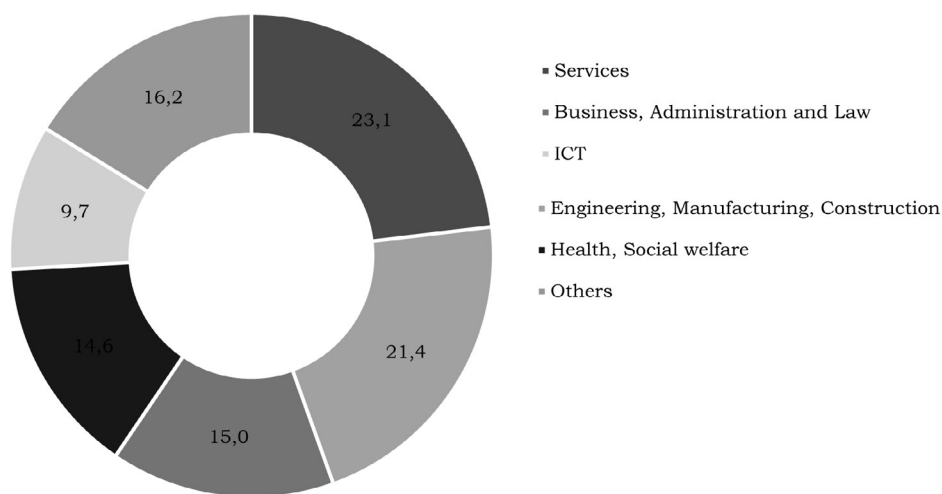
In 2025, a total of 238 students with special educational needs (SEN) were admitted to vocational education institutions. Within this cohort, male students represented the majority at 64.3%, while female students accounted for 35.7%. From a regional perspective, Tbilisi maintained the leading position, accounting for 50.4% of total SEN admissions nationwide, underscoring the concentration of inclusive provision in the capital.

<sup>1</sup> National Statistics Office of Georgia (Geostat). URL: <https://www.geostat.ge/en> (date of access: 20.02.2026).



**Fig. 7. Distribution of admitted students with special educational needs by regions, 2025 (%)**

Source: National Statistics Office of Georgia (Geostat)<sup>1</sup>



**Fig. 8. Distribution of graduates by programs, 2025 (%)**

Source: National Statistics Office of Georgia (Geostat)<sup>1</sup>

The total number of graduates from vocational education institutions in 2025 amounted to 10,500. With respect to gender distribution, male graduates constituted a slight majority at 52.9%, while female graduates accounted for 47.1%. An analysis of graduate output by program field reveals that the Services sector produced the largest proportion of graduates (23.1%), followed by Engineering, Manufacturing and Construction (21.4%), and Business, Administration and Law (15.0%). These three fields collectively accounted for approximately 59.5% of all VET graduates in the reference year.

**Results and Discussion.** Georgia's higher education sector demonstrates robust quantitative growth, with new admissions increasing by 8.0% and total enrollment reaching 195,400. The feminization of enrollment (52.1% female) aligns with broader OECD structural trends (OECD, 2023). The most economically striking finding is the 19.7%

growth in international student enrollment to 44,400. International students now account for 22.7% of the total student body, indicating that higher education is operating as a lucrative export service sector for the Georgian economy, injecting external capital into the local service and housing markets.

However, serious structural imbalances persist. At the doctoral level, admissions increased marginally, but completions declined sharply by 16.0% to 368. This decline points to financial inefficiencies, an absence of sustainable stipends, and potential attrition risks that threaten national research and development (R&D) capacities. Furthermore, the massive concentration of 44.8% of doctoral students in Social Sciences, Business, and Law, contrasted with thin numbers in Engineering and Applied Sciences, points to a clear structural misalignment with national economic priorities, which require STEM-driven innovation.

<sup>1</sup> National Statistics Office of Georgia (Geostat). URL: <https://www.geostat.ge/en> (date of access: 20.02.2026).

**Table 2. Summary of Key Education Indicators, Georgia, 2025/2026**

| Indicator                           | Value          | YoY Change |
|-------------------------------------|----------------|------------|
| HE institutions (public / private)  | 64 (19 / 45)   | —          |
| New HE admissions                   | 58,500         | +8.0%      |
| Total HE student population         | 195,400        | +4.1%      |
| International students              | 44,400         | +19.7%     |
| HE graduates                        | 32,500         | +9.9%      |
| Academic staff                      | 12,200         | +6.2%      |
| Doctoral students                   | 3,025          | +0.1%      |
| Doctoral completions                | 368            | -16.0%     |
| VET institutions (public / private) | 191 (140 / 51) | —          |
| New VET admissions                  | 19,700         | +15.3%     |
| VET graduates                       | 10,500         | —          |

Source: National Statistics Office of Georgia (Geostat)<sup>1</sup>

The VET sector's 15.3% growth in new admissions—nearly double the growth rate of higher education—signals a meaningful structural rebalancing of post-secondary demand. It indicates that vocational tracks are gaining economic legitimacy as direct routes to productive employment.

Nevertheless, geographic inequalities remain problematic. Tbilisi claims 40.1% of general VET admissions and 50.4% of all special educational needs (SEN) admissions, indicating that peripheral regions suffer from under-investment and inadequate inclusive infrastructure. This urban-centric concentration restricts balanced regional human capital accumulation.

**Conclusion.** This article has presented a theoretically grounded and empirically anchored socio-economic analysis of Georgia's higher education and VET sectors for the 2025/2026 academic year. The findings illustrate a national system experiencing rapid, profit-generating quantitative expansion, alongside notable structural and geographic tensions.

The international scholarly literature emphasizes that modern tertiary systems must continuously balance institutional expansion with equity, financial sustainability, and market relevance. In Georgia, the 19.7% expansion of international student enrollment establishes the university sector as a powerful economic contributor. However, the system's reliance on the capital city creates regional human capital flight, deepening economic disparities between Tbilisi and rural districts.

Furthermore, the 16.0% drop in doctoral completions represents a major

institutional failure that requires urgent policy intervention. If university systems fail to graduate doctoral researchers, they cannot replenish their own academic labor force or sustain public R&D contributions to the economy. The concentration of doctoral work in oversaturated fields like business and social sciences further limits the development of technical innovation.

Several policy and funding implications emerge from this study:

**1. Doctoral Funding Reforms:** Public grant frameworks must be redesigned to offer competitive stipends and targeted financial aid for STEM doctoral candidates, reducing attrition caused by financial strain.

**2. Regional Resource Allocation:** State funding should incentivize the expansion of VET and higher education infrastructure in underserved administrative regions, utilizing hybrid and digital learning frameworks to lower the socio-economic costs of geographic mobility for rural students.

**3. Export Sustainability:** The surge in international student numbers requires a robust regulatory framework to maintain pedagogical quality and diversify source countries, ensuring the long-term sustainability of this educational export market.

Ultimately, Georgia's higher education system stands at a critical juncture. To transition from simple quantitative expansion to long-term economic efficiency, public policy must focus on correcting structural mismatches, ensuring regional equity, and protecting research capacity.

<sup>1</sup> National Statistics Office of Georgia (Geostat). URL: <https://www.geostat.ge/en> (date of access: 20.02.2026).

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**СОЦІАЛЬНО-ЕКОНОМІЧНІ АСПЕКТИ ВИЩОЇ ОСВІТИ: ТЕНДЕНЦІЇ, ВИКЛИКИ ТА ПЕРЕТВОРЕННЯ У ГРУЗІЇ**

Системи вищої освіти у світі переживають глибоку та прискорену структурну трансформацію, зумовлену одночасним впливом макроекономічних чинників масифікації, технологічних зрушень, змін у вимогах ринку праці та еволюцією моделей державного і приватного фінансування. У статті представлено комплексний огляд літератури та емпіричний аналіз тенденцій у сфері третинної освіти, що охоплює їх соціально-економічні виклики, структурні зміни та системні трансформації. Дослідження поєднує систематичне опрацювання міжнародної наукової та економічної політичної літератури з оригінальними статистичними даними, отриманими з національного сектору вищої та професійно-технічної освіти (VET) Грузії за академічний рік 2025/2026.

Такий подвійний фокус забезпечує ґрунтовний діалог між глобально теоретизованою динамікою людського капіталу та контекстуально специфічними емпіричними реаліями, роблячи внесок у порівняльну літературу, де пострадянські та південно-кавказькі освітні економіки залишаються суттєво недопредставленими. Огляд літератури критично аналізує шість тематичних доменів: доступ і рівність; інституційне забезпечення якості та ринкова підзвітність; моделі управління та розподілу витрат; інтернаціоналізація та глобальні мережі мобільності студентів; цифрова педагогічна інфраструктура; результати випускників у контексті взаємозв'язку між вищою освітою та ринком праці.

Емпіричні результати, отримані з офіційних статистичних даних, демонструють стійке інституційне зростання поряд із збереженням структурних диспропорцій. Основні тенденції включають 8,0% річне зростання кількості нових вступників, 19,7% збільшення кількості іноземних студентів — що приносить значні доходи та позиціонує Грузію як регіонального експортера освітніх послуг — та динамічне 15,3% зростання у сфері професійно-технічної освіти. Водночас 16,0% скорочення кількості захистів докторських дисертацій та різка географічна концентрація освітньої інфраструктури у столиці Тбілісі створюють серйозні системні ризики для розвитку регіонального людського капіталу та довгострокової економічної стійкості.

У висновках статті запропоновано рекомендації політики, спрямовані на оптимізацію розподілу фінансових ресурсів, пом'якшення регіональних економічних дисбалансів та підвищення ефективності державних інвестицій у сферу третинної освіти.

**Ключові слова:** вища освіта, професійна освіта та навчання, Грузія, рівність, цифровізація, результати випускників, економіка вищої освіти.

**JEL Classification:** I21; I22; I23; J24.

Конфлікт інтересів: автори повідомляють про відсутність конфлікту інтересів.

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