

Development and Engagement Platform

**Barriers to the access to higher and vocational education for the youth
from non-dominant ethnic groups in Georgia**

Research Report



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Foreword

The research assessing the barriers to the access to higher and vocational education for the youth from non-dominant ethnic groups was carried out as part of the EU Eastern Partnership Civil Society Facility program. The research project aims at determining the role and importance of education for ethnic Armenian and Azerbaijani youth residing in Georgia, by identifying and evaluating the challenges and barriers due to which representatives of non-dominant ethnic groups in Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli regions drop out of/do not finish school, and which prevents them from receiving higher and vocational education.

The document represents a report on the complex research, carried out on the above-mentioned issue, offering the analysis of the student and pupils' experience, their vision of the process of overcoming challenges and difficulties, on the one hand, and the opinions and assessments of experts employed in the institutions in charge of the non-dominant ethnic group education quality, on the other hand.

The research project was carried out during eight months, involving many people from different fields contributing to it alongside the author. The research author would like to express gratitude to each and every expert participating in the in-depth interviews, to all young people involved in the focus groups and the quantitative research components for being sincere and for openly sharing their experience, as well as to the research experts, data analysts and interviewers for the job they did.

Introduction

Modern-day Georgia is a multi-ethnic country. According to the 2014 General Population Census data, ethnic Georgians make up about 87% of the country's population, while various ethnic groups: Azeri, Armenians, Russians, Ossetians, Yezidis, Greeks, Kists, Ukrainians, Abkhazians etc. make 13%. Armenian and Azerbaijani ethnic groups are the two largest ones among the groups of people of different origin residing in Georgia. Samtskhe-Javakheti region is for the most part densely populated by representatives of the Armenian ethnic group, while the representatives of the Azerbaijani ethnic group are settled in the towns and villages of Kvemo Kartli region.

Since ethnically non-Georgian population is mostly densely settled in a community comprising their own national group, they rarely interact with Georgians or representatives of other ethnic groups in their daily life. However, even in case of territorial cohabitation (for example, Georgians and Armenians in Akhaltsikhe, Georgians, Azerbaijanis and Armenians in Marneuli, etc.), non-dominant groups are so to say separated from the majority in terms of attitudes and lifestyle.

Language barrier is the main challenge facing ethnically non-Georgian population, preventing them from having access to the healthcare and social services, obtaining information and being actively involved in the country's social, political or cultural life.

Those students, who live in non-Georgian speaking towns and villages mostly populated by representatives of their own ethnic group, have little opportunity to communicate with Georgians and, consequently, their native language is the main language of communication for them. General education institutions are of particular importance in terms of teaching the official language.

According to the Law of Georgia on General Education, those citizens for whom Georgian is not a native language are entitled to receive general education in their native language, while the official language in non-Georgian-speaking schools¹ and the social sciences shall be mandatorily taught in Georgian language. ² Out of 2,302 general educational institutions registered in Georgia, 10% are non-Georgian - Azerbaijani, Armenian or Russian. With few exceptions, the school-age youth from the Armenian and Azerbaijani communities receive general education in their native language. Since Georgian is the language of instruction at the higher education level and the official language competency is relatively low, the youth from different ethnic groups are facing challenges in this regard.

The subject of interest of the below-given research was to study the barriers that ethnic Armenian and Azerbaijani youth encounter in the process of receiving general education in Georgia and the challenges they face in case they decide to pursue further studies.

¹ Paragraphs 3 and 4, Article 4, Law of Georgia on General Education. <https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/29248?publication=98>

² Paragraphs 2 and 3, Article 5, Law of Georgia on General Education. <https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/29248?publication=98>

Research Methods

The research into the barriers to higher and vocational education for the youth from non-dominant ethnic groups started in Georgia in March 2023 and the field works were conducted in the period between April-September.

Given the specificity of the issue, it is a complex research comprising several components:

- ✓ desk research component (March – September 2023);
- ✓ qualitative research component, which, in turn, includes two parts – focus group sessions and expert interviews (April-September 2023);
- ✓ quantitative research component (August-September 2023);

Purpose of Research

The purpose of the research was to study the challenges and barriers, due to which ethnic Armenian and Azerbaijani youth cannot and/or do not continue their studies in vocational and higher education institutions.

For the purpose of the research, the individuals directly participating and involved in the non-dominant ethnic group educational process were selected as the respondents.

Research Objectives

The following objectives have been set, allowing to study the barriers facing ethnic minorities in terms of access to vocational and higher education, as well as to discuss and analyze the issue from different perspectives:

- determining the importance and relevance of education at the individual, family and society level;
- general education process and the youth school experience, realizing the existing challenges as seen by the youth;
- identifying the challenges in terms of the interest in and need for vocational education;
- evaluating the effectiveness and limitations of the official language learning programs in the period of transition from school to continuation of studies in a higher education institution;
- analyzing the specifics of acquiring higher education by ethnic minorities, their participation and engagement in the teaching and learning process in the higher education institution (HEI).

Research design

Given the specifics of the research, in order to achieve its purpose, a complex approach was applied.

Ethnic minority education-related laws, reforms, local and international research reports and recommendations, as well as annual reports of the governmental institutions in charge of this issue, were studied by the research team at the first stage as part of the desk research.

The second stage implied the qualitative component. As part of this component, the research team applied a combination of the focus group and expert interview methods. Eight focus group discussions, including four sessions with ethnic Armenian youth from Samtskhe-Javakheti region and four focus group sessions with ethnic Azerbaijani youth, were held. A total of 58 respondents participated in this research component. Eight field experts, including representatives of non-governmental organizations, local educational resource

centers, general and higher educational institutions, participating and involved in the ethnic minority education and/or research process, were interviewed through an in-depth interview technique.

A total of 200 pupils and students from seven municipalities of Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli region, were interviewed through the quantitative method at the third stage of the research.

Research Limitations

For the research purposes, the individuals who are/were directly involved in the education process have been selected as research participants. The primary interest of this research was to study their feedback, experience and vision regarding the existing challenges. Therefore, the data presented in the report reflect the respondents' personal and subjective experience.

Despite the research team's efforts, the officials from the Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia and the Office of the State Minister for Reconciliation and Civil Equality could not be interviewed as part of the qualitative component's expert interview.

The quantitative component has no claims for representativeness by regions, generalization of the research results by regions is not recommended.

Key Findings

The importance of family support in the continuing education process	<p>78% of respondents in Samtskhe-Javakheti and 75% in Kvemo Kartli note that family support is of crucial importance in their education process.</p> <p>Emotional component of the support helps the youth in setting their goals and creating motivation for future success</p> <p>Financial component of the support provides for them, so that they could receive education.</p>
Language barrier	<p>45% of respondents note that they are fully (19%) or partially (26%) able to listen, comprehend, speak and write in Georgian; 39% say, they have listening and comprehension skills, but they have problem speaking. 13% out of the remaining 17% of respondents can only comprehend certain words, 4% cannot listen, comprehend, speak or write in Georgian at all.</p> <p>For the non-dominant ethnic groups, the knowledge of official language:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. makes daily life easier;2. offers education opportunities;3. facilitates integration
Challenges of studying at the general education stage	<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ In the majority of non-Georgian schools, the official language is perceived to be taught as a foreign language by the teachers with poor Georgian language communication skills➤ As far as teaching Georgian language is concerned, there is a lack of a systemic approach. Educational institutions are totally dependent on teacher's good will➤ For many years, school textbooks were imported from Armenia and Azerbaijan, so they were not in line with the Georgian-language school standards. Starting from the year 2022, students up to class 10th have been studying by textbooks printed in Georgia, while students in their 10th class and above have been again provided textbooks by the Armenian and Azerbaijani governments➤ In the non-Georgian schools, especially in the rural areas, the school subjects are taught by specialists in other disciplines;➤ School principals often select teachers based on the subjective criteria and nepotism is frequently the case➤ As far as the school management and administration is concerned, teachers, parents and students' engagement is not ensured and the interests of all the parties concerned are not taken into account either;➤ School fails to offer students information on education opportunities;➤ Students are often deprived of a chance to engage in the informal educational activities at the school principal's sole discretion;

➤ General education cannot ensure student readiness for HEI entrance exams;

Official Language Programs

- 1+4 educational program is unstandardized and varies from university to university;
- Official language training program is a fee-based program, with a tuition fee equal to a one-year tuition fee for the bachelor's level program;
- Programs focusing on the integration component equally as on the language learning component are particularly effective;
- Official language programs with the youth of different ethnicity studying together prove to be effective;
- One-year official language training programs are usually less effective if the youth do not have a certain knowledge base from secondary education.

Challenges in the higher education process

- At the higher education level, the youth from non-dominant ethnic groups for the first time have the opportunity to learn the Georgian language, communicate with representatives of other ethnic groups, engage in informal educational and non-educational activities and socialize.
- Lecturers' professionalism is evaluated by the expertise in their discipline, while their harsh and inadequate attitude is oftentimes attributed to strictness;
- Individual lecturers, who are fair, conscientious and considerate, are rarely the case and could be recalled by the youth in detail;
- The cases of discrimination on ethnic grounds by both, students and lecturers, are frequently reported in higher education institutions. The content of the educational program oftentimes mismatches the studied subject and a student cannot fully acquire the knowledge and skills should be used during a professional activity.

Research outcome

Desk Research

A study into the barriers and challenges facing ethnic Armenian and Azerbaijani youth in Georgia in the vocational and higher education process started with a desk research. The purpose of the information provided in this sub-section is to review the circumstances and contexts within which Georgian citizens from non-dominant ethnic groups have an opportunity to get access to various levels of education.

Ethnic Armenian and ethnic Azerbaijani population is the largest one among non-dominant ethnic groups residing in Georgia. They make 11% of the country's population, including ethnic Armenians - 4.5% (168 102 people)³, and ethnic Azerbaijanis - 6.3% (233 024 people).

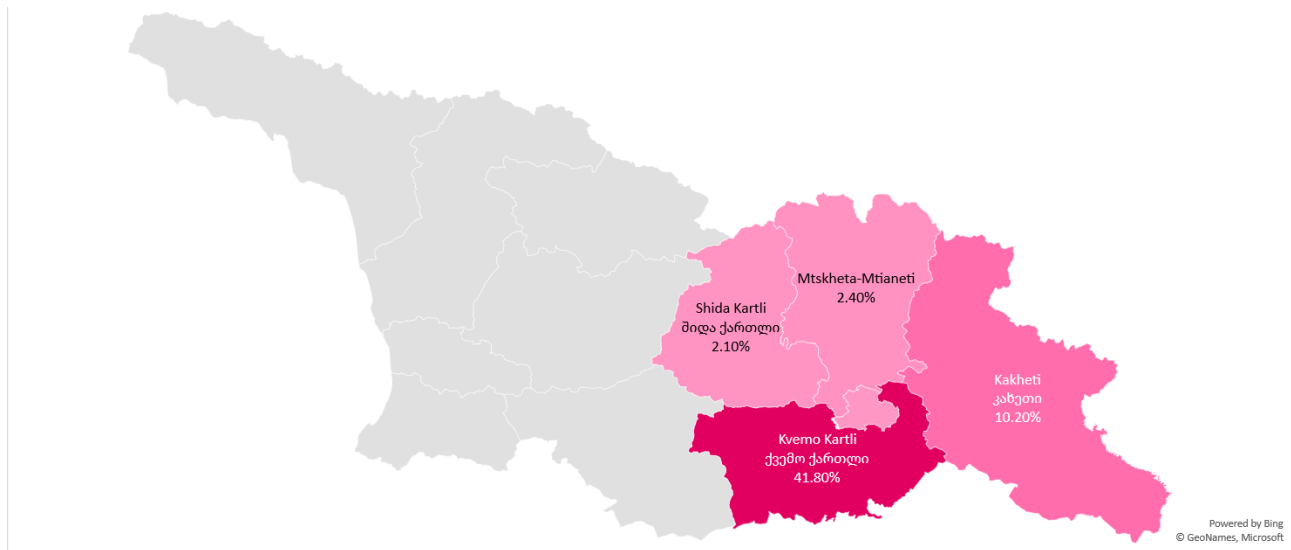
Ethnic Azerbaijani population is mostly concentrated in Tbilisi and four regions of Georgia: Kvemo Kartli, Kakheti, Shida Kartli and Mtskheta-Mtianeti⁴. (Tables 1.1 and 1.2).

Region	Number of ethnic Azerbaijani population in the region	Percentage of ethnic Azerbaijani population in the region
Tbilisi (capital)	15,187	1.4 %
Kvemo Kartli	177,032	41.8 %
• Marneuli	87,371	83.7 %
• Gardabani	35,642	43.5 %
• Bolnisi	33,964	63.4 %
• Dmanisi	12,530	65.5 %
• Rustavi	4,661	3.7 %
• Tetrtskaro	1,548	7.3 %
• Tsalka	1,316	7 %
Kakheti	32,354	10.2 %
• Sagarejo	17,164	33.2 %
• Lagodekhi	9,601	23 %
• Telavi	4,945	12.8 %
Shida Kartli	5,501	2.1 %
• Kaspi	3,846	8.8 %
• Kareli	1,124	2.7 %
Mtskheta-Mtianeti	2,316	2.4 %
• Mtskheta	2,301	4.8 %
Total in Georgia	233,024	6.3 %

³ A precise number of the Armenian population could not be determined, since part of them are residing in the occupied territory of Abkhazia.

⁴ Implies the regions with the Azerbaijani population exceeding 1000 people.

Table 1.2. Distribution of ethnic Azerbaijani population in Georgia



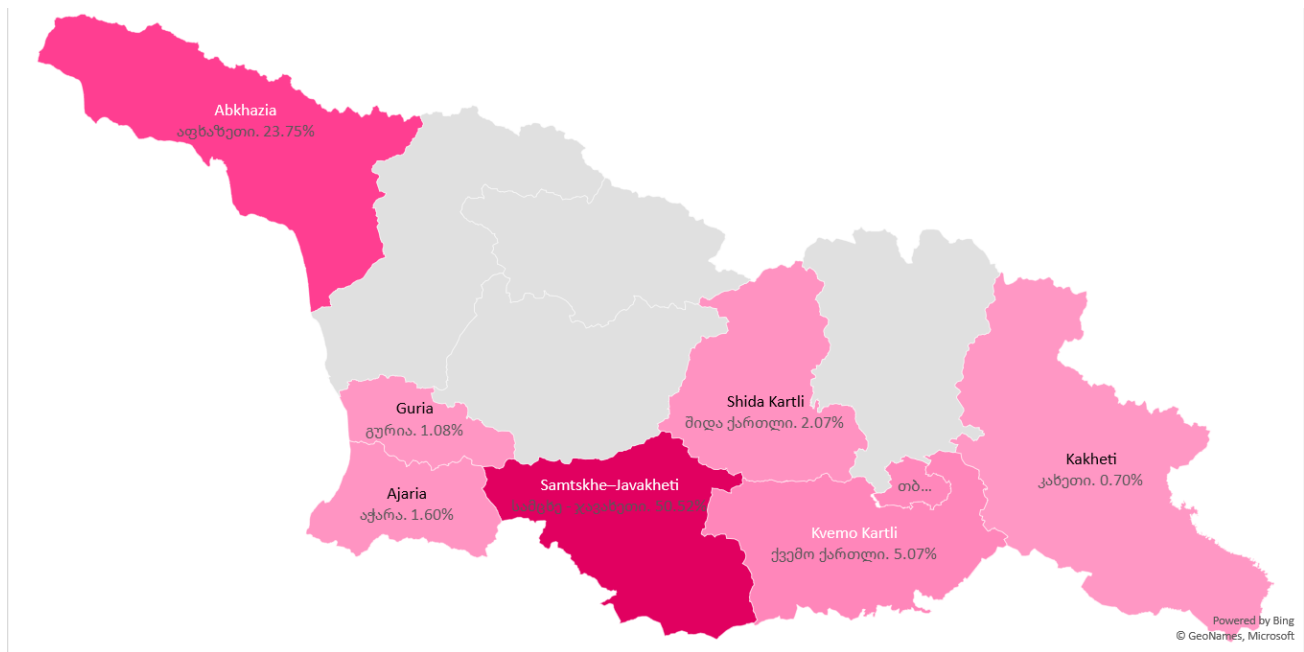
As for the ethnic Armenian population, apart from the capital, they are distributed across six regions of Georgia: Samtskhe-Javakheti, Kvemo and Shida Kartli, Kakheti, Adjara, Guria and the occupied territory of Abkhazia⁵. (Tables 2.1 and 2.2).

Table 2.1. Distribution of ethnic Armenian population in regions and municipalities		
Region	Number of ethnic Armenian population in the region	Percentage of ethnic Armenian population in the region
Tbilisi (capital)	53,409	4.80%
Samtskhe-Javakheti	81089	50.52%
• Akhalkalaki	41870	92.9 %
• Akhaltsikhe	12028	28.4 %
• Ninotsminda	23262	95 %
• Adigeni	372	2.3 %
• Borjomi	2176	8.6 %
• Aspindza	1381	13.3 %
Kvemo Kartli	21500	5.07%
Adjara	5461	1.60%
Kakheti	2191	0.70%
Shida Kartli	2072	2.07%
Guria	1228	1.08%
Abkhazia (2003)	44870	23.75%
•Gagra	16322	4680.00%
•Gulripshi (except for Kodori Gorge)	9375	4700.00%
•Sokhumi	7209	6140.00%

⁵ Distribution of ethnic Armenian population across Georgia's regions is based on the 2014 general population census. The exception is the occupied territory of Abkhazia, where the census data are dated back to the year 2003.

•Sokhumi city	5565	1270.00%
•Gudauta	4141	1270.00%
•Ochamchire	2177	880.00%
•Tkvarcheli	67	50.00%
•Gali	14	10.00%
Total in Georgia	168,191–220,000	4.50%

Table 2.2. Distribution of ethnic Armenian population in Georgia



According to the data of the 2014 general population census conducted by the National Statistics Office of Georgia, Kvemo Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti are the regions most densely populated by non-dominant ethnic groups. Ethnic Azerbaijani population accounts for 41.8% of the population of Kvemo Kartli region (Table 1.2), while ethnic Armenians constitute 50.8% of the population of Samtskhe-Javakheti region (Table 2.2).

For the purposes of this research, ethnic Armenian and Azerbaijani youth from those two regions were chosen as a target group.

Part of ethnic Georgians are rather skeptical about ethnic minorities densely populating particular regions and in some instances regard it as a potential threat⁶, since Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli are the border regions. On the other hand, compact settlement of non-dominant ethnic groups beside the representatives of their own culture and a lack of support on part of the majority contribute to isolation of ethnic Azerbaijani and Armenian population from the country's socio-political and cultural processes.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Georgia's development into a free and independent state proceeded in a rather chaotic manner. Socio-economic and political challenges further intensified the ethno-nationalist tendencies dating back to the Soviet period. Moreover, people of different ethnicity living in Georgia have

⁶ Rusudan Amirejibi, Kakha Gabunia, 2021, Georgia's Minorities: Breaking down barriers to integration.

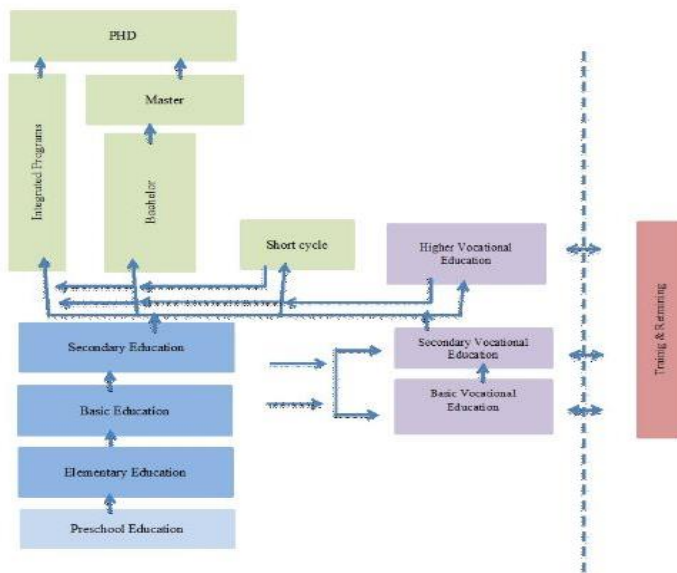
had a common language, which not only allowed them to communicate with each other, but also opened the way to education and career/professional development. Teaching Georgian language to non-dominant ethnic groups obviously was not a priority in Soviet Georgia and therefore it was not encouraged. After Russian lost the official language status in Georgia, it became obvious that knowledge of Georgian would be one of the prerequisites for success. This was quite a challenge for ethnic Azerbaijani and Armenian population, as they did not have a sufficient language proficiency level. It is the Soviet legacy that even today, after dozens of years, the knowledge of Georgian is one of the biggest and most important barriers for the population living not only in villages but also in cities inhabited by ethnic minorities. That’s exactly the Soviet legacy that even nowadays, after many decades, the knowledge of Georgian represents the greatest and most important barrier for ethnic minorities residing not only in the rural areas, but also in the urban areas.

The right of every citizen of Georgia to receive education is guaranteed under the Georgian Constitution, namely Article 27 that reads as follows: “Everyone shall have the right to receive education and the right to choose the form of education they receive”⁷. Equal educational opportunities for ethnic minority groups are provided for by the Law of Georgia on General Education.⁸

Georgia’s education system comprises the following stages (Table 3):

Pre-school, general, vocational and higher education.

Table 3. Education stages in Georgia



The given research allows to review the challenges that the non-dominant ethnic minority youth are facing at the general, vocational and higher education stages.

⁷ <https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/30346?publication=36>

⁸ <https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/29248?publication=98>

General education is accessible in the languages other than Georgian in the Armenian, Azerbaijani and Russian-language schools, as well as in different language sections of the Georgian-language schools.⁹

As of the beginning of the academic year 2023-2024, there are 2086 public schools in Georgia. According to the academic year 2021-2022 data, non-Georgian schools account for 10% of Georgia's public schools and their number makes 207,¹⁰ including 130 schools that offer education in Armenian or have Armenian-language sections¹¹, 82 Azerbaijani-language schools and 29 Georgian-Azerbaijani schools¹².

Under the Law of Georgia on General Education, teaching the official language in non-Georgian schools shall be mandatory. Teaching of social sciences in Georgian language is also regulated under this very law.¹³ Since 2003-2004, a number of reforms planned in terms of general education have naturally applied to non-Georgian language schools as well. The issue of teaching not only Georgian as the official language, but also Armenian and Azerbaijani as the native languages, has been a challenge up until now. The problem is multifaceted and includes such important aspects, as:

1. According to the Georgian Ombudsman's 2018 report, professional qualification of Georgian-language teachers represents a major challenge. Part of the official language teachers working in the non-Georgian language schools do not have command of Georgian language even for maintaining basic communication, while the number of teachers trained by the Professional Development Center is hardly enough to meet the needs of Georgian language teacher in non-Georgian-language schools.¹⁴
2. Starting from 2005, a new national curriculum implemented by the Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia didn't provide for teaching of native language and literature. Therefore, educational institutions have had to import native language and literature textbooks from the respective countries. The situation was particularly difficult in this regard in 2009, when neither Azerbaijan nor Armenia could provide textbooks for the 12th class students, as both countries offered an 11-year education system at that time. Although many years have passed since then and many changes have taken place throughout those years, ethnic Armenian and Azerbaijani school students could not be provided textbooks compiled and published in Georgia in the academic year 2022-23 either. Therefore, school textbooks were again imported from Armenia and Azerbaijan.¹⁵
3. The issue of teaching social sciences, which is supposed to be taught in Georgian language in non-Georgian language schools, is still problematic. Despite the fact that this change came into effect in 2010-2011, it was hardly possible to study school subjects in the Georgian language due to the low level of the state language proficiency.¹⁶
4. School textbook translation for the Armenian and Azerbaijani-language schools started in 2007. By the academic year 2022-2023, only the 1st-9th class students were provided approved school

⁹ Systemic Challenges of the Education Policy Towards the Ethnic Minorities in Georgia, Human Rights Education and Monitoring Center (EMC), 2020

¹⁰ https://emis.ge/Saganmanatleblo_dacesebulebebi_da_programebi/zogadsaganamanatleblo/

¹¹ <https://georgia.mfa.am/en/community-overview/>

¹² <https://tdi.ge/en/page/what-we-should-know-about-azerbaijani-fellow-citizens>

¹³ Articles 4 and 5 of the Law of Georgia on General Education. <https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/29248?publication=98192>.

¹⁴ Report of the Public Defender (Ombudsman) of Georgia, 2018, On the Situation of Human Rights and Freedoms in Georgia;

¹⁵ Report of the Public Defender (Ombudsman) of Georgia, 2022, On the Situation of Human Rights and Freedoms in Georgia, 288;

¹⁶ Systemic Challenges of the Education Policy Towards the Ethnic Minorities in Georgia, Human Rights Education and Monitoring Center (EMC), 2020

textbooks translated into relevant language.¹⁷ Consequently, in the rest of the classes students have been studying by textbooks imported from Azerbaijan and Armenia.¹⁸

5. Bilingual education serves as a basis for a full-fledged integration of ethnic minorities.¹⁹ Although the discussions on possible introduction of bilingual education started back in 2011, bilingual teaching could not be fully provided up until now. By the year 2022-2023, only 41 out of 207 non-Georgian language schools available in Georgia have been involved in the program “Introduction of state standards in the ethnic minority schools and pre-school institutions”, which is one of the bilingual education components.
6. As it is pointed out in the Public Defender’s 2022 report, equally as in the recent years’ reports, the problem lies in the lack of a uniform conceptual vision, training of bilingual teachers, provision of institutions with appropriate educational and methodological programs, auxiliary manuals and the necessary material and technical resources. (Report of the Public Defender of Georgia, 2022, On the Protection of Human Rights and Freedoms in Georgia, 289)
7. According to the 2013-2022 statistical data, the school dropout rate i.e. the cases of quitting school or suspension of student’s status decreased during those years. The school completion rate among ethnic Georgians made 69%, which is close to that of ethnic Armenian group – 65%, while the school completion rate in the ethnic Azerbaijani group was still low - 33%.²⁰

Before 2005, higher education institutions (HEI) had been in charge of administration of entrance exams in Georgia. Starting from 2005, a unified, standardized system was developed in the form of the ‘unified national exams’, necessary for a transition onto the higher education stage for both, Georgian and non-Georgian language school graduates willing to continue their education. Since all applicants were required to pass three tests: Georgian language, general skills and foreign language, the ethnic minority youth found themselves in unequal conditions compared to their ethnic Georgian peers, as Georgian language proficiency was a rather big challenge for them.

This became evident in the first year of the unified national exams, as only 20 ethnic minority applicants managed to become students.²¹

In 2005, the Ministry of Education and Sciences of Georgia started implementing the higher education minority ‘quota system policy’. This policy was amended on the number of occasions during the years and starting from 2010, the non-Georgian-speaker students have been offered an opportunity to take the unified national exams through a simplified procedure.²² The simplified system, the so-called ‘1+4 program’ allows non-dominant ethnic groups to take general skills exam in their native language. Thus, they are offered an opportunity to take the higher education institution’s one-year preparation course in the official language and after accumulating 60 credits they can continue studies at the bachelor’s degree level. According to the 2010-2018 statistics, the number of students enrolled in this programs has been increasing year by year,

¹⁷ Report of the Public Defender (Ombudsman) of Georgia, 2022, On the Situation of Human Rights and Freedoms in Georgia, 288-289;

¹⁸ Systemic Challenges of the Education Policy Towards the Ethnic Minorities in Georgia, Human Rights Education and Monitoring Center (EMC), 2020

¹⁹ Report of the Public Defender (Ombudsman) of Georgia, 2022, On the Situation of Human Rights and Freedoms in Georgia, 288-289;

²⁰ Dropout rate (2013-2022), Center for Civil Integration and Inter-Ethnic Relations (CCIR), 2022

²¹ Study of the Higher Education Minority Quota System Policy in Georgia, Research report, Center for Civil Integration and Inter-Ethnic Relations (CCIR), 2020.

²² Overview of the education sector, identification of challenges faced by ethnic minorities and socially vulnerable groups; Institute for Development of Freedom of Information (IDFI), 2022.

which contributes to a considerable increase of the number of non-Georgian speaker students in higher education institutions, in general.²³

It is noteworthy that despite the fact that students at the secondary school level have an opportunity to study in their native language, the youth should have Georgian language proficiency in order to get higher education. In the university, the youth from non-dominant ethnic groups continue education from the undergraduate level in the Georgian language alongside with Georgians.

Qualitative and quantitative components

The education system, quality education is less accessible for non-dominant ethnic group pupils and students, as compared to their Georgian peers. This is mostly caused by the language barrier, scarcity of or inefficient use of available resources, low-qualified personnel, lack of cultural and social integration.

There are serious challenges in terms of access to quality education at all levels of education. In certain regions densely populated by non-dominant ethnic groups there are no pre-school educational institutions. Thus, pupils do not possess the skills necessary for transitioning onto the general education level.

Education's role and importance

The youth participating in the research attach particular importance to education. The student discussions revealed that irrespective of whether they are employed in their field or not, the very fact that they study in the universities make the youth feel proud. This instills confidence, allowing them to openly and boldly talk about the benefits of higher education despite the challenges.

As far as the importance of education is concerned, the focus group participants emphasized three aspects: (1) equal education opportunities for ethnic minorities is the path towards social integration (2) For the respondents, education is one of the most important factors influencing independent decision-making and personal formation, and it can be said that it is the major factor. For them, education is related to the fundamental human rights, freedom, awareness and protection of individual rights (3) education is a prerequisite for future success and a guarantee of a good life.



“In my opinion, education is a key to the door of every dream. If you are educated, you can be whoever you want. Education is a foundation for everything.” (female, age group 18-25, Kvemo Kartli) and “a person’s future totally depends on his/her education”

(female, age group 18-25, Samtskhe-Javakheti)

“Education is necessary for ethnic minorities to better integrate into the society and be widely distributed”

(male, age group 18-25, Samtskhe-Javakheti)

“Education is freedom. Educated person cannot be easily oppressed or treated badly”.

(male, age group 18-25, Kvemo Kartli)

²³ Office of the State Minister of Georgia for Reconciliation and Civic Equality, <https://www.smr.gov.ge/ge/page/58/saganmanatleblo-programa>

As far as the role and importance of education is concerned, some particularly interesting peculiarities were revealed in terms of region and gender.

- **peculiarities by regions** – Of the total number of quantitative research participants, 57% of respondents in Kvemo Kartli and 75% of respondents in Samtskhe-Javakheti noted that education was very important for them. The focus group discussions with the youth partly explained this almost 20% difference between those figures. The point is that when talking about education, the respondents tend to consider education not in terms of the levels already passed or to be taken, but rather associate it with higher education. While higher education seems to be a remote perspective, respondents' attitudes are determined not only by the extent of their willingness to receive education, but rather by how accessible they consider it to be for moving onto a higher level of education after graduating school. The youth in Samtskhe-Javakheti have the opportunity to get higher education on the ground, without leaving the region. While the youth residing in Kvemo Kartli region have the closest access to higher education in the capital. Consequently, in this case, the element of physical distance seems to be an additional barrier to overcome.
- It is interesting to observe this part of quantitative research in gender terms. 83% of female respondents note that education is very important for them, while this figure makes 48% among male respondents. This result is particularly noteworthy, given that girls have less support from family and surrounding. “Parents often consider them to be potentially the members of another family, which implies the prospect of a girl's marriage. Therefore, they avoid investing money in girls' education.”

The focus group participants recalled numerous cases involving their neighbors, relatives and friends, when even girls with high academic performance were discouraged by their families not only to continue their studies in a vocational or higher educational institution, but also to get a complete general education.

”

“There is a low mindset, especially in the rural areas. I think it's very bad. It is believed that girls should be given less opportunities and it should not be so. Girls are restricted in every possible way.

(female, age group 18-25, Kvemo Kartli)

“Families always want the boy to achieve something. They always make efforts to ensure that boys could advance. They don't do the same for the girls, as they think girls will get married sooner or later. “

(female, age group 18-25, Samtskhe-Javakheti)

The Role of Family Support in the Continuing Education Process

Family plays a great role in kindling young people's interest in education, as well as in their decision-making to continue studies at the vocational or higher education level. This could be clearly seen in the attitudes and experience of the non-dominant ethnic group pupils and students. 78% of the quantitative research participants in Samtskhe-Javakheti and 75% in Kvemo Kartli note that their parents played a great role in promoting their interest in education. The following two main areas need to be highlighted in terms of family support: emotional component and financial component.

Emotional support - it is noteworthy that education is perceived by non-dominant ethnic groups as a part of Georgian culture. This may be due to the fact that Georgian families attach particular importance to their children's higher education. While Georgian parents, as a rule, not only fully support, but in most cases urge their children to continue education despite their will, in case of ethnic Armenian and Azerbaijani youth, they often have to make double efforts in this regard. On the one hand, they should get interested in choosing the education path themselves and, on the other hand, they have to convince their family to support them in this decision. Interestingly, parents are rather actively involved and intervene in their children's career choice. Parents suggest the careers that they think will give their children an opportunity to be easily employed.

"My classmates' parents did not want their children, especially girls, to enroll in the university and continue their studies. They believed that girls didn't need it, as they thought they should marry a good guy from a good family."

(female, age group 18-25, Samtskhe-Javakheti)

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"They [families] find it difficult to make this decision and let their girls leave for a big city alone. This probably concerns older generation who believe that big cities are inhabited only by killers and drug-addicts and who think that their children will not live safely there."

(male, age group 18-25, Kvemo Kartli)

Financial support is of particular importance for the youth as it ultimately and most often plays a decisive role in whether they would be able to move on to the next education level or not. As it has been already mentioned, the higher education institutions available in Samtskhe-Javakheti region to some extent mitigate this situation, which is not the case in Kvemo Kartli region. For those students from Samtskhe-Javakheti, who have to continue their studies in another city (Akhalsikhe and Tbilisi) and for the youth from Kvemo Kartli region, who have decided to get higher education, the readiness of their parents to provide financial support is of the utmost importance, as living in the capital is associated with extra costs, i.e. paying for accommodation, food and transportation in addition to the tuition fees.

"I know the families who, on the contrary, prefer that their children would learn some craft and work physically, rather than, as they put it, would waste time attending school."

(female, age group 18-25, Samtskhe-Javakheti)

"No everyone can afford covering accommodation costs, tuition fee and travel expenses at once".

(male, age group 18-25, Samtskhe-Javakheti)

Against the background of limited financial resources some families not only cannot provide financial support to their children, but rather expect them to become 'breadwinners' after graduating school, which implies that

instead of continuing their studies, upon graduation or completion of their 9th class, they get directly involved in the work process: this is a common practice in case of boys, who are perceived as a labor force and family breadwinners, and who have to travel mostly to Russia or in exceptional cases to the European countries to work there. Another factor contributing to the aforesaid is that even those with a good education background

are paid low salaries in Georgia. Therefore, boys prefer not to spend extra 4 years and financial resources on their studies and directly set off to work.

As for the girls, even those with high academic performance rarely enjoy family support in receiving higher education, since, as it has been already mentioned, they are potentially perceived as the member of another family. Against the background of financial challenges, girls are often encouraged by their parents to get married. When a girl marries at an early age (not referring to the cases of minors), even if she is not directly forced or forbidden to continue her studies, she is committed to support her partner who works. Thus, she should stay at home, especially if she has a child/children. In addition, in case a girl is not forced to marry, the prospect of sending girl to study in the city, unlike boys, is perceived as a particularly acute issue by the family. Living in a big city for the older generation is associated with various marginal groups, more specifically with drug addiction, homicide etc. Therefore, families find it hard to make such a decision out of the girls' safety concerns.

The role of official language proficiency

Georgian language proficiency is of the major challenges facing pupils and students from the non-dominant ethnic groups.

According to the experts, language barrier-related challenges are the result of inconsistent development of the education system and a lack of a systemic vision. Language barrier considerably hinders the non-dominant ethnic group's integration within the education system framework, which, in its turn, leads to ineffectiveness of the interventions implemented in terms of language competency development. In the experts' opinion, for the elimination of the language barrier it is important to ensure integration at the institutional and individual level.

"Language is an important factor, due to which quality education cannot be provided equally. As far as this factor is concerned, it could not be said unequivocally that one side is at fault and the other is not, though the state and the system should assume more responsibility. If we take, let's say, the education system reform, which is important and which has been underway since 2005. So many years have passed since then, but the language barrier could not be fixed in an effective manner and within a specific time."

For the youth participating in the research, the education process is, first of all, associated with language proficiency. It should be noted that the absolute majority of respondents (58) participating in the focus group discussions spoke Georgian if not fluently, but at least with minimal mistakes. As for the quantitative component of the research, in which school pupils made 50% of respondents, 45% of respondents noted they fully (19%) or partially (26%) possessed Georgian language listening, comprehension, speaking and writing skills, while 39% of respondents said, they had good listening and comprehension skills, referring to the poor Georgian language oral communication skills. As for the remaining 17% of respondents, only 13% could understand individual words, while 4% had poor Georgian language comprehension, speaking and reading skills. It is noteworthy that the majority of participants in the focus group discussions noted that they have had no command of the official language at school and they managed to learn Georgia only at the University. state language during school and managed to learn Georgian only at the university, either as part of the official language training program or directly within the framework of the educational program. It seems that this challenge remains relevant among school pupils nowadays.

It is noteworthy that the youth consider language proficiency to be the major barrier in the process of receiving quality education. The lack of language skills was ranked the first among the three most pressing challenges by 68% of respondents participating in the quantitative research, followed by limited access to resources and information necessary for learning (22%) and financial challenges (17%).

45% of the interviewed youth note that Georgian language proficiency is directly linked to the academic performance, while 26% of respondents believe that the language barrier affects the self-esteem component as well.

The discussion participants have a profound understanding of the role and importance of the Georgian language skills and proficiency. Based on the respondents' discussion, several levels were identified in this regard:

1. **The role of Georgian language in the non-dominant ethnic groups' daily life** - the respondents spontaneously provide examples from their daily life (in a hospital, bank, court, public service hall) to substantiate the importance of the official language, noting that language proficiency is essential for making one's daily life easier.
2. **The role of Georgian language in the non-dominant ethnic groups' education process.** On the other hand, for the respondents Georgian language proficiency is a necessary precondition for acquiring education, and consequently, for securing the future, which implies the prospect of studying in a higher education institution.
3. **The role of Georgian language in the non-dominant ethnic group's integration into the rest of the society.** Finally, the respondents note that integration cannot be considered separately from the Georgian language skills and proficiency. When touching upon this issue, the respondents pointed out that to be a full-fledged member of the society, one should have good command of the official language. Thus, they feel themselves a bit isolated on the emotional level. Speaking about integration, the respondents do not just refer to the relationship with ethnic Georgian population:



“For me, the official language proficiency implies that you feel yourself as a full-fledged member of the society, both within your own ethnic group and among the dominant ethnic group as well.”
(female, age group 18-25, Samtskhe-Javakheti)

“Georgian language is very important not only for our daily life, but also for our future. For example, if you want to get higher education, develop your career or, let's say, business, even you should know Georgian language.”
(male, age group 18-25, Samtskhe-Javakheti)

“People need Georgian language not only to receive education, but also to make their lives easier.”
(male, age group 18-25, Kvemo Kartli)

“We are the citizens of Georgia and we often have to communicate with ethnic Georgians and the people of other nationality, so Georgian is a common language, allowing us to understand each other. Therefore, it is necessary to know Georgian language.”
(female, age group 18-25, Kvemo Kartli)

Insufficient level of Georgian language proficiency is such huge barrier, that it served as a background during the respondents' discussion of nearly all the issue. Moreover, any challenge existing in the non-dominant ethnic group's education process is to some extent related to the language barrier. The research participants obviously have reflected deeply on this issue. The language competency issue was fragmentarily mentioned in the focus groups, when discussing the weaknesses and shortcomings of both, the general, as well as vocational and higher education. Although the moderator did not directly ask the respondents about the reasons behind the language barrier, the attitudes in all groups allowed us to discuss this issue. Some major reasons were identified, which, according to the respondents, are the underlying reasons behind this complex problem:

- ✓ **Unstandardized teaching of Georgian language in non-Georgian language schools.** Despite the fact that under the Georgian legislation Georgian language should be taught in all non-Georgian language schools, the state cannot ensure the language teaching standard for the Armenian and Azerbaijani language schools. It is noteworthy that, according to the respondents, the official language in their schools is still taught by teachers with poor Georgian language communication skills. Teaching the official language in schools depends solely on individual teachers and their goodwill. Even the teachers majoring in Georgian language have to find additional literature to share their knowledge with students, since the available Georgian language textbooks cannot ensure quality teaching.



“In my opinion, the school teachers' level is hardly suffice to teach the children well. The teachers themselves have comprehension problems. So, how are they supposed to teach children?”

(female, age group 18-25, Samtskhe-Javakheti)

“In my school we were taught well. We had a Georgian language teacher, who delivered classes using her own materials and that helped me learn the Georgian language better. But as for the school material, it was awful. “

(male, age group 18-25, Kvemo Kartli)

The research participants positively evaluated those Georgian language teachers, who spared no efforts and enthusiasm to teach the official language to the students. Interestingly, such teachers can motivate the youth not only to learn the Georgian language, but also to continue their education in general. The challenge is that in most of the schools there is a lack of such teachers and school pupils and students for whom Georgian is not their native language, have to learn the Georgian language themselves.

This is a great challenge not only from the technical, but also from the emotional point of view. In some instances, an inadequate teaching of the language has had an impact at the personal level, and certain problems related to self-esteem, self-realization, as well as a feeling of guilt etc., have developed at the stage of student's personality formation. According to the respondents, the above-mentioned problems have had a certain impact on their academic wellbeing. As a matter of fact, the youth who speak Georgian fluently manage to achieve it through personal contacts, communication with Georgian neighbors, strangers and acquaintances. Inadequate language skills triggered such emotions as: shame, guilt, etc. On the one hand, they tried to compensate it at the expense of personal contacts.

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“Georgian language teachers in my school, especially those teaching 1st-6th grade students, had a low level of Georgian language proficiency and they taught us very basic things. It was a bigger challenge for me. I kept thinking that it also affected my self-esteem. I thought I was a talentless girl. I kept telling myself that I was nothing. And I blamed myself for that, but I couldn't understand that it was due to my surrounding.”

(female, age group 18-25, Kvemo Kartli)

“When I a child, I started communicating in Georgian with my neighbor’s children. I would add ‘O’ to every words and I thought it was Georgian. That’s how it started. I was not ashamed of my mistakes and they corrected me, they never laughed at me, and there was a lot of support, I learned Georgian and they also learned Armenian.”

(female, age group 18-25, Samtskhe-Javakheti)

- ✓ **Georgian as a foreign language.** Most of the focus group participants note that in their non-Georgian language schools the official language is taught the same way as a foreign language. On an emotional level, the respondents believe that the official language cannot be considered a foreign language, which makes us think about the respondents’ strong attachment to the state. Which implies that the main focus is made on memorizing the grammatical part of the language without the context. In addition, teaching of Georgian literature is not mandatory and it once again depends on the teacher’s good will. According to the respondents, the hours allotted for Georgian language are hardly enough for the student to master the official language at a high level. Irrelevance of literature and books to the students’ mental age was named among the key problems.

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“A concept of foreign language learning shall be separated and Georgian language shall not be attributed to it. Georgian is the official language. However, the situation with Georgian language is far from being good as compared to that with foreign language learning.”

(male, age group 18-25, Kvemo Kartli)

“As for the Georgian language textbooks, as far as I remember, the teacher brought her own textbook - Georgian language for the 1st-3rd grade level and we studied by it in the 12th grade.”

(male, age group 18-25, Kvemo Kartli)

“We study Georgian as a second language rather than as the official language. But it is necessary. We aren’t taught either the literature or any other subjects. It’s very complicated and it gives rise to further problems. Georgian language should be taught from the very first grade in a quality manner. Afterwards, learning the language will be much easies. That's where the problem comes from and then it gets more complicated.”

(female, age group 18-25, Samtskhe-Javakheti)

- ✓ **Physical distance from the Georgian population.** Interestingly, during the discussion the participants often emphasized that before enrolling in the university they have never had a chance to learn the official language, not until they came across some peer students of other ethnicity.

“People keep saying that they should know the Georgian language. But no one gives a thought to where those people live and whom they are surrounded by. For example, Azerbaijanis live compactly and communicate with each other only in Azerbaijani language.”

(female, age group 18-25, Kvemo Kartli)

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- ✓ Only 27% of the total number of the quantitative research respondents noted that they always (9%) or often (17%) communicate with the ethnic Georgian coevals in the informal atmosphere. This rate varies between the youth from Kvemo Kartli (18%) and Samtskhe-Javakheti (33%) regions.

Most of the respondents point out that the practice of living in towns and villages densely populated by Armenian and Azerbaijani-speaking inhabitants without any experience of interacting with people of Georgian or other ethnicity is directly related to a lack of Georgian language skills and proficiency. The question is whether it's a language barrier that is the reason for the non-dominant ethnic group's isolation from ethnic Georgians, or, on the contrary, it's living at a distance from the Georgian population in a specific geographical area that creates barriers related to the lack of Georgian language skills. It should be noted that blaming ethnic minorities is one of the underlying reasons for such distancing. Stereotypical attitudes towards ethnic minority groups contribute to further expansion of the degree of distancing.

- ✓ **Lack of the non-Georgian speaking population's interest in and motivation to learn the official language.** During the discussion, the research participants recalled their personal experience, i.e. when and how they got interested in learning the Georgian language. The involvement of state and teachers' attitudes in the language learning process are considered by the respondents to be the key demotivator. They believe that teaching resources, as well as teachers' qualification and attitudes do not meet the standards available in the country.

It is noteworthy that instead of kindling students' interest in learning the official language, some teachers often serve as a demotivator and even a kind of barrier.



“Nobody forced me to learn Georgian. When I realized that it would give me more opportunities, more rights to achieve more, then I started learning it. I need it, so I have to know it.”

(სამცხე-ჯავახეთი, ქალი, 18-25 წელი)

“The environment in the school I attended was such that it seemed that Georgian language was not necessary at all. All the teachers knew the Russian language, there were Azerbaijanis and Armenians. All that left an impression that the Georgian language was something unnecessary. That was too bad, it shouldn't have been like that. Even the school principal has had a poor command of Georgian language.”

(female, age group 18-25, Kvemo Kartli)

Challenges in the general education process

The experts participating in the research note that non-Georgian language schools are a kind of isolated part of the general education system and they are not integrated into the mainstream part of this system, formed by the Georgian language schools. The education system has no practice of close cooperation between Georgian and non-Georgian language schools, and the implemented support measures are mostly of a one-off nature.

Integration challenges existing at the institutional level obstruct the integration at the individual level as well. The picture we get as a result is that students from non-dominant ethnic groups find themselves in a cultural and social isolation.

“Schools that are not operating in Georgian language could not become a part of the education system’s mainstream. They are like separate islands whose challenges are not addressed as part of the overall system.”

Training program

The majority of the qualitative research participants say, the educational process offered by general education institutions is monotonous and from their experience it is ineffectively planned. This prevents students from getting interested in acquiring knowledge. It is noteworthy that the respondents are negative about the available training programs. They believe, they are not relevant to the class and previously acquired knowledge. In addition, scarcity of activities and literature have been also named among the pressing problems.



“Our program was very uninteresting and monotonous. All the topics included in the program had been covered in previous classes. I wish it could have been different, with more interesting activities.”

(female, age group 18-25, Kvemo Kartli)

Engagement in the informal educational activities

According to the respondents, while school cannot ensure students' interest in acquiring the knowledge, there is a different attitude towards informal educational activities. A single informal educational event is suffice for a young person to get interested. The most active focus group participants who took the initiative to answer the questions, noted that they have had many opportunities to engage in educational activities. Those activities can be recalled in detail and in a consistent manner, though in most of the cases they are related to the experience gained many years ago. Respondents talk about their emotions, impressions and the way this experience influenced and changed their attitude towards education in general.

Since for non-Georgian speaking students, especially those in the lower grades, school is often the only means of receiving information about the informal educational activities, the willingness and the role of the school administration, the principal, to share such information with students and notify them about such activities is of crucial importance. Both positive and negative experiences were identified among the respondents. In many instances, the school administration does not allow non-governmental organizations to conduct workshops and trainings in school. By doing so, he/she makes a responsible decision and deprives students of their right to optionally engage in different activities. On the other hand, the school graduates who are open for such events, noted that participation in camps, trainings and similar meetings played a great role in terms of development of both communication and language skills.

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“I have never had such an experience at all. And the reason for that is my school principal, who was unwilling to hold any trainings or other events. Thus, regrettably, I didn't have such opportunities during the school years”

(female, age group 18-25, Kvemo Kartli)

“Personally I was involved in various civic education forums and camps in the direction of civic education. During my school years, various interesting projects were implemented in Ninotsminda schools by the Akhaltsikhe Youth Center. I also visited the youth center on the number of occasions and that's how I got interested in this area”.

(male, age group 18-25, Samtskhe-Javakheti)

School textbooks

During the discussion, the research participants point out to a number of significant drawbacks and challenges in terms of the quality of school textbooks in the general educational institution: (1) from the students' experience, learning by bilingual textbooks intended for the study of social sciences (Articles 4 and 5 of the Law of Georgia on General Education) proved to be ineffective, since due to the poor-quality translation, the Armenian and Azerbaijani sections in those books did not reflect the content of the text. Consequently, even the factual information couldn't be grasped by students. The respondents' quotes from the focus group sessions prove that it was the case in both, Azerbaijani- and Armenian-language schools. This may be due to the fact that the majority of social science teachers have no command of the official language.

“School textbooks published in Georgia were translated into Armenian and the translation was very poor, it did not reflect the main idea and the students couldn't understand its content.”

“It was certainly inappropriate that we were provided school textbooks by Azerbaijan, but at least the Azerbaijani textbooks were of better quality than those printed in Azerbaijani language by the Ministry of Education of Georgia. The latter contained numerous mistakes. We could not understand the content. Those were not just the basic, but rather gross mistakes. It was very hard to understand the idea, even in math, when a problem was written and one could not grasp the content. Therefore, Azerbaijani books were of better quality and more informative.

(2) Providing inadequate information to students. It implies that students, on the teacher's instruction, just omitted the Georgian section of the textbook. It is believed that in order to solve the above-mentioned problem, it is necessary, on the one hand, to enhance the language competences, and, on the other hand, to teach in Armenian and Azerbaijani languages alongside the Georgian language in order to provide information in a comprehensive manner, which makes the approach to learning more complex and, more specifically, implies the introduction of a bilingual teaching model. This very uncertainty and partial utilization of textbooks is exactly what makes the respondents question the effectiveness of bilingual education in general. (3) The third and most important challenge identified is that the schoolbooks imported from Armenia and Azerbaijan are misleading for students, especially those in their lower classes, as they are detached from Georgian reality:

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“Georgian part of the textbook is often omitted by teachers. In my opinion, it would be better if, let’s say, the Georgian history textbooks were entirely in Armenian, as the majority of teachers are Armenian-speakers and the children study in Armenian. Thus, the whole material would be absorbed. And also, a teacher may have poor command of Georgian language and could disseminate inaccurate information in class. Therefore, I think the bilingual textbook issue needs to be solved.”

(male, age group 18-25, Samtskhe-Javakheti)

“I think that up to the class 5th-6th , we were provided school textbooks from Azerbaijan. Until class 3rd or 4th, I thought that our president was Heydar Aliyev, as school textbooks were published in Azerbaijan and included Heydar Aliyev’s photos. I thought that he was our president and the anthem of Azerbaijan was our anthem. “

(female, age group 18-25, Kvemo Kartli)

Teachers’ Professionalism

Experts participating in the research believe that teachers play a crucial role in terms of access to quality education in the non-Georgian language schools. According to their observation, low level of teachers’ qualification is a factor hampering the education process, while a non-transparent personnel selection system prevents the access of relatively younger teachers with higher qualification to the education system. This will ultimately have a negative impact on the quality of education and students’ achievements. According to the experts, particularly noteworthy is the quality of Georgian language teaching in non-Georgian language schools, since the majority of students, even after graduating from school, do not have the necessary Georgian language writing and speaking competence.

Teachers employed in the non-Georgian language schools often do not show any motivation and interest in the professional development, which is conditioned by low salaries, teachers’ age, language barrier etc. In addition, it should be noted that despite the fact that teacher underwent advance training as part of the education system reform, there is no empirical substantiation of the education quality improvement.

“There is a lack of qualified personnel in the country, new personnel do not show up, while the old one is getting old and for many reasons, do not have either an opportunity or any intention to undergo professional development. Even if their professional development is the case, there is no empirical evidence that it will contribute to a qualitative improvement of the education quality.”

Against this background it is noteworthy that the youth tend to generalize their positive experience of interaction with a qualified teacher to the entire school. As a rule, teachers are named as the key figures kindling the interest in education among the research participants. Regrettably, such cases are less frequent. In contrast to that, the discussion revealed many instances when non-specialist teachers were teaching the subject to the youth not in exceptional cases, but rather on a semester basis and even throughout a year. In this respect, foreign languages were not an exception either. Neither the teachers, nor the textbooks give students an opportunity to master their foreign language oral communication skills during the school years or after graduation.”

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“English was taught in our school. At first we were studying French, then we continued studying English. The classes were delivered by the teacher of French language, who was studying English with us.”

(female, age group 18-25, Kvemo Kartli)

“The Geography classes were delivered by the Chemistry teacher. It was all mixed up. We were taught by a specialist majoring in another field. “

(male, age group 18-25, Kvemo Kartli)

“When I studied at school, German was the only language taught. Then we switched onto English. Our teacher did not know English, as she was a German language teacher. But she was teaching English anyway”.

(male, age 18-25, Samtskhe-Javakheti)

School Administration

Along with teachers’ qualification, the school management and administration part is of no less importance for providing quality education. However, the involvement of students, parents and teachers in school management and administration has not been ensured. School administration fails to serve as a coordinator between the parties concerned. It can neither attract new resources to ensure quality education, nor has it any interest and motivation to utilize the available resources in a targeted and effective manner. It is noteworthy that similar practices could be often found in the non-dominant ethnic group communities, though they are more typical for Azerbaijani schools.

“As far as school administration is concerned, there are more examples of nepotism in Azerbaijani schools than in the Armenian ones. For example, putting on staff, unequal distribution of teachers’ hours, let’s say the same about decorating things, unequal distribution of hours for teachers, resistance to and less acceptance of a new staff, all this is characteristic of Azerbaijani schools. “

“It is important that the school administrative personnel be changed and the effective educational leaders be found, so that the schools can function within the framework required for improvement. Afterwards such personnel will try to attract the best teachers.”

Information on education opportunities

According to the respondents, students have a rather vague idea about the universities available in Georgia. At best they have information about some higher education institutions, but they don't know anything about the faculties: the disciplines offered by this or that faculty and the specifics of this or that particular field. In fact, they decide to continue studies on the higher education level not knowing what their expectations should be. Of course, there are some exceptions, like, for example, the faculty of medicine, where it is clear what students are going to study. School teachers cannot provide this type of information to pupils, and in case schools are not open for various informal education opportunities, this information cannot reach out to students. Before the enrollment, students rarely have a chance to visit universities or receive any kind of information directly from a higher education institution. In this case, students have to find this information themselves from relatives and acquaintances who study at this or that faculty. This informal way has proved to be the most effective when choosing a career. However, not all students and entrants have acquaintances, next of kin or relatives who study at the university. In such cases that are rather common, the applicant first takes the entrance exams and then makes a decision regarding the career choice directly during the study period.

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“It was not during the school years, but rather after the enrollment that I realized where I ended up. When I was an applicant, I could hardly name 5 universities available. I knew only about the medical university and TSU. I was unaware of the existence of some other universities. I've learned about numerous universities available here only after I made friends this year. I didn't have any information about that before.”

(male, age group 18-25, Kvemo Kartli)

“After I finished school, I searched the Internet and found information about the universities and programs myself.”

(female, age group 18-25, Kvemo Kartli)

“I was aware of the opportunities. I was asking teachers, senior students who had enrolled and were studying in the universities. So, I am well-informed.”

(female, age group 18-25, Samtskhe-Javakheti)

School dropout without a complete general education and a decision to continue studies

School dropout rates for students from the families with different social-economic status, as well as those with different ethnic background, vary. The middle level education completion rate in ethnic Georgians makes 69%, for ethnic Armenians – 65%, and this rate is particularly low for ethnic Azerbaijani youth, amounting to 33%.²⁴

²⁴ ²⁴ Center for Civil Integration and Inter-Ethnic Relations (CCIR), dropout rate (2013-2022), 2022

It is noteworthy that when talking about the dropout decisions, research participants tend to attribute to this category both, the decision to drop out of school and not to continue studies in the university upon completion of secondary education. Due to this and the fact that both cases have similar underlying causes, the barriers for non-dominant ethnic groups in this regard are considered in this report collectively. The key factors influencing the decision to quit studies are as follows:

Family role. When talking about the role of the family, the emotional and financial support elements have been identified that have a considerable impact on the youth's opportunity to receive general education or move onto a higher level of education. As it has been already mentioned, the cases of girls and boys are perceived differently and in many instances families put more effort into the development of male children. In addition, it has been said that boys often drop out of school in order to start working and support the family financially, while the reason for girls dropping out of school is mostly their early marriage.

It is noteworthy that family's different perception of girls and boys also concerns the decision to continue studies on the higher education level. Since higher education institutions in Georgia are mostly concentrated in Tbilisi, it is perceived that living in another city is more dangerous for girls than for boys. For this reason, despite the fact that girls often show better academic performance and are more motivated than boys, they are often deprived of the choice to continue their education.

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"Boys are given more preference, though girls are more motivated to continue their studies."

(male, age group 18-25, Samtskhe-Javakheti)

1. In addition to the fact that families need to mobilize funds for the youth to continue their studies at a higher education level, the situation is further aggravated by the fact that, at the general education level, school fails to provide adequate student training and the youth have to additionally attend tutors' classes, which is actually impossible without the family's financial support.

The participants could recall isolated instances from their personal or other people's experience, when an applicant managed to pass the entrance exams independently and without additional preparation, though it could be said that those are individual cases based on individual characteristics, great effort, and self-refining.

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"School education alone is hardly suffice for one to enroll in the university. One has to attend tutor's classes and, at the same time, be involved in informal education."

(female, age group 18-25, Samtskhe-Javakheti region)

"School education is not enough. Of course, an applicant can somehow enroll in the university with such educational background, but studying in the university will show that he/she does not have enough knowledge and education."

(male, age group 18-25, Kvemo Kartli)

2. **Self-esteem.** The youth from non-dominant ethnic group generally grow up and develop in an environment where there are less opportunities for interaction with ethnic Georgians. At best, school students may meet peers from dominant ethnic group only when involved in some informal educational activities. Even in case they have a good Georgian language teacher, ethnic Armenian and Azerbaijani youth are lacking the Georgian language practice. Therefore, they find it difficult to express their opinions in the official language or make numerous mistakes during conversation. Therefore, the very prospect of receiving higher education in Georgian language for at least 4 years is a great challenge for them not only from the technical, but also from the emotional point of view.

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“I didn't even prepare for the exams. I didn't expect the result I got after the exam. I was just 10 points short of the grant. If I had known that, I would have prepared.”

(male, age group 18-25, Kvemo Kartli)

“When in school, some students are already thinking about continuing their studies in the vocational college, which will allow them to start working immediately, rather than enrolling in a higher education institution.”

(female, age group 18-25, Kvemo Kartli)

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3. **Vocational education** is less popular among the research participants. When discussing the educational prospects, the vocational level is often left out of attention and only after being reminded, the research participants start talking about it. Moreover, the instances of young people dropping out of school to get vocational education are perceived by the people around them as termination of education. Participants have little awareness of vocational education institutions. The reason behind the decision to continue studies at this particular level is unclear for them and, consequently, such decisions on part of the students are viewed in a negative context and are not considered to be the means of deepening one's knowledge.
4. **Vague future prospects.** This particularly concerns the youth from rural areas, as the only workplace available in the village is school. This implies that enrollees have a limited career choice. They have to think not only about the major in which they are willing to master their skills, but also the future employment opportunities in this particular major. Even if the youth intend to become teachers, the vacant positions in general education institutions are either limited or occupied by more experienced teachers. Alike the Georgian youth, the employment prospects of ethnic minority youth are equally vague irrespective of whether they live in smaller towns or in the capital: the insufficient number of jobs (1) does not guarantee that even with a quality education, a young person will be employed in his/her major, and (2) if employed, will have a decent salary.

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“People, who are employed in their major rarely have good salaries nowadays. Today, only those, who run their own business, even with no educational background, could earn well.”

(female, age group 18-25, Samtskhe-Javakheti)

5. **General skills exam.** As it has been already mentioned, starting from 2010, non-Georgian language school graduates have been offered an opportunity to receive education in Georgia through a simplified procedure, namely as part of the so-called ‘1+4 program’. The latter implies that applicants should take a single general skills test in his/her native language, which allows to enroll in a 1-year official language training program, upon completion of which he/she will continue studies at the bachelor's level. It is noteworthy that general skills are perceived as a regular subject, rather than as a set of skills that a student should develop at the secondary education level. The respondents voiced concern that general skills are not taught as a subject at school, therefore, its decisive role for transition onto the higher education level is unclear to the research participants:

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“To enroll in the university, one has to pass the general skills exam. Although this subject is not taught at school, one is supposed to take the general skills exam anyway.”

(male, age group 18-25, Kvemo Kartli)

Official Language Training Program

The qualitative and quantitative research participants are well-aware of the official language training programs either from their personal experience, or that of their acquaintances. It is noteworthy that the participants in the focus group discussion who are fluent in Georgian have been involved in at least one official language training program. The program that is particularly popular among the youth at the secondary education level is the Official Language and Integration Program offered by Zurab Zhvania School of Public Administration, whereas upon completion of general education - the so-called ‘1+4 program’, which is available in higher education institutions and which serves as a transitional step towards the undergraduate educational program.

Official Language and Integration Program by Zurab Zhvania School of Public Administration was unanimously evaluated as positive by all the respondents. What the youth particularly like about this program is that it has no age restrictions, therefore, when attending school, they have had the experience of learning and interacting with older people. The manuals used in this program, as well as the teachers’ qualification, was positively evaluated by the respondents.



“I was involved in the courses offered by Zurab Zhvania School. The school branches are available in the regions populated by ethnic minority groups: Ninotsminda, Akhaltsikhe, Akhalkalaki, Marneuli and some other towns. The tuition is free of charge. I attended 3-hour classes twice a week. Classes were delivered by highly qualified ethnic Georgian teachers. Those courses are available not only for students, but also for adults, in general.”

(male, age group 18-25, Samtskhe-Javakheti)

It should be noted that despite certain inconvenience additionally accompanying the language course attendance, such as transportation/movement to the district center and extra 3 hours of study after the classes, young people could not name any drawbacks and weaknesses of the program. Since the program is free of charge, it presumably serves as an emotional balance for the time spent by the participants and the additional resources they put into the language learning process. However, the main question that has not been raised so far is - why can't every village or every school have this program integrated into the educational process?

The recent years' statistics of the **'1+4 educational program'** has been already discussed in the desk research section. During the research, it was interesting not only to analyze the quantitative data in terms of the program's success, but also to study the attitudes, observations and evaluation of the direct beneficiaries of the program. The majority of the respondents continued their studies at the university through the '1+4 program'. The students of State Medical University, Samtskhe-Javakheti, Ilia and Ivane Javakhishvili State Universities were involved in the group discussion, which allowed to observe official language programs offered by several higher education institutions. Some key peculiarities were identified, according to which the success of the program was evaluated by students:

1. The official language training programs that **bring together students of different ethnicity** have been positively evaluated. Only this practice allows the youth not only to accumulate grammatical and theoretical knowledge, but also to gain Georgian language oral communication experience.
2. The main challenge facing the process of teaching Georgian language in general education institution was its non-systematic nature. In contrast to it, highly resonant are the official language training programs, where **Georgian language learning process is divided into different areas**, such as: writing, reading, grammar, speaking, etc. Each component is allotted sufficient time and the lecture program is structured accordingly.
3. Programs where the **integration component is regarded as no less important than the Georgian language teaching component**, also receive positive feedback. Such programs are highly focused on informal educational activities, sightseeing tours and teamwork, thus allowing students to communicate in Georgian language in an informal atmosphere. The latter is a key prerequisite for learning the language.

“In my opinion, '1+4' is a very necessary program. I particularly like the one offered by Ilia State University, as in addition to learning the language, it also helps us to better integrate. I have had the language skills, when I enrolled in the program, but due to a lack of practice, I was making grammar mistakes. Although I still make some now, but relatively fewer.”

(female, age group 18-25, Samtskhe-Javakheti)

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“Personally I am very much satisfied. Unlike the school, the Georgian language here has been divided into aspects, with at least 2 hours allocated to each aspect, including: speaking, writing, reading. It was conducted at different times. It was the main factor for us to learn the Georgian language well.”

(female, age group 18-25, Kvemo Kartli)

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“Students have to pay tuition fees to study the official language as part of the preparatory course. It’s not fair, is it?” The state shall ensure that the citizens are taught the official language. It’s not just a language course or an undergraduate course, is it? It’s a one-year preparatory, language training course.”

(female, age group 18-25, Kvemo Kartli)

4. Fee paid for the official language learning course, which is equal to the one-year tuition fee at the undergraduate level in the state universities, is perceived by ethnic minority groups as the biggest injustice. The state fails to ensure that students could master their official language skills at the general education stage. Therefore, a citizen of Georgia has to take the official language training course before entering the university. The very fact that a student/family is responsible for payment of the program tuition fee is beyond any logic.

5. Content of the official language training program. At the general education level, the official language proficiency levels of the youth vary, which is conditioned by the teachers’ attitudes and qualification, as well as by their individual experience. The official language programs offered by some universities are not divided into levels. Consequently, students with a basic command of Georgian and those with relatively good Georgian language skills undergo the same program. This puts those students who know Georgian at a certain level in an unfair position. They have to spend time and financial resources for a program that is not effective for them.

As for the program content, the fact that the program is not tailored to the youth needs is yet another challenge. It implies that the program is the same for the students of all fields of study and cannot provide even a preparatory level of professional terminology. Consequently, the students who have been studying Georgian only for 1 year, find it hard to master their major at the undergraduate level.

“We started studying medicine upon completion of the preparatory course. We studied the school program for a year. Since we are the medical university students, then Georgian medical terminology should be taught at the preparatory course.”

(male, age group 18-25, Kvemo Kartli)

“Modification and refinement of the ‘1+4 program’ alone is unlikely to change anything, unless it becomes systemic and is implemented at all levels.”

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“During the preparatory course, we studied the same things, the stories etc., that we learned in school. Just the basic things. We were studying by “Midamo” for a year, which is actually a textbook for the 2nd grade students.”

(male, age group 20-24, Samtskhe-Javakheti)

Challenges in the higher education process

Challenges in terms of access to quality education are also transferred to the next levels of education, and despite the fact that at the higher education level the students from non-dominant ethnic groups and ethnic Georgian students are provided education on equal conditions, the differences from the point of view of quality education are still maintained.

The government’s differentiation approach and the inclusion of students from non-dominant ethnic groups in the higher education system through the ‘1+4 program’, considerably increases access to higher education, though it cannot compensate for the challenges at the general education level. Due to the lack of the background knowledge, the students enrolled in the program are unable to complete the training programs, and even if they do, their competence in a specific major is lower compared to the Georgian students.

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“Due to the differences in previous education levels, students from non-dominant ethnic groups are less competitive and less prepared to equally receive the education offered at the higher education level.”

“There is such a big gap in the school education system that at the higher education level the students find themselves in the unequal conditions.”

Part of the non-dominant ethnic group students enroll in the university based on the unified national exams, without taking the ‘1+4’ program. Although they have good command of Georgian language, they still find themselves in unequal conditions in terms of access to quality education, as compared to their Georgian peers. This is mostly due to a low level of their engagement and involvement in the university life.

Along with the challenges existing in the higher education system, the students from non-dominant ethnic groups are facing some additional problems, that is adaptation to the new environment, unstable living conditions, integration, etc.

Paying tuition and accommodation fees is a heavy economic burden for students from non-dominant ethnic groups, often forcing them to accept low-paid, full-time jobs. Employed students have less time to study and engage in university life, which ultimately has a negative impact on their academic performance and success.

“Those people are facing some new problems at the undergraduate level, that is the accommodation problem, the problem of adapting to a new environment, the formation of some smaller groups on ethnic grounds.”

Educational expectations and reality

The youth participating in the research don't seem to have high expectations for university education. It should be noted that for the non-dominant ethnic groups, higher education has a different load in terms of relationships rather than it terms of gaining knowledge. For many non-Georgian school graduates, everything that was supposed to be available at the general education level, be it Georgian language learning, communication with representatives of other ethnic groups, informal educational and non-educational activities and socialization, becomes possible only after their enrollment in the university. It is also noteworthy that many freshman students have a rather scarce, vague and subjective information about the academic process in the university, which is based on personal experiences of their relatives and acquaintances. Unlike other students, they not only have to adapt to the university environment, but also to integrate into the Georgian-speaking society.

Challenges facing the youth at the higher education level can be combined into several categories:

- 1. Teaching content.** Undergraduate level education is more about theory than practice, even in case of the majors where practice is crucial. In addition to the fact that non-Georgian speaking students find it difficult to grasp theoretical material from the Georgian-language literature, the quality of theoretical knowledge obtained without practice is also a problem.

Another challenge is that the first and the second-year students are required to take the subjects that even indirectly have nothing to do with their major. For the youth it is hard to stay motivated when they have the feeling that whatever they are taught in the university will never be useful in their future professional activity.

"I have a degree in Geography. I would like to undergo registration and take the teacher's exam. But the exam questions are about the countries and their capitals, which we did not study at the university. I wonder why those questions have been included in the exam. In my opinion it is rather unfair. As a university student, I used to study volcanoes, earthquakes and geographical stuff. Whereas now, to pass the exam, I am supposed to know the countries."

(female, age group 20-24, Kvemo Kartli)

- 2. Lecturers' qualification.** It is noteworthy that lecturers' qualification is not considered as a combination of teaching methods and subject competence. Almost all participants in the discussion were unanimous in the opinion that lecturers were highly-qualified professionals, though professional misconduct on their part was frequently the case. On the one hand, this is probably due to the fact that a lecturer is a rather influential figure in the academic process, and the research participants refrained from making any negative comments. On the other hand, during the school years they had gained a vast negative educational experience on part the teachers and therefore the evaluation standard is rather low.

"There are lecturers who do not teach us Georgian language very well and they set a bad example for students. I have such a lecturer now. She is not a sociable person and is always angry. However, this does not prevent me from studying the subject. She delivers classes in Georgian grammar and grammar is necessary for learning the Georgian language."

(female, age group 20-24, Samtskhe-Javakheti)

Problem communicating with a lecturer is attributed to his/her strictness rather than to a low level of lecturer's professionalism. Considerate lecturers are rarely the case and are memorable and come as a surprise for students.

3. Discrimination. When asked about the extent of inclusiveness of the environment in their educational institution, only 29% of the quantitative research participants said, the environment was completely adapted to their needs.

The respondents could hardly recall the cases of discrimination at the school level. This is probably due to the fact that the school students' ethnic background is more homogeneous and at the general education level the youth have little contact with peers from other ethnic groups.

The discussion participants find it hard to openly and boldly talk about the cases of discrimination. Even when the matter concerns obvious cases of discrimination, the youth try to find the words to softly convey whatever they have to say.

Regrettably, discrimination is the case on part of both, their peers and the academic personnel.

In fact, ethnic Armenian and Azerbaijani youth, especially those in their first year of university, often speak Georgian with mistakes. Georgian students show unfriendly attitude towards them and make fun of them. This is obviously the factor preventing the non-Georgian speaking students from asking questions or expressing their opinions during the lectures. The 1+4 program graduates are often treated unfairly by their peers from the dominant ethnic group. This attitude is based on the feeling of injustice that the graduates of the official language program managed to move onto the bachelor's level by passing a single exam, while they had to pass 4 exams to do so.

Discrimination of part of the lecturers is even more traumatic, as lecturer is an influential figure and, at the same time, he/she is supposed to evaluate the level of students' knowledge. It should be noted that there are frequent cases of discrimination against new students, even when reading out non-Georgian surnames. And these are not just the isolated and single cases.



“Regrettably, we are also facing discrimination problem, be it in social media or even in the university sometimes. Most of us have enrolled in the university through the ‘1+4 program’. Ethnic Georgians believe that it was easier for us to enroll in the university than for them.”

(female, age group 20-24, Kvemo Kartli)

“Sometimes the members of ethnic minority groups are insulted. When I was a freshman, I had a lecturer who would tell us he would not give us high scores just because we were Armenians and Azerbaijanis, and that despite the fact that we were doing everything correctly, completing the assignments well”.

(male, age group 18-25, Samtskhe-Javakheti)

“The lecturer made me take an additional exam just because I was the only Armenian student in the group. That lecturer delivered lectures and we passed seminar to another person. Once he came in during the colloquium or mid-term exam, saying I should leave the room because I didn't know Georgian and I would never become a doctor. He was unaware of how I passed the seminar and that I have had higher scores compared to my Georgian classmates. He kicked me out straight away and asked me to come for an additional exam that I was supposed to take separately in his presence and that it would be an oral rather than a written exam.

(female, age group 18-25, Samtskhe-Javakheti)

“This lecturer would check only the assignments done by Georgians, telling them what is right or wrong, paying absolutely no attention to us, as if we are not present at the lecture and are not involved in it.”

(female, age group 18-25, Kvemo Kartli)

Conclusion and Recommendations

The youth from non-dominant ethnic groups are facing numerous barriers in the education process. Research and analysis of those challenges leads us to a conclusion that it is important to realize that education should not be perceived just as a mechanical aggregation of the levels that are independent of each other. The education process is systemic and each of its components is equally key and critical.

The initial goal of the research project was to study the challenges facing the youth at the vocational and higher education levels. However, as early as at the desk research stage, it became evident that it would be impossible to consider the higher education level separately, without taking into account the obstacles existing in the general education institutions.

The desk research determined the key areas and aspects that would be particularly interesting to study in the entire research process. The group discussions revealed the factors hindering the ethnic Azerbaijani and Armenian youth' access to quality education. The quantitative component allowed to quantitatively confirmed the initial assumptions, while expert interviews ensured that the researcher's subjective attitude be excluded to the extent possible. The use of a combination of complex research methods allowed to observe and study the research subject from many different perspectives.

The research findings proved that for overcoming the educational barriers facing the ethnic Armenian and Azerbaijani youth, a complex approach needs to be applied. Education of non-dominant groups cannot and shall not develop separately from the Georgian education sphere.

Based on the research analysis, the following recommendations have been developed:

To the Ministry of Education and Sciences of Georgia

Non-Georgian language schools are non-independent units of the Georgian education system. To enhance ethnic minorities' access to quality education it is necessary to ensure that the education system reforms carried out in the general education area cover the non-Georgian language schools as well. It is particularly important that changes be introduced in the following areas:

- Teaching of the official language. Georgian language should be taught in all non-Georgian language schools in a systemic and profound manner. Teachers should necessarily be the Georgian language specialists, so that at the general education level, students could communicate and develop at least the average-level language skills.
- Selection of new teachers and retraining and professional development of the available teachers. School subjects should be delivered by field professionals. Teachers should apply modern and inclusive teaching and learning approaches.
- Provision of quality textbooks. It is important to ensure that students get school textbooks that are not provided by other countries, i.e. through the funding and efforts of the Armenian and Azerbaijani government. Textbooks should be in line with the Georgian-language school standards so as to ensure standardization in all schools available Georgia.
- School principal and administration's policy. The youth study revealed the key role of informal education in the process of language learning and integration of the non-dominant ethnic groups. It is important that the activities offered by NGOs should be perceived by the school as an opportunity and students shall not be restricted in their choice to participate in such events

Office of the State Minister of Georgia for Reconciliation and Civic Equality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The importance of mutual cooperation with various governmental and non-governmental actors shall be realized so as to ensure a peaceful and effective cohabitation of Georgian citizens of diverse ethnic background; • Official language training programs shall be updated, allowing the youth to build on an in-depth theoretical and practical knowledge of Georgian language on the basis of the available knowledge level; • Official language trainings programs shall be standardized, offering same program to all university students • Official language training programs shall be tailored to the youth needs; • Official language training programs shall ensure not only the accumulation of linguistic knowledge, but also the integration;
NGOs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As far as the education of non-dominant ethnic groups is concerned, the research findings proved that informal educational activities are particularly effective. Despite the challenges, it is important that the effective negotiations be conducted with the central authorities, the ministries, as well as with the local actors and school administrations. • It is important that the empowerment and development activities be planned not only for students and youth, but also for school principals, administrations and teachers.
University Administration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For the purpose of refining the available official language training programs it is important that the universities closely cooperate and share best practices with each other. • All parties involved in the teaching and learning process, especially lecturers and academic staff, shall necessarily be trained in teaching diverse groups; • Any university shall have a safe and reliable referral mechanism to address the cases of lecturer-student abuse
School Administration	<p>Based on the research findings, it is important that the following challenges be eliminated in school:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Professional teachers shall be selected for teaching the subject; particular attention shall be paid to the selection of Georgian language teachers; • Educational process shall be student-orient, focusing on the student needs; • School shall provide Georgian language teaching for students; • School shall show readiness to engage in various educational and cognitive activities without any bias; • School principal and administration shall be aware of and ready to support student in overcoming potential barriers.

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