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HIGHER EDUCATION IN GEORGIA AND SELF-ASSESSMENT OF COMPETENCES BY THE UNIVERSITY GRADUATES

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FOREWORD

The major pillar of the higher education reforms taking place in Georgia for the past twenty years has been the changes introduced under the Bologna Process despite their actual representation of the main essence and ideas of the Bologna Process. These reforms, various governmental strategies and policy documents, laws and regulations are mostly directed at introducing new forms and mechanisms of the institutional organization of higher education. These forms are or should be compatible with the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) (European Higher Education Area and Bologna Process, n.d).

The multicomponent documentation of the Bologna Process, among other things, distinguishes the interrelation between higher education and the labor market as well as the mechanisms of their compatibility that should be reflected in the academic programs of the higher education institutions (HEIs). At the same time, the debates on how the university education should be linked to the market, and whether or not this requirement should also cover the specialties without direct linkages with the labor market [e.g. actor, linguist, philologist, etc.] are still relevant. This topic is particularly interesting within the broader theoretical context – what is the university/ higher education for? Does it aim at the creation of new knowledge or at the utmost adaptation of the existing one to the prevailing demands?

The knowledge students should have after graduation for being adaptive to the rapidly changing environment, professional growth, mobility to various spheres, and establishment in new professions is a topic for separate research and discussion within the Bologna framework.[1] Lifelong learning as one of the major dimensions of adult education responds to the rapid changes in the environment in the first place, and only after that - to the humanistic idea of education on the benefits of knowledge (London, 2012).

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1   If by the beginning of the 20th century the acquired specialty would equip graduates with necessary skills and in most cases, competences till the end of their careers, by the end of the century it became obvious, that the individuals have to change profession, get retrained in their specialties, study new technologies and be ready that their careers in certain environments or spheres are not guaranteed (Apolo Technical, 2022).

This publication aims to study the interrelation between higher education and the labor market by analyzing how the higher education policy reflects the challenges of the labor market. On the other hand, we look at how the university beneficiaries, i.e. graduates evaluate the knowledge/competences they acquired at universities, as well as the quality of education, in general. The publication studies the topic of employability alongside the Bologna Process reforms based on the self-assessment of the transferable skills by the 2008-2020 university graduates. We used a mixed methodology for the research, i.e. a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods. The findings enable the interested audience to prepare evidence-based policy documents for enhancing the relations between higher education and the labor market and conduct comparative studies on the subject.

This publication is a logical continuation of higher education research conducted by the Center for Social Sciences since 2012. All three authors hold an equal copyright to it and their surnames are listed in an alphabetical order.

CHAPTER 1. BOLOGNA PROCESS AND MODERNIZATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN GEORGIA

1.1 Historical Overview

Higher education reform and different areas related to it are inseparable from the political and social history of modern Georgia. Adopting the Law on Higher Education (21 December 2004) and joining the Bologna Process (May 2005) have radically changed the institutional arrangement of higher education in Georgia which had been a variation of the unified Soviet model before. [2]

The Rose Revolution government that came into power in 2003, and more specifically, the third President of Georgia, Mikheil Saakashvili (2004-2012) and the leading party identified their political priorities to be the fight against corruption, integration within the European structures, and institutional reconstruction of the country. It can be declared that the educational reform and in particular, higher education reform completely matched these objectives as the membership of the Bologna Process would reflect the political aim without any extra costs. Moreover, the ground was already prepared for adopting a new Law on Higher Education - the Resolution of the Georgian Parliament on Major Priorities of Higher Education (1 March 2002) enlisted the main principles that would serve as a basis for the new law: "Formation of individuals with high civic self-awareness, preparation of cadres equipped with the modern skills and competences; attraction and maintenance of new generation to the higher education system; and en-

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[2] Sometimes, this variation would feature certain novelties that cannot be explained easily. For instance, Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University introduced a Master's program at the Faculty of Physics in 1996 as a pilot model and spread this approach to all the existing faculties in 1998 except for the faculties of medicine and law. This odd innovation can be considered as a preliminary step for the upcoming reforms (although, no one can actually say the reason behind the institutionalization of Master's level education in 1996-1998 (Chitashvili, 2020)) that turned out to be in compliance with the three-tier system of higher education (Bachelor, Master, PhD) introduced on the legislative level after six years (Law on Higher Education, 2004). We can only speculate about the delicateness of the content and the forms of Master's education in 1998, as well as its difference from the one-tier education.

sure higher professional education matches individual interests and capabilities, qualification upgrading and retraining" (Point 1). The resolution also contained a provision on the liberalization of education, quality assurance mechanisms and institutionalization, integration of education and research, and so on. The draft bill of the law on higher education was already developed for the Parliamentary elections of 2003 and discussed multiple times during the electoral marathon.[3]

The new law adopted by the end of 2004 differed quite a bit from its original version by completely ignoring the research staff and giving absolute authority to the accreditation council within the Ministry of Education to make decisions on closing/opening HEIs (Chitashvili, 2020). The new law fully changed the qualification frameworks and degree systems and aimed at complete modernization of higher education institutions from teaching and research perspectives. It also aimed at reappointing the academic personnel.[4]

This very newly hired academic personnel in conjunction with the administrative units introduces the changes to the academic programs as well as new institutional settings in the higher education system under the Bologna Process framework.[5] It should be noted here that by May 2005 when Georgia joined the Bologna Process, it still represents a Soviet legacy that has nothing in common with the new system except for the law.[6] And the law says that by 2007 the higher education reform should be completely

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3   The discussions of the draft bill were organized by the leadership of Zurab Zhvania's political party "New Democrats" and later on "Burjanadze – New Democrats" in spring 2003.

4   In summer 2005 the dismissed personnel of the two faculties (law and social and political sciences) of Tbilisi State University participated in a new competition for the academic positions of full, associate and assistant professors.

5   The law was adopted in December 2004. In May 2005 Georgia joins the Bologna Process, i.e., only six months after the reform launch. Even though six months is a short period for evaluating the actual results, the rigid top-down reform of the higher education system has already a visible outcome: rectors of HEIs are dismissed and interim governors are appointed. According to the law, after the modernization, the Academic Councils should elect new rectors by the end of 2007. Before that, interim rectors ensure the coordination of the changes envisaged by the law.

6   See Report from New Members of the Bologna Process, Georgia, 2005. It is noteworthy that this report is dated 30 December 2005, i.e., 1 year after the adoption of the law (21 December 2004), and reflects the changes that the higher education system went through that year.

finished. We should admit that this provision was actually fulfilled and the Bologna national report 2007 is clear evidence of it (Bologna Process Georgia National Report: 2005-2007).

It should be mentioned by all means that joining the Bologna Process and the introduction of new institutional forms of higher education (three-tier higher education, European credit system, quality assurance, diploma supplement, etc.) had a surely positive impact - Georgia joined the global format (EHEA) and directed its future development trajectory towards the international institutional collaboration and organizational development. However, only transmitting the forms and expectations related to the automatic achievement of positive changes turned out to be premature. We can presume that the reformist political establishment did not thoroughly consider one important aspect when planning the educational policy – the actual needs of the country when defining the vision, mission, objectives and development strategies of higher education and its organizations.

In order to see a full picture of the development of the Georgian higher education system, we should also look at its historic past because to a certain extent, this historic background has determined the structural and institutional setting of the higher education system and first and foremost, its performance in the periods of 1991-2005 (after gaining independence till joining the Bologna Process) and 2005-to present (since joining the Bologna).

The first Georgian university was established in 1918[7] and naturally, the university tradition, and generally, the understanding of a university started to develop directly with the concept of a modern university. Initially, one faculty was open with the directions of wisdom, humanities, natural sciences and mathematics, while in 1919-2020 TSU was already running 4 faculties: wisdom (with the departments of psychology, philosophy, linguistics, speech, history and economics), mathematics, natural sciences and medical sciences (National Parliamentary Library of Georgia, 2019). By that time, 1801 students and 79 free listeners were enrolled at the university; they acquired only one academic degree – doctor of science. [8]

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[7]   Tbilisi State University, currently, Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University (TSU).

[8]   The first doctoral dissertation was defended on 9 May 1920. The degree of Doctor of Science was awarded to Akaki Shanidze (National Parliamentary Library of Georgia, 2019).

After the formation of the Soviet Union (1924) the higher education policy, organization and administration incorporated into a unified system and therefore, the idea of university autonomy was abolished. The Soviet Union subordinated universities to its political goals and maximally restrained them from growing free thinkers. In other words, free and liberal education was completely governed by the Marxism-Leninism ideological framework with a primary objective to supply the planned economy with the specialists. Research was entirely moved out of the university space into the Academy of Science. [9] Academy of Sciences of the Soviet Socialist Republic of Georgia (SSR) was established on the basis of TSU in 1941 (currently, the Georgian National Academy of Sciences) as a branch of the Academy of Sciences of the Soviet Union. Award and first and foremost, approval/control of the academic degrees was entirely centralized by the Attestation Committee. [10] The artificial split of education and science would further weaken the main mission of a university – training of critical and rational thinkers, creating new knowledge, enhancing critical thinking and serving society. The Soviet system was completely focused on preparing obedient, non-critically thinking individuals, however, with high qualifications in their respective fields, for distribution on the regulated labor market.

The special edition published in 1978 about the functions of a higher school (Высшая Школа, 1978) enlists what and how universities should perform in respect to education, science and manufacturing practices (p. 15). The introduction to this edition discusses a new cultural and ideological foreword on the path of transferring from developed socialism to communism, which is absolutely necessary for achieving the victory - a formation of an individual for the communist society: "raising every worker with an ideological consciousness devoted to communism, with communist attitude to labor

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9 The Academy of Science of the Soviet Union was a legal successor to the Russian Imperial Academy of Science. In 1925 a 200th anniversary of the Academy was celebrated and on 18 June 1927, a new charter of the Academy was approved. The politicization of the Academy [governmental interference, enrollment of the communist scientists as members, control of the leadership] starts intensively in 1928. In 1930 a new charter is approved and the Academy falls under the jurisdiction of the Central Executive Committee of the USSR.

10 Higher Certification Committee was established in 1932 and started to function to full extent from 1934. It served as a final instance that awarded academic degrees (candidate of science and doctor of science) and titles (senior research fellow, docent, professor).

and national economy. Completely overcoming the remainders of bourgeois views, developing morality and personality and creating a real, genuine wealth of spirituality and culture. And these overarching goals should be served by…" *(Высшая Школа, 1978, p. 4).*

This monolithic ideologized system would collapse in 13 years and the new republics that emerged on the ruins of the Soviet Union would have to determine their priorities of higher education. The universities would be given the opportunity to freely function and serve academic thought. This desire turned out to be a bit difficult to accomplish for the post-Soviet republics except for the Baltic states that were distinguished by having a history of university experience long before the Soviet Union.[11] Immediately after the independence, these universities went back to their statutes, which stopped functioning in 1939 as a result of the Baltic occupation and started to redefine their missions in a new environment.

After declaring independence (1991), Georgia, as well as other Soviet republics, maintained a Soviet mini model of higher education up to the adoption of a new law (2004). But before that, the universities and the Academy of Sciences had split the market between themselves by establishing the so-called paid educational institutions that would offer narrow specializations despite any demand for those specializations. By 2004 there were 250 HEIs in Georgia with not only the questionable quality of education but also questionable teaching practices per se. As a result of the first wave of accreditation, a total of 117 HEIs remained, while by 2007 their number further decreased to 39. Currently, there are 63 HEIs in Georgia. Among them, 56 are secular universities, while 7 HEIs belong to the Georgian Orthodox Church (National Center for Educational Quality Enhancement, 2020).

As mentioned above, the Bologna reforms completely changed the higher education landscape in Georgia not only in terms of reducing the number of HEIs but also by their structural and institutional arrangement, functioning aims and strategic development plans. The collapse of Soviet education was followed not only by structural changes but the breakdown of the university's purpose in respect to linking it with the labor market. If the Soviet education would directly subordinate universities to the planned economy,

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11 Vilnius University was founded in 1579, Tartu University in 1632 and Latvia University in 1919.

with the job market determining the "number" of placements in the educational sector and distributing the graduates on the market across the Soviet Union (Smolentseva et al, 2018, p. 26), after the independence, this system also collapsed – planned economy went down and the post-Soviet republics had to move to the liberal market economy model (Rutkowski, 2013; Kupets, 2015). The universities of the post-Soviet republics including Georgia were left without a "guaranteed" economic market that "traditionally" would instruct them its demands to supply the labor force.

Here we should also discuss the modern national labor market and the challenges associated with it, and especially, its homogeneous nature, which in other words, means the deficit of high technological and high productive economic activities/spheres. This is closely related to the political-economic restructuring Georgia experiences since the collapse of the Soviet Union. According to the National Statistics Office of Georgia (GeoStat), in 2017-2020 (and in reality, before that as well) the leading economic activities with the biggest number of employees were agriculture, forestry and fishery, manufacturing, retail and wholesale trade and education (Distribution of Employees by Economic Activity, GeoStat). In 2019, trade contributed to the overall field structure of the gross domestic product (GDP) by 14.4%, manufacturing by 10.1%, and agriculture by 7.2%. This distribution was almost identical in 2018 (Gross Domestic Product 2018 and 2019). Similar to other post-Soviet states, a big portion of the Georgian population has obtained higher education diplomas (at least Bachelor's degree), however, they are occupied in the activities that require general or vocational education (e.g. trade sphere mentioned above) (Kupets, 2015).

To summarize, as we saw, the development trajectory of the Georgian higher education system has altered multiple times: from the establishment of the European higher education model (1918-1921) to the unified Soviet system (1921-1991), from the post-Soviet period to the Rose Revolution and the Bologna Process (1991-2005), and from aligning the higher education system to the European model by the post-revolutionary government to the ongoing activities of Europeanization (2005-to date). Certainly, these changes have significantly influenced the institutional development of universities as well as the overall planning process of the higher education policy. In order to explain these changes and processes, it is interesting to discuss the

theories of new institutionalism and isomorphism that we present in the following subchapter.

1.2 Theoretical Contextualization

The sociological theory of new institutionalism that has developed from the sociology of education, discusses how institutional structures, norms, regulations and cultural frameworks define the performance of organizations. In the higher education context, the followers of this theory believe it important to consider higher education as a uniform institution that relies on the isomorphic model. This envisages that globally, universities use one and the same organizational structural settings for performance (Meyer et al, 2007, p. 193; Beckert, 2010, p. 150). Universities are perceived as components of higher education as an institution, therefore these two concepts [higher education and university] are often used interchangeably (Meyer et al, 2007; Meyer et al, 2009).

David Franck and John Meyer (2007) explain that throughout history, social differentiation related to modernity increased the demand for the reproduction of specific knowledge and for teaching relevant to a new reality. At first sight, this posed a threat to universities in case they would not be able to follow a new tempo and adapt to changing environments (p. 287). Nevertheless, university as an institution managed to spread globally and the reason behind this is explained to be a universalistic form of its cultural and human capital (Meyer, 2000), which envisages that knowledge is formed universally and spread across the globe without being locked in the hands of a specific culture/society. In the modern world (since 1955) universities are expanded across the world at an amazing speed. If by the beginning of the 20th century there were only three people per 10,000 world citizens involved in higher education, by 1950s this figure doubled, and by 2000 – increased six times, which was ensured not only by the general expansion of education but by the involvement of women in education (Frank & Meyer, 2007, p. 289).

In parallel to the massive growth, higher education and therefore, universities embraced a new function – higher education became massive and got connected with the economy. This became more visible after World War

II when relatively closed societies transformed into the world society. This transformation confined the institutional models adjusted to the national societies, increased the number of individuals involved in higher education (including that of professors) and supported the universalization of education. On the one hand, this process creates a "knowledge society" and connects education with society tightly, but on the other hand, it subordinates education to actors such as industries, systems that are oriented at financial gains and their techno-functional demands. Overall, it threatens the fundamental function of a university – knowledge creation and distribution (Ibid, p. 291). The theory of new institutionalism points out that the higher education structures functioning widely today on the national levels were formed for many years, although they have not originated from the national level. These models adapted the local models in parallel to globalization and universalization and subordinated them to the global rule (Ibid). The major assumption of the theory of new institutionalism is that the global institutional environment creates homogenous local structures – higher education organizational models get institutionalized globally with certain specific local-cultural nuances (Meyer et al, 2007, p. 191).

The newly enacted model turned out to be rather vulnerable to the local practices and reality, but according to the theory of new institutionalism, the universal and global models get embodied in the local structures (Ibid, p. 194). A good example of this in the Georgian context would be the adoption of the new Law on Higher Education in 2004 and the way it introduced a new institutional model, i.e., the global scheme, to the local structures, i.e., universities without any preliminary preparation and evaluation of the effectiveness of these schemes for the local environment. The theory also suggests that there always is a certain gap between the formal model and its actual enactment (Meyer et al, 2007). For instance, in the Georgian context, this can be related to the obligatory requirement to conduct academic research in the universities with very scarce resources. [12]

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12 The major comments made by the foreign experts of institutional authorization in 2018 touched upon this very aspect, i.e. implementation of research and execution of the research standards (see the evaluation reports of different universities that are publicly available at the website of the National Center for educational Quality Enhancement). Lack of financial resources that research requires does not free universities from fulfilling the research standards of authorization.

The theory of new institutionalism as an explanatory model can be well applied to the Bologna Process. As Bernard Wachter wrote in 2004, the Bologna Declaration (1999) aimed at increasing the competitiveness of European education and the employability of graduates. For achieving this, a new easily readable academic degree system was adopted, as well as the European credit transfer system (ECTS), degree recognition for mobility and quality assurance mechanisms for measuring the outcomes of education. In other words, the Sorbonne Declaration of 1998 signed by the Ministers of France, Germany, Italy and the Great Britain to harmonize the European higher education served as a basis for the Bologna Declaration that practically institutionalizes this objective by introducing the abovementioned principles. The Bologna Process gained a new, "social" dimension on Prague ministerial conference in 2001 that envisaged that the "higher education [is] a public good… [and] responsibility (Prague Communique, 2001, p. 1). While in Berlin in 2003, during the next enlargement of the Bologna process, as well as at the 2005 Bergen Summit, a new requirement was introduced to establish quality assurance mechanisms for verification of the awarded degrees and qualifications. The ministerial conferences and the action plans of the Bologna Process completely changed the diversity of the European higher education and united it in a single system (Budapest-Vienna Declaration, 2010). In respect to the social dimension briefly mentioned by the Prague Communique, the Rome Communique of 2020 identifies the new objectives of the innovative European education space, such as decisions that alter the image of our society; "…rely on innovative technologies, including artificial intelligence, we must ensure that these observe ethical standards and human rights and foster inclusion; …smaller, flexible units, including those leading to micro-credentials, can be defined, developed, implemented and recognized by our institutions using EHEA tools (Rome Communique, 2020, p. 6).[13]

Georgia's joining the Bologna Process was an act of incorporation into the global academic networks and "transfer" of isomorphic structures for making the formal integration easier, on the one hand; but on the other hand, it created certain problems due to the miscalculation of the local situation. For instance, since 2005 a big number of formal changes have been in-

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13 Next Bologna Ministerial is planned for 2024.

troduced to the higher education system of Georgia that were not followed by the mobilization of respective financial resources from the state. One of such challenges is related to an increased focus on innovative and techno-logical development while the state funding of science constitutes 0.03% of GDP (Chitashvili, 2020).

The higher education reform was followed by a serious discussion around the idea of a university[14] (a sort of allusion to John Henry Newman and Karl Jaspers), but we would distinguish two of them here. The first debates were related to the public discussion in the Heinrich Boell Foundation in 2007 about the "Idea and Function of University" [15] and the second one – to the research conducted by the Erasmus+ National Office of Georgia on "The Role of University in the Regional Development" (Bregvadze et al, 2017). These two events are separated by 10 years and reflect well enough the debates around the university as an institution. If in 2007 the major debates were connected to the new understanding of the idea of a university and intro-duction of it in a modern context through the Bologna Process institutional form, in 2017 university is discussed in rather a utilitarian realm as a means for regional development and preparation of qualified cadre. Practically, if we look at the different research on higher education conducted in the past decade (Lezhava and Amashukeli, 2015; Amashukeli et al, 2017), we will see that one of the major issues is the practical importance of higher education and its compatibility with the labor market demands.

Within this context, we should discuss how the Bologna reforms are im-plemented and institutionalized in the higher education system. In order to explain this process, together with the new institutionalism theory, we will discuss the model of isomorphic changes introduced by DiMaggio and Powell in 1983. The authors explain the process of isomorphic changes in the organizations and therefore, the process of introducing new institutions through applying three mechanisms: coercive, normative and mimetic. The

14 "Idea of a University" is a title of John Henry Newman (1852) and Karl Jasper's (1923-1946 new edition) books. Jaspers published the first edition in 1923 and the second one in 1946. He discusses a university as a unique social institution where the relations between the state and the university defines the educational goals and processes and creates a specific environment for intellectual elite.

15 See the transcript of the discussion at the URL: https://ge.boell.org/sites/default/files/2019-11/7_GE_University.pdf, accessed on 1 February 2022.

coercive isomorphism takes place when there is formal and informal pressure from the superior institutions and an expectation that the society has towards an organization it is referring to. In our context, referring to the Bologna Process for legitimizing different political-normative directives would be a good example.

In the case of mimetic isomorphism, a reference is made to certain organizations as successful ones and their structures are transferred. In reality, these institutions might be very unprotected and vulnerable, but for others, especially the newly established ones, they still play a role model (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). For instance, an HEI can present itself as a "prestigious" and "innovative" compared to another by displaying different ratings and quantitative indicators and thus, pushing other organizations to imitate its "successful" model.

Normative isomorphism emerges in the context of professional standardization (Ibid, p. 152). This practice is globally accepted (e.g., professional associations, qualification retraining centers, expert reports and publications, academic journals, etc.) to standardize qualifications and define professional ethics codes and values, which enables for smooth replacement of personnel with new, relatively competitive cadres.

The higher education reform in Georgia deploys all three mechanisms of isomorphism on different levels by different actors: coercive isomorphism is used by the state through initiating the Bologna reforms, normative – through introducing institutional and program accreditation, qualification frameworks, etc., and mimetic – by the universities for representing and legitimizing their positive image.

Considering that higher education was only 86 years old in 2004 and for 83 years it belonged to the Soviet system, its modernization and institutionalization with the new forms was successfully achieved by the coercive methods.[16] Mimetic isomorphism still continues to legitimize the universities in the global context. For instance, this can happen through dif-

16 Not a single expert believed that it was possible to fulfill the transitional provisions of the Law of Higher Education (2004) and establish a new organizational form only in two years. Yet, the government managed to implement these changes and introduce all the organizational forms mentioned in the Bologna country report to full extent: three-tier higher education, European credit transfer and accumulation system, standard diploma supplement, institutionalization of mobility and quality assurance system.

ferent rating systems that universities publish to stress their importance and position themselves as leading institutions and role models. As for the normative isomorphism, we can consider the introduction of the institutional authorization and program accreditation in 2018 (National Center for Educational Quality Enhancement, 2018) as a good example that was followed by the enrollment of the National Center for Educational Quality Enhancement into the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) as its member organization. However, transmitting the European principles of quality assurance into the Georgian realm could not be directly translated into the relevant requirements towards the Georgian HEIs and the realistic measurement of the quality. In other words, the national quality assurance model is not able to actually grasp the system problems and needs (Amashukeli, Lezhava & Chitashvili, 2020). For instance, the majority of the HEIs are not able to measure/verify their achievements by the new program accreditation standards and the major goal and achievement is to review the internal regulations and strategic documents to fulfill the external requirements (Tsotniashvili, 2020, p. 99). For our research, it is interesting to look at one of the dimensions of the Bologna Process that envisages the close linkages between the educational system and labor market and economic wellbeing (Bologna Declaration, 1999). Therefore, we study the effects of the isomorphic models enacted since 2005 on the links between higher education and the labor market.

1.3 Problem Statement and Research Focus

Studying the links between higher education and public economic good has been a hot topic since 1950s when a new field of economics of education emerged (Schultz, 1961; Becker, 1964; Mincer, 1974).

The economic dimension of higher education is a complex phenomenon. For instance, on the one hand, it implies that the educational sector creates a labor resource – human capital for the labor market and thus, it ensures the performance/enhancement of the economy (Becker, 1994, Teixeira, 2014). This assigns a bridging role to the higher education institutions between education and the labor market (Humburg et. al, 2013). On the other

hand, different authors underline the importance of HEIs for the formation of labor market through enhancing the self-employment skills of university graduates (Kostoglou & Siakas, 2012).

The abovementioned topic became rather important in the Georgian higher education space after the country joined the Bologna Process. The interrelation between higher education and labor market is one of the key components for the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and its framework program. According to the Bologna Declaration (1999), the establishment of close links between higher education and the labor market, enhancement of employability skills of graduates and formation of the competitive labor force is one of the central objectives of EHEA (Bologna Declaration, 1999).

Currently, the political-economic meaning of higher education is described in different strategic and normative documents of Georgia. For instance, by signing EU-Georgia Association Agreement on 27 June 2014, Georgia took an obligation to improve the quality of higher education and align it to the EU's Modernization Agenda for Higher Education and the Bologna Process, which also implies improving the collaboration between HEIs and the labor market for enhancing the employability of university graduates (Guide to the EU-Georgia Association Agreement, 2014, p. 55). The importance of higher education is clearly underlined in the Law on Higher Education of Georgia adopted in 2005 (Chapter 1, Article 3, Point 1) and the Strategy of the Socio-economic Development of Georgia "Georgia 2020" adopted in 2014 (pp. 47-48). As for the Joint Strategy of Higher Education and Science of Georgia 2017-2021 approved in 2017, this document does not identify the improvement of compatibility between higher education and the labor market as a separate independent strategic objective. The strategy considers the aspect of compatibility with the labor market (enhancement of employment and self-employment potential) rather with respect to vocational education (Ministry of Education and Science, 2017, pp. 27-29, 35-38) and discusses this issue in the context of higher education only in general terms (Ibid, p. 36). However, within this very strategy of 2017-2021, the reform of the quality assurance has been performed (2015-2017): the standards of the state authorization for higher education institutions and academic program accreditation have been renewed (in compliance with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in

the European Higher Education Area – ESG 2015) and the reflection of the requirements of the labor market representatives in the process of development of academic programs has been recognized to be an indicator for quality control (Authorization Standards of Higher Education Institutions, 2018; Accreditation Standards of Higher Education Academic Programs, 2018). In order to comply with the new requirements and get the authorization, HEIs had to review their academic programs and teaching courses and adjust them to the requirements of the modern labor market. This could be done by establishing program committees,[17] organizing the meetings with employers and identifying the field necessities, as well as gathering the employment data and the information on the needs of graduates (Darchia et al., 2019, p. 40).

It is noteworthy that in December 2021, in order to start the process of public consultations, the drafts of the Joint National Strategy of Education and Sciences 2022-2032 and the Sectoral Action Plans have been published.[18] "Preparing each student of high education institutions for the civil changes and labor market; equipping them with the continuous employability skills, multiple field-specific competencies, including the ones for active citizenship" appear to be amongst the objectives of one of the key aims of the strategy (that is related to high-quality education) (Joint National Strategy of Education and Sciences 2022-2032, p. 49).[19] Within this objective, the introduction of the graduate (both, of higher and vocational education) monitoring system for creating the databases of the graduates' competences, employment status, working experience, etc. is planned for the next decade. The strategy also envisages the development of a national system for student surveys[20] (Ibid, p. 43; Higher Education Action Plan 2022-2032).

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17 This is a standard practice for the development process of academic programs at American universities. Its analogies appear and get established widely in Europe after the initiation of the Bologna Process.

18 By the date of publication of the present work, neither the strategy nor the action plans have been publicly discussed or approved.

19 The development of the vocational education was reflected in this strategy based on the recommendations of the International Monetary fund and World Bank in respect to the development of professional human resources for the labor market.

20 Student survey as a tool is a standard practice for developing the teaching process and contracting professors at American universities. It was also introduced in Europe after the Bologna Process.

The present study reflects the objectives of the new National Strategy of Education and Science at some point as it touches upon the collection of statistical data on the education and employment of university graduates in Georgia. It is noteworthy that, the statistically representative research of the Center for Social Sciences conducted in 2016 was also about studying the links between formal education and employment. However, in that research, the share of those who graduated after Georgia joined the Bologna Process reached only 35% among the entire survey population. [21] Different from it, the 2021 survey targeted exclusively the Bologna graduates (2008-2020). It should be also mentioned that the present study focuses on the transferable (transversal) skills as well: the role of HEIs for developing these skills in students and the role of these skills in the employment of university graduates (for further details, please see the methodology chapter). Unfortunately, there are no systematic standardized studies[22] of the human capital conducted with the adult population (including students and graduates) of Georgia that would directly assess (and not based on self-assessment) the field-specific and transferable competences (knowledge, skills and their application) of individuals.[23] As far as we are informed, neither the universities conduct such assessments of their students/graduates.

The focus on the transferable skills is also determined by the fact that these skills support the employment/self-employment of individuals and are formed and developed in the formal educational settings (OECD, 2019;

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21 Since the study aimed to gather the data of the entire country population and not the professional achievements or experiences of specific groups, such as university graduates since 2005, for instance. The study is available at: http://css.ge/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/edu_return_ge.pdf

22 Only the data of World Bank 2013 survey of Skills for Employment and Productivity (STEP Skills Program) is available for Georgia. The data is analyzed in the 2016 research report of the Center for Social Sciences that is available at: http://css.ge/?p=873&lang=ka

23 Such as the one conducted by Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD): https://www.oecd.org/skills/piaac/data/ or the World Bank: https://microdata.worldbank.org/index.php/catalog/step/about (evaluation is performed by both, direct and self-assessment tools). It is noteworthy that both studies evaluate only very basic skills. At the same time, the World Bank research deploys the test exercises between levels 1 and 3 (in total, there are 5 levels of difficulty).

UNICEF, 2019), especially in case of the university graduates' employability[24] (Artess et al., 2017; Lock, 2019). This detail is key to our research that looks at these very links between higher education and employment.

Development of transferable skills is a continuous process (UNICEF, 2019, pp. 10-11). Although, formal educational institutions represent the environment that supports the development of field-related and transferable skills and therefore, employability. Thus, the teaching curriculum, pedagogy (teaching and learning methods) and assessment of students' achievements are three major components for developing transferable skills (Artess et al., 2017, p. 39; UNICEF, 2019, p. 25).

The discussion of transferable skills became especially popular in Georgia after the adjustment of the internal and external quality assurance system to the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG 2015) (new standards of university authorization and academic program accreditation were developed and introduced). One of the provisions of the program accreditation standard touches upon the development of transferable skills together with the development of "practical/scientific/research/creative/performer skills". The guide to the accreditation standard mentions that the existing academic programs in Georgia present the practical components aimed at developing practical/transferable skills of students as an independent course(s) and often in the final semester (National Center for Educational Quality Enhancement, p.25). The guide also discusses two other models: a practical component integrated into the teaching courses and a mixed model that implies the usage of two models at the same time.[25]

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24 We should underline that employability is not a synonym to employment. It envisages the unity of knowledge, skills and personal characteristics that increases the chances of an individual getting employed (although does not guarantee it). Graduates' employment or employability are not defined as a direct outcome (or obligation) of the university education – it is a lifelong learning component (Artess et al., 2017, გვ. 10).

25 As for the teaching-learning methods, the guide divides them into "ones supporting to master specific material" and "ones developing general/transferable skills." This is a rather conditional division as these methods still develop general competences in students together with giving them theoretical knowledge (Ibid, 25-31). We should mention here that the guide does not include any empirical evidence for supporting the abovementioned (and not only). Also, it does not explain the key concepts such as knowledge, skill, competence and the differences between them, or differences between field-specific and transferable skills/competences, etc.

Our research aim is to study the role of higher education in the development of employability and entrepreneurial skills of university graduates by giving them respective competences. For this purpose, we have analyzed the perspectives of the representatives of the higher education sector, as well as the self-assessment of the university graduates. The detailed research methodology is described in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 2. RESEARCH AIM, METHOD AND KEY CONCEPTS

In order to study the links between higher education and employment opportunities, we have set the following research objectives:

Research objective 1: Does the higher education policy reflect a set of challenges related to the interrelation between the higher education system and the labor market?

Research objective 2: How do the university graduates evaluate the quality of education that received?

Research objective 3: How do the university graduates evaluate the role of higher education in the development of their competencies, and especially transferable skills necessary for employment and entrepreneurship?

In order to answer the questions above, we used a mixed methodology, i.e. both qualitative and quantitative research methods. For maximally covering the challenges of higher education, we targeted several groups.

Research objective 1:

In order to assess the higher education policy, we have interviewed the independent experts of higher education working on the assessment and analysis of higher education policy for years, as well as the representatives of university administration and academic personnel, and the current and former educational policy-makers[26] - representatives of the Ministry of Higher Education and Science of Georgia and its legal entities under public law (LEPL) responsible for the development, fulfillment and monitoring of different strategic documents. A total of 30 in-depth interviews were conducted with this target group on the following topics: the process of educational policy development and the country's strategic vision for higher education; the specifics of the labor market and its involvement in the development of

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26 Considering the research ethics, the quotations presented in Chapter 3 do not contain any status [of a policy-maker] in order to keep the identity of the respondents confidential.

higher education – production of "knowledge economy" in Georgia; development of transferable skills of the university graduates and the role of the practical component of the learning process. The respondents of the qualitative research were selected from the multi-profile universities in Tbilisi and the regional cities (Kutaisi, Batumi, Telavi). Under multi-profile universities, we consider those institutions that cover a wide range of academic disciplines (social sciences, economics, humanities, exact and natural sciences) that would enable us to see a wider picture and not only base our analyses and research findings on one or two single disciplines.

Research objectives 2 and 3:

Our second target group consisted of employers and self-employed individuals with whom we conducted 4 online focus groups discussions in the winter of 2021. The self-employed individuals participating in the focus groups are identified as "startupers" throughout the publication. We believe their involvement in the research was important for seeing the links between higher education, transferable skills and entrepreneurship opportunities (see the research questions); what their experience of working with the Georgian HEIs look like and what is the role of higher education in the development of the national labor market – both, in respect to supplying it with the human resources, as well as the expansion of the existing market. Under the latter, the formation of new economic occupations and/or the establishment of new private companies are meant. It is important to understand these issues not only from the perspective of self-employed individuals having small or big businesses for several years, but from the perspectives of young entrepreneurs. For this very purpose, we use the term "staretuper". However, to make it easier to understand the essence of this term we should also define its international meaning and the one we apply considering the limitations of our research.

The definition of a startup is largely debated in the academic and non-academic literature. According to the different authors, there is a considerable difference between a startup and a starting business. Namely, a startup is a company that is on the very first stage of development (up 1.5 years since establishment), applies an innovative business model and is targeting at the

non-traditional methods of development (Mohout and Keimen, 2016; Blank, 2013; Ries, 2011 as cited in Skala, 2019). The product or service it offers does not necessarily matter, but rather the ways it tries to get established on the market in a short period of time. Mostly, a startup tries to achieve success having limited resources and suggesting a business model (in any sphere) targeting to fill in a sharp deficit on the market. A startup demonstrates a huge risk of failure and "a combination of knowledge, skills, experience and social capital of its founder" that in case of success results in a rapid growth in size, attraction of investments and the vast increase of the value of the business (Skala, 2019).

Based on the abovementioned, it is difficult to determine whether or not Georgian startups fit within this definition as this issue requires a more in-depth analysis of the Georgian startup eco-system and their business models, neither of which is the aim of the present research. Besides, the startup databases in Georgia (e.g. www.startuperi.ge) does not differentiate between a startup and a newly started business. Moreover, a startup is equalized with a newly started business of maximum 2 years. Therefore, we tried to use the same approach within our context and consider junior entrepreneurs as startupers, and thus focus on the following criteria in the sampling: whether or not an individual has graduated from the university within the Bologna Process; whether or not the business is in its early stage of development (maximum 5 years) and whether or not its activity is targeted as filing a sharp gap on the market (in both, services and production). The majority of our research respondents fit within this classification; they operate in the following spheres: child products, child and adult entertainment, food industry, delivery service, health activities, and apparel production.

University direct beneficiaries, i.e. graduates also belong to one of the targets group for our study, with which we conducted a quantitative survey (comprising 1201 respondents)[27] in January-February 2021. Since the modernization of the Georgian higher education system (harmonization with the European standards) started in 2005 with Georgia joining the Bologna Process, we specifically targeted those individuals who obtained the Bache-

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27 For detailed information and demographic background of the survey participants, please see Chapter 4 and Notes.

lor's degree in 2008-2020. Herewith, the 2008 graduates were also surveyed based on the logic that they have spent only one academic year outside Bologna[28] and gained the major degree still within the first wave of reforms.

Even though the quantitative fieldwork was planned in the form of face-to-face interviewing, the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020-2021 and respective lockdowns and restrictions in Georgia have made us alter our plan. Therefore, the survey was conducted with a mixed method: telephone interviewing (21.1%) and online (self-administered) survey (78.9%).[29]

In order to develop a quantitative research instrument (structured questionnaire) we have used the international experience of studying graduates' competences/skills, such as the questionnaires of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) survey of adult skills (PIAAC), the World Bank's STEP Skills Program, and European Skills and Jobs of the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP). We selected certain variables from these questionnaires that were relevant for our research purposes and adapted them to the Georgian context. Also, we have integrated the findings of our previous research and developed a single instrument. We performed both descriptive and explanatory statistical analyses (cross-tabulation, correlation, logistical regression).

Our survey questionnaire consisted of several thematic parts: demographic component, evaluation of the received education, education and employment, self-employment, and unemployment. Considering our specific focus on the graduates' skills, and more precisely, transferable skills (or transversal skills as EHEA's latest documents call them), we should define what this term envisages. To start from a broader definition, skill is an op-

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28 The Bergen Summit during which Georgia joined the Bologna Process, was organized on 19-20 May 2005. This means that the first wave of the reforms officially started from the academic year 2005-2006 even though the different changes had happened to the system in 2004, such as adoption of a new law on higher education, for instance.

29 The survey was conducted by the Caucasus Research Resource Center (CRRC). The target groups were sampled based on the CRRC databases of respondents of different surveys that had previously agreed to participate in upcoming CRRC surveys. Also, the snowball method was also used. Therefore, the research results are not country representative and cannot be generalized on the entire Georgian population. It only displays the tendencies of the concrete target group in respect to higher education and labor market (2008-2020 university graduates).

portunity to use (realize) received knowledge[30] for fulfilling a specific objective and problem-solving. Skill can be cognitive (implies the usage of logical, intuitive and creative thinking) and practical (from handcrafting to working with different methods, materials, and instruments) (ESCO Handbook, 2017, p. 18). Often, competence is also used as a synonym for skill and is defined as follows: a confirmed skill of applying knowledge, skills, personal, social and/or methodological opportunities within a working or learning context, professional and personal development. However, there is a difference between these two terms: skill implies the usage of methods and instruments in a concrete environment and for a specific objective, while competence, with its core essence, is broader and envisages an ability of an individual to independently (autonomously) and creatively use their knowledge and skills in new situations and for overcoming unexpected challenges (Ibid, pp. 18-19). Throughout the present publication, we will be using these two terms with their different meanings described above.

As for the transferable/transversal skills, they are equally relevant for different occupations or economic sectors. Reasoning, language/speech, application of knowledge, social interaction, attitudes and values – are those basic and "soft" skills that are considered cornerstones for an individual's personal development (Ibid, p. 20). OECD has perfectly summarized a set of concrete skills identified and defined on the international level for past decades that play an important role in the economic activities and social lives of individuals (see table 2.1). We have based the research instrument on these very skills and the indicators for their assessment. Therefore, we tried to display the skills in the questionnaire that would be 1) transversal or at least cross-sectoral – relevant for different economic activities (in other words, no sector-specific or occupation-specific), 2) in compliance with the indicators of the 6th level of the National Qualification Framework (Bachelor's level) (Decree №69/N of the Minister of Education, Science, Culture and Sports of Georgia, 10.04.2019).

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30 Knowledge means the unity of facts, principles, theories and practices that is connected with the field of education or work. Knowledge is a result of assimilating the information received during the learning process (ESCO Handbook, 2017).

Table 2.1 Meta classification of Competency Framework (OECD, 2016)	
Categories of Competences	**Indicators**
A. Cognitive Competences	
Communication	Reading, writing, verbal communication, foreign languages
Processing information	Analytical thinking, organizing information
Problem-solving	Identifying problems, planning and implementing an action plan, identifying, causal/correlative links and applying them in the problem-solving process
Learning	Learning skills, reflection, managing a learning process
Mathematics	Applying quantitative indicators, quantitative reasoning, communicating through mathematical language
B. Interpersonal Competences	Teamwork, participating in projects, cultural sensitivity, stress management
C. Intrapersonal Competences	
Self-regulation	Comprehending/ acknowledging own actions, self-reflection, cognition, adaption, stress handling
Management	Managing self (and others), organizing, responsibility
Creativity/manufacturing	Creative, initiative, assessing and taking risks
D. Technological Competences	
ICT	Using technologies

Research Limitations

As for the study limitation, as it was already mentioned above, within the qualitative study we targeted multi-profile HEIs and thus, conducted interviews with their academic and administrative personnel. The reason for

this choice lies in the fact that there are 56 authorized HEIs in Georgia at this stage (Center for Educational Quality Enhancement, n.d.) and it would be impossible for us to cover all of them. In order to have a somewhat complete picture, we selected multi-profile universities. Therefore, the research findings reflect the general tendencies and it would be desirable to study different specific academic directions in more depth.

In addition, the research is based on the self-assessment of transferable skills by the university graduates and not on the cognitive and practical standardized direct assessment that would measure the graduates' competences more objectively and precisely. Therefore, we have expected from the very beginning that the (self)assessment would be more subjective. Besides, the study findings cannot be generalized to all students who have graduated in 2008-2020 as the sampling is not representative of the graduates' population neither for the given time period nor for the higher education academic programs.

CHAPTER 3. MAIN FINDINGS OF THE QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

3.1 Challenges of the Higher Education System

As mentioned above, one of the objectives of the research was to study the systemic problems of higher education, especially with respect to the labor market. The current chapter discusses this very issue and comprises of the interview results of educational experts and policymakers.

Before discussing the interview results, we should mention that for the institutionalization of the Bologna Process guiding principles, it is important to reflect these principles in the normative and strategic documents. We already underlined earlier that the adoption of the new law on higher education in 2004 served as a normative basis for 2005 reforms. Reflection of the Bologna objectives in the joint strategy of education and science first occurred only in 2014 with the elaboration of a working document of the Strategic Directions of the System of Education and Science.[31] Even though this document has not been adopted on the national level, it was the first attempt to develop the country's unified vision of education within the Bologna reforms.[32] Among the different strategic objectives of this document, we can see the aims to improve the quality control and funding model of higher education, improvement of internal and international collaboration and support mobility, formation of a unified space for research and education, elimination of the barriers to access to higher education and enhancement of the compatibility of higher education with the labor market needs. The latter objective comprises the development of combined career development processes in the universities, the development of practice-based learning and the implementation of employment policy. However, the document does not contain any information on the

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31 The document is available at: https://www.mes.gov.ge/uploads/strategia..pdf

32 It is important to mention this document within the context of our research. The fact that this document was not adopted in 2014 and the strategy of education has been only adopted once in the history of independent Georgia, in December 2017, shows the attitude and inconsistent policy of the state towards education that we discuss later on in the publication.

mechanisms or resources for undertaking all these goals. As discussed above, the document remained as a working paper and has never been adopted.

Considering the abovementioned, it is interesting to consider the evaluation of our qualitative research respondents on this matter. When discussing strategic documents, and in general, the policy formation process, the very first issue identified by the respondents was related to the inconsistent planning, management, and mostly, the politicization of higher education system. According to the interviewees, the management of the system is highly centralized and is defined on the individual level of the ministers of education, who change very frequently. Each newly appointed minister (despite which political party their predecessor belonged to) announces the need for reforms and new strategies without even evaluating the work performed previously. A clear example of this was the strategic changes announced by the newly appointed Minister of Education and Science, Mikheil Batiashvili in fall 2018 ("Changes, Problems, Unexpectedness, Discoveries and Expectation of Reforms Again – 2018 in Education", 31 December 2018), while the Joint Strategy of Education and Science was only adopted in December 2017. This shows that the principle of heredity does not work in the system which results in inconsistent decisions and actions, and requires additional human and financial resources. In the end, such processes negatively affect the development of quality of education in Georgia. Herewith, it should be mentioned that these problems related to the national higher education system have been widely discussed in multiple academic articles, research publications or policy documents for many years (Glonti & Chitashvili, 2006; Bregvadze, 2013; Lezhava and Amashukeli, 2016; Jibladze, 2017; Chakhaia & Bregvadze, 2018; Darchia et al., 2019; Amashukeli et al., 2020; Chitashvili, 2020; Tsotniashvii, 2020).

> *"Education system is directly related to the election cycle and we see that not only in general, but also in higher education. Changes are absolutely politicized and linked to the electoral cycle [...] strategy [of education and science] depends on concrete individuals and the change of ministers causes instability, trust towards the system is shaken" (respondent 3, female, higher education expert).*[33]

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33 Multiple quotations throughout the publication reflect different issues revealed within broader themes. Therefore, the numerous quotations replicate this diversity.

"In general, the main problem of our education system, including higher education, is that the system is not managed correctly […] when everything goes down to one person – the minister who makes decisions and defines the trajectory of the system, there always is a high level of subjectivity. Thus, we get what we get. Rapid change of ministers causes the following: changes the minister, changes the policy. Even within the same government, with the difference of two-three years, [policy] has changed radically in certain cases" (respondents 11, male, higher education scholar).

"There is no inheritance and when a new minister comes, the things the former has accomplished are put on the shelf, even if they represent one and the same [political] team, and all this happens without any analysis: we have never heard any analysis of this or that minister has done well or wrong before leaving the office. The new team has to present a project, that this was done wrong and we change it for this and that reason, right?!" (respondent 15, female, professor, state university).

"There is a scarcity of inheritance and not in the case of governmental change, but within one and the same government, the processes are stopped and not developed. They will need new resources if started once again from the very beginning, that stops and hinders the process" (respondent 20, male, rector, state university).

According to the research participants, the inconsistency of the system results in the fact that higher education policy and respectively, the university performance is not planned in the long-term, results-oriented perspective. Nevertheless, there still are the abovementioned strategies (2017-2021) and draft strategies (2014), while the authorization standards require from the universities to develop strategic plans; and all of these happen in a more formal way and their implementation into practice is not that obvious. This is explained by the lack of a public-political consensus on what kind of educational system we want to have and for what purpose. Considering the mentioned, an (actual) strategic vision for the development of higher education does not really function.

"I think there should be a consensus in the country on what we need education for. What do we need general, higher or vocational education for? What is the country's expectation of higher education? And then the strategy and policy would in compliance with these expectations. We don't have such a consensus, and if we had one, the situation would be totally different. Currently, I don't see a unified policy for higher education. I see only fragmented processes" (respondent 14, female, Quality Assurance Unit, state university).

"I believe the policy is not defined. In reality, there is no strategic vision and the education system is very weak. If we look at other sectors, they have the development priorities and landmarks, while in the case of education, the overall strategy is not agreed upon. And this results in the weakness of respective documents [...] I see a lack of strategic vision, prioritization and only see a tendency of automatizing that cannot solve the existing problems" (respondent 19, female, professor, private university).

The majority of the experts involved in our study rather critically assess the implementation of the 2017-2021 joint strategy of education and science as well. In this case as well, the problem lies in the fact that the education system and reforms are utilized by the political forces as "a trump card that they use to gain the electoral votes" (respondent 16, female, higher education expert, non-governmental organization). As the respondents noted, the strategy exists only formally: even though it contains great goals (that lack empirical evidence and respective financial resources), they cannot/do not support the improvement of the quality of education.

"Formally, it [the strategy] is there and we get a comedy: the Ministry has a strategy, a new Minister arrives and brings a new strategy, which looks rather like a wish list demonstrating what they want to do... The strategy lies in the corner, dusted and we listen to new ideas every year" (respondent 11, male, higher education scholar, non-governmental organization).

"If they don't put immense goals [in the strategy], it won't look like they are doing something. Immense goals are tied to

the visibility of doing something. I say I have approved sector benchmarks but what do these benchmarks look like? Do they reflect quality? We are focused to plan something enormous and then say, that's what we did" (respondent 12, female, quality assurance unit, state university).

As one of the respondents mentioned, only several provisions of the strategic document were fulfilled by 2019. Among those, a relatively sustainable achievement was related to the introduction of new mechanisms for quality assurance and the acquisition of a full membership of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) by the national quality assurance center. However, one thing is to introduce the standards and the other one is to actually implement them. Therefore, as the respondents underlined, due to poor performance there is a high probability that the expected positive outcome (in respect to improving the quality of education) might not be achieved and the chance to make structural changes to the politicized educational system might be missed.

" [...] what was achieved in 2018-2019 in the education system is not a part of the strategy. The only thing that was achieved from the strategic objectives is related to the adoption of a new law on vocational education. We have made a lot of efforts on that but finally, it was completed. Another one was the quality assurance mechanisms and the membership of ENQA [...] some things won't be changed that easily due to ENQA membership: if we desire to change anything, we will have to think twice not to lose this membership, as this has happened before [to others] [...] therefore, I have a feeling that not much will be changed on the policy level, however, due to flawed implementation and wrong approaches the benefits might not be achieved" (respondent 7, female, higher education reform expert, non-governmental organization).

Part of the respondents also spoke about the role of higher education in the development of knowledge-based economy. The progress of Georgia in this respect was highly critically evaluated by our research participants. At the one hand, it was discussed that there are resources for establish-

ing a triangle between education, scientific research and innovation, but there are no conditions and environment for supporting this collaboration. As discussed, this is connected with the inconsistent policy and a general lack of interest in the topic among the policymakers (there is no political will for this). This issue is also connected with the fact that all the academic disciplines (including agricultural sciences, engineering, education, natural science, humanities and social sciences) are recognized as educational priorities by the state but not with respect to research, but with respect to state scholarships provided to students (Decree №50/N of the Minister of Education and Science of Georgia). Thus, the abovementioned prioritization of the academic disciplines does not consider linking them to the industry as well.

> *"This [knowledge economy] envisages links between research and education, innovation, and knowledge triangle - when university, science and industry work together for enhancing economy. I can recall two or three universities in Georgia that have the potential for that but have neither internal nor external state resources for this purpose. This is a vital issue needing a consistent and rigid policy"* (respondent 29, female, higher education expert).

> *"The role of the state lies in supporting the links between businesses, universities and the system of education. Transmitting the foreign experience is possible. Also, we should not leave the study of the labor market to the private sector, but the state should conduct proper research and link it to the development strategy of the country. Anyway, the government announces their strategy and if you ask a few organizations having relevant experience, they will draft a wonderful strategy and action plan. And this is not fulfilled yet. Formally, we always have strategies* (respondent 7, female, higher education reform expert, non-governmental organization).

> *"Almost all [academic] directions are recognized as the state priority. When a state declares something as priority, this should be followed by the respective funding. From the institutional perspective, it is important to gear up the links [with the industry], but this should be realistic. Physics academic program in TSU is one of the most successful ones having a long*

history, but it is not linked to any of the industrial spaces" (respondent 4, female, quality assurance unit, state university).

On the other hand, our respondents discuss a rather unstable Georgian economy that naturally negatively affects the number of working positions. Considering the homogeneity of the market that envisages there are a few leading sectors in Georgia and new industries, and respectively new economic occupations, are rarely created, the links between the higher education and employment market are scarce and homogenous as well. Besides, we should also discuss the field characteristics that are not considered by the general market studies. For instance, if a study does not identify a demand from the labor market on the disciplines like humanities or theoretical physics, this does not mean that the universities should not develop them in the future. Therefore, the respondents have mentioned multiple times that we should very carefully discuss the issue of directly (causally) linking higher education with the labor market. In this context, one problematic area was also highlighted by our respondents that the majority of employers have a little understanding of what skills and knowledge they are looking for in employees. This is explained by the still very formal and not a result-oriented communication between higher education and employers. However, the authorization and accreditation standards still create a ground for the actual involvement of employers in the development of academic programs and for a qualitative change after time. On the other hand, the universities should reflect the demands and needs of the economy and labor market in the academic programs and teaching and learning process (Darchia et al., 2019).[34] Our research respondents also mentioned that the links to the labor market is more logical in case of the vocational education as this field is more oriented towards rapid employment (although, the problem of the poor economy and limited labor market touches upon vocational education

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34 It is not meant here that HEIs should study the labor market themselves in a permanent regime if they have no resources for that. It is very unlikely that any Georgian university has the material and human resources necessary for that, especially for conducting field market studies. Furthermore, the standards of authorization/accreditation asking to reflect the labor market demands in the academic programs should not be directly understood considering this very scarcity of resources. Therefore, what is meant here is to use the results of studies already conducted by the state, local non-governmental or international organizations, analyze these results in-depth and reflect them in the academic programs.

graduates as well), while the major objective of the higher education (universities) should remain to be the knowledge creation.

> *"The market is also not very trustworthy in this country. When you admit a student in a 4-year bachelor's program and think that after 4 years they will get employed, there is no prognosis done what the market will look like or whether or not it will exist after those years. I approach the employment issue very carefully as even the employers do not know what they want" (respondent 3, female, higher education expert).*

> *"Employment would be a very adequate measurement for the vocational education rather then for higher education as the vocational education is connected with fast employment. The labor market and higher education will never be similarly linked with one another as the vocational one. Which market research shows that we need physicists? None. That's why we cannot connect these two so easily. However, we should use those specific fields that the Georgian economy needs and those instruments we have. For example, some think that the labor market and employment start with counting the number of employed students. Georgia cannot follow this path as we don't have an economy, and there are no jobs (respondent 7, female, higher education reform expert, non-governmental organization).*

> *"I look at employment rather carefully […] When you are a university with an analytical profile, you should prepare a person that will create new knowledge, this is your major mission. That's how you differ from others and I guess university has no other mission, as in order to develop certain skills necessary for employment, you don't need to go to the university. There are lots of other effective opportunities for that; but if you [university] do not create new knowledge, you practically lose your main role" (respondent 14, female, quality assurance unit, state university).*

> *"[…] employment is a complex concept. On the one hand, it depends on the existence of the labor market, jobs, and economy in order to simplify graduate employment. In a country*

without a well-developed economy, poor labor market and a limited number of jobs [...] in order to have a high indicator of employment, several factors should be in place: diversity of economy and labor market and readiness for that. We have neither the former, nor the latter. This is not an economy, but a service sphere where one doesn't necessarily need a PhD, but they [PhDs] still work due to lack of the market. [...] Besides, there is no communication between the scarce market and universities. We look over the labor market from above. No, we should go down to it and ask what kind of cadre they need. This communication is lost, we, professors sit on the Olympus, but when we got down, employers could not tell us what they need, as they don't know it either. Both parties should be ready for communication [...] Therefore, there is a demand and efforts but communication still has a formal character. The next issue is what the university needs for preparing students for the labor market. We should understand that the philosophy of employment should be changed. The time when one was sent to the village first and then to the city [for employment] is over; the market has absolutely changed" (respondent 29, female, higher education expert).

Our respondents name a lack of practical components in the learning process as one of the major challenges hindering the formation of the modern labor force. There is a deficit of human resources equipped with contemporary knowledge and skills on the national labor market which is also revealed by different quantitative and qualitative studies conducted with the employers (Lezhava and Amashukeli, 2015; Guria Youth Resource Center, 2021) and the Global Competitiveness Report which places Georgia on 125th position (out of 141 countries) in respect to evaluating the skills of the labor force (Global Competitiveness Report, 2019).[35] This discussion of the education experts regarding the need for the practical component interestingly corresponds to the findings of the quantitative study conducted with

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35 Despite the fact that the Global Competitiveness Report does not separate the labor force having higher education in their analysis, these data still reflect a general picture and follow the overall trends in the country revealed by the studies about the labor market conducted by different organizations.

the university graduates that clearly underlines a positive effect of the practical component on employment with one's own specialty (see table 4.13).

"Sometimes, graduates have an excellent theoretical knowledge, but cannot apply it into practice. Thus, the knowledge application aspects are rather weak" (respondent 29, female, higher education expert)

"Practical component of higher education is rather neglected. There are some fields that absolutely require practice. For instance, stomatology. It's inevitable, isn't it? There are some fields that should not allow students to graduate without practice" (respondent 12, female, quality assurance unit, state university).

Some of the respondents underlined that in addition to the field competences, the university education should target the development of transferable skills in students – first of all, this will increase the employability of graduates in the constantly changing economy and labor market where field competences are often outweighed by transferable skills. As one of the educational experts mentioned, these days, there is no knowledge "acquired once and for all" and it is essential to follow the principles of lifelong learning in the educational process. However, the criticism of our respondents is directed at the fact that the universities and their administrative-academic personnel (not counting certain exceptions) do not fully understand the importance of integrating transferable skills in the learning process. And this is connected with the issue of practical component that is problematic in the majority of HEIs in Georgia, as discussed above. It is noteworthy that according to the ESG 2015, the renewed program accreditation standards envisage the assessment of practical and transferable skills that gives even a bigger weigh to the topic (Accreditation Standards for Higher Education Programmes, 2018). It should be also admitted here that this opinion interestingly corresponds to the quantitative data of our study that revealed a correlation between certain teaching methods and transferable skills (see diagrams 4.8 and 4.9)

"We should prepare students for being adaptive in the changing working environment so that they know there is no

knowledge acquired once and for all in the 21ˢᵗ century. They graduate from the university and are obliged to constantly update their knowledge. I.e. we should teach students the principles of lifelong learning. Also, they should have not only field knowledge, but transferable skills as well that they will use in accordance with the changes in the labor market. This means that we should give them field knowledge in connection with the transferable skills. If students don't have this, it does not matter what their diplomas say, they won't be able to get employed and be successful. These transferable skills are IT and communication skills, etc. (respondent 29, female, higher education expert).

"Let's discuss the course of academic writing: this course might be taught by philologists that not necessarily have an understanding of academic writing, they lack the teaching hours, and "ok, let's give them the course of academic writing." I believe, universities do not pay too much attention and importance to these transferable skills" (respondent 2, female, higher education reform expert).

"One of them is communication skill. This is a vital skill. It is absolutely impossible to graduate without this skill. In certain cases, a person gets employed through transferable skills rather than field competences" (respondent 12, female, quality assurance unit, state university).

"I believe we don't understand well what transferable skills mean, how to measure and develop them. If you ask around different universities, you will get different answers. We don't know those approaches that develop these skills" (respondent 14, female, foreign affairs unit, state university).

One more important aspect that was identified during the qualitative study is connected with the role of science in the development of the knowledge economy and labor market. According to our respondents, strengthening links between education and science, therefore, the development of the knowledge economy in the country and international collaboration of HEIs is hindered by the existing legislation at some point. It should be highlighted here that this problem is more relevant for the state universities as

legal entities of public law (LEPL). "Rigid" is the epithet used by the research respondents with respect to the legislative norms covering the state HEIs with the LEPL status. For instance, the existing procurement procedure is named as the major factor hindering scientific activities. One of the study participants underlines that the so-called spin-off[36] cannot be developed at the Georgian university basis due to the legislative framework, considering that even for purchasing minor products a tender should be announced. Besides, universities with LEPL status have a rather inflexible bureaucratic structure that makes it extremely difficult to connect higher education with the business ecosystem that on the other hand is a declared priority for every government of Georgia.

> *"I am saying this based on what I personally faced. Their [HEIs] laws require tenders for purchases that is an enormous problem for a company. It is said [in the state strategies] that spin-offs should be developed. I wanted [medical] university to invest 10% and gain the same profit. This would make me [a spin-off company] a part of the university space. I am involved in the international society as a professor, but if the university would co-fund me, the university legislation would enter the stage, i.e. I would need to conduct a tender to buy even a pen and this is insane. And how the legislative base is ensured?! It is flawed. And this shows that this [linking HEIs with the industry] is not a priority. They announce the 5-point development plan and it looks like a session of a communist party. "I will do this" sounds really great but that's where all die immediately. Everything is done for gaining electoral votes, that's it" (respondent 8, male, professor, international university).*

> *"Universities with LEPL status cannot do it as they have lots of challenges on the legislative level. For instance, in TSU, which is a LEPL, we introduced magnetic resonance equipment that is necessary for everyone in Georgia but we don't have it: samples are sent to Turkey, Germany, and we have this equip-*

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36 A university spin-off is a private company that uses the knowledge created within the university space and is connected to the university in financial terms despite its founder being a professor or a student. A spin-off gives provides financial compensation to the university for commercializing the knowledge it created (Hogan and Zhou, 2010).

ment in TSU. When the pharmaceutical sector heard about this machine, they were happy and decided to contract and collaborate with us. Before TSU as a LEPL decides what legal form this collaboration might have, it is too late. The business needs it today and not after two years. I am not criticizing TSU now, it is simply that under current legislation it is impossible for a university to think about development of hubs. For this purpose, special legislation should be developed and the law should be amended to give more flexibility to the LEPLs" (respondent 17, female, international organization).

As we already mentioned already, by the end of 2021 a new draft of the Joint National Strategy of Education and Science 2022-2032 and respective sector action plans 2022-2023 were made available for public discussions. These documents were developed within the program "Innovation, Inclusive Education and Quality (I2Q) conducted with the financial support of the EU Public Administration Project (PAR) and the World Bank.[37] Besides, a new model for funding higher education that is also a part of I2Q program was also transferred to the mode of public consultations. Herewith, it is noteworthy that in addition to the funding system reform, the 2022-2032 strategy envisages the solution to the problems discussed above such as implementation monitoring and accountability, legislative changes for simplifying the procurement process for HEIs, prioritization of academic disciplines, development of mobility systems between HEIs and industry and others. However, it is also should be underlined that the changes in the system management is rather a long-lasting process and the period for midterm result achievement is defined to be 2027 (Higher Education Action Plan 2022-2032).

Overall, it can be concluded that the higher education experts, administrative and academic personnel of the universities participating in our research are rather critical of the education policy. Most of our respondents believe that the major challenge of the education system is its politicization. This issue causes inconsistent decision-making and activities that on the other hand are not agreed upon with the stakeholders, are made solitarily and serve some narrow political interests. Therefore, they do not respond to the existing needs of higher education system and overall, the education policy

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37   Detailed information is available at: http://iiq.gov.ge/ge/

is not result-oriented. This issue is also connected with the lack of political support for creating a knowledge economy in the country – this aspect requires linking academic knowledge, economy and innovation with one another, changes to the legislation, close communication with business sector, etc. Another important challenge connected with the educational process was identified to be the lack of practical components in the learning process and the development of transferable skills alongside the field competences among the students. It is also noteworthy that the majority of our respondents believe that first of all, higher education should create new knowledge rather than being focused on supporting the employment of graduates.

Considering the abovementioned, it is also important to see what the employers and new entrepreneurs (startupers) think about higher education in Georgia, and its role in the process of developing youth employment/self-employment opportunities. The next subchapter will touch upon these very issues.

3.2 Assessment of Higher Education by Startupers and Employers

The present sub-chapter discusses the results of the focus groups conducted with the startupers and employers. As it was mentioned above, we were interested to see how higher education supports the development, and at some point, even the formation of the labor market. Therefore, we wanted to understand the motivation of the startupers that forced them to start up their businesses and what role higher education played in this process. As it turned out, the major motivation was related to the lack of supply in concrete fields and/or low quality of certain products. Considering this, the driving force of our respondents was to fill in the disbalance between demand and supply and use the business opportunities in this respect. It is no surprise that this was accompanied by the desire to own a business that was supported by Covid-19 pandemic at some point, which left some of our respondents unemployed.

> *"We came to a conclusion that we wanted to create something on the Georgian market that we liked" (startupers focus group).*

> *"We wanted to have a birthday center that would be different from others. But the idea came from the fact that my child did not like the majority of the birthday centers and there were only some of them that he/she liked" (startupers focus group).*

> *"I wanted to do what I listened to or came across with. There was a serious flaw in the delivery service; a single parcel required several days to be delivered throughout Tbilisi. That made me think of changing this" (startupers focus group).*

It should be admitted here that one part of the respondents cannot directly connect the higher education they received with starting up their business. According to them, the profession they chose and mastered at the university and in some cases, the quality of education did not correspond to the knowledge they needed for starting up a business and its management. It is implied in the case of certain respondents that the education they received was not enough and they also needed to know basic principles of adjacent disciplines. While in the case of other respondents, the quality of their direct profile (specialty) was so low that they had to fill this gap alongside getting working experience.

> *"It is wonderful to get an education in a good institution, but I have graduated from [university is named] and despite having 100% funded scholarship, neither in this industry [meaning their startup], nor in the tourism sector and I have graduated from tourism management and follow the hotel business, no, no and no – I don't think my education helped me in anything. I started in the hotel business from scratch and my working experience gave me the knowledge I needed to start up my business and not higher education" (startupers focus group).*

> *"There is no connection. I learned more after graduation. In general, I think that one cannot that easily study any specialty, you also need personal development. Personal development is a stage we realize certain stuff, and in this case, it [education] is not connected" (startupers focus group).*

> *"I cannot really divide and say that if not [the university is named] I would not be able to startup my business" (startupers focus group).*

"I would say that this is not a major factor, I mean in the case of the startup and not in other professional activities of course. This is the territory where education and the knowledge base you have may not play any role" (startupers focus group).

At the same time, the majority of the respondents find it difficult to divide between the education they got in universities and overall knowledge and compteneces they developed in parallel to getting working experience. Furthermore, they underline that within the university studies they acquired certain fundamental knowledge and skills that they further fined out and enriched in another environment, and namely, at the workplaces. However, they also underline that if not the fundamental education, it would be extremely difficult for them to adapt and handle the business processes. Thus, starting up one's own business has not necessarily direct, but rather an indirect connection with the transferrable skills developed within the formal higher educational settings.

"Of course it helped. If not that background, I would not understand many processes that I have never come across before or in previous jobs" (startupers focus group).

"I am a financial manager, and a lawyer, even though I have studied neither of them. It is simply the fact that you can easily do something because you are adapted to, and after all something remains [in your memory, mind] (startupers focus group).

Furthermore, the role of lifelong learning is clearly revealed in the focus group discussions that means not only continuation of education after graduation, but also refinement of knowledge in the working environment, acquisition of new knowledge and development of skills. The research respondents underline that in most cases, they have used knowledge and skills not related to their own specialties but from the adjacent ones when starting up their businesses. This is extremely important considering the lack of human and material resources they face as they often have to also work in different spheres as marketing, finances, accountancy and law.

"Everything was useful for me at some point, marketing skills from one job, networks from another, skills from educa-

tion, such as presentations skills, etc. I mean I feel with every cell of my body how good it is that all this happened, because it helps me now. I simply give a different shape to knowledge I have gained, I realize it differently" (startupers focus group).

"I cannot say that my knowledge from Bachelor's studies… I mean I remember some stuff that is fundamental, but I cannot say that I can recall anything that I studies about accountancy for instance. There is something that was stored in me. It was fundamental that was built upon in the working process" (startupers focus group).

"My working experience has refined this theoretical knowledge a lot. And now my sociological knowledge helps me to understand the segmentation, i.e. whom the product is directed at. This is further enriched by the marketing experience that I gained… Therefore, everything helps me, my working experience, my background of public relations helps me while working with media, etc." (startupers focus group).

"In my case, I have graduated from [the university if identified] the direction of marketing. Afterwards, I did my Master's in economics, but I believe that the experience of teamwork, friendship, people that I came across with during Master's studies was much more important than the Master's itself" (startupers focus group).

One more interesting tendency was observed in respect to higher education that is connected with the lack of transversal skills and knowledge necessary for business. In particular, the majority of the respondents admit that they have a lack of specific knowledge required to manage a startup that is not necessarily connected with any profile education but can be available within the university settings as extracurricular activities. Namely, this is related to the knowledge on how to draft grant proposals and business plans that is quite deficient according to our respondents. As they put it, this deficit of knowledge hinders their participation in the grant contests and causes them a lot of time as they have to develop these skills now.

"It would be ideal to, I mean let's say business administration […] they say how well they can draft a grant proposal

and a budget so they don't need anyone's help. I would love to have this skill. So that for instance, students choose certain subjects at some point, right? They might not have any relation with startups but it would be great to also have these subjects in the curricula so to teach people to gear up some additional stuff" (startupers focus group).

Despite the fact that some of our respondents cannot link the education they received during Bachelor's studies with their business activities, they still recognize the role of the university for their career development and in general starting up a business. This role is mostly related not only to certain skills as mentioned above, but also to networks they established within the university settings. In general, the role of networking is not only identified in this, but also in other education-labor market studies as well (Amashukeli et al, 2017, Lezhava and Amashukeli, 2015).

"It helps you in many cases, in startup management, you can network easily instead of calling and calling and calling" (startupers focus group).

"You put a lot of money and investment in your education; investing resources and studying at a good university does not mean that you automatically get employed. In this country, networking might be more useful than a higher education diploma" (startupers focus group).

"Networking is the first and most important tool that you have in Georgia" (startupers focus group).

The information discussed above about higher education and the perspectives of starting up a business corresponds to the quantitative survey of our study that we conducted with the university graduates. Despite the small sample of the target group, i.e the university graduates who started up business in the past few years that we consider under the category of startupers (overall 136 respondents, out of which only 120 have an active business currently), which does not allow us to generalize any results, we can still observe general tendencies. Considering the abovementioned group only partially corresponds to our definition of a startuper, we call them self-employed individuals in the case of the quantitative study. While

assessing higher education, this group is somewhat critical of the role/support of university education for their business activities. Namely, around 22-43% believe that the university had helped them at some point (see Diagram 3.1). The aspect of obtaining the initial capital is most critically evaluated (54%). As mentioned above, this component was also negatively discussed by the focus group participants (acquisition of grants, development of business plans).

Diagram 3.1

Role of university educationin business activities [N=120]

	Did not help	Neutral	Helped
Be able to develop / expand my business	42%	23%	36%
Select the necessary staff	42%	20%	38%
Run a business	39%	18%	43%
Do accounting	46%	23%	31%
Gain initial capital	54%	24%	22%
Register a business	44%	23%	33%
Draft a business plan	44%	23%	33%
Study the market	38%	22%	40%
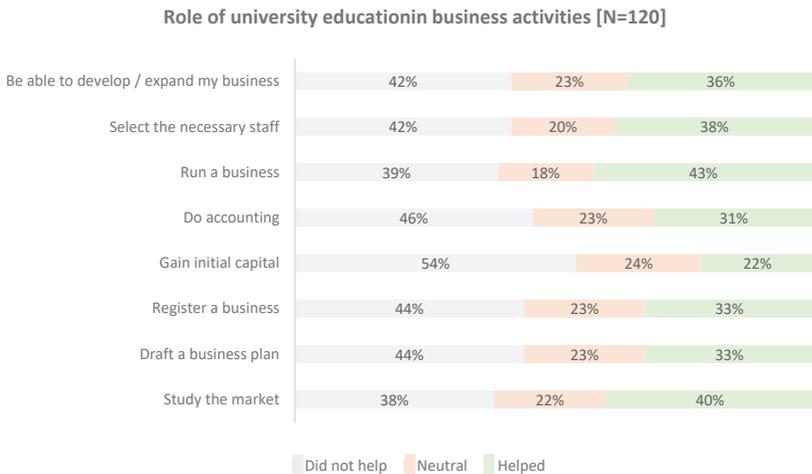
In addition to the self-evaluation of the startupers' competences, it is also important to see how they, as well as the other employers assess the knowledge and skills of their employees. According to our respondents, a general demand on highly qualified cadre and higher education depends on the specific field and position, which is not surprising at all. In case of the startupers, demand mostly falls on the low-qualified individuals, such as craftsmen, carpenters, couriers, etc. This is caused by the fact that most of the high qualification activities (management, financial management, etc.) they are doing themselves. In the case of the employers, demand for higher qualifications and therefore, higher education is observed. However, it is also noteworthy that this demand for higher education seems rather formal. In particular, there is a tendency that the trust towards universities is low – only part of our respondents admits to having some collaboration with local, mostly private uni-

versities. Some private universities were also named that they prefer to work with to search within a database of relatively better-prepared cadres. Besides, preferences towards private universities are determined by the better technical skills of their graduates. Namely, our respondents believe it is important for graduates to have well-developed ICT skills. As the focus group participants put it, it is much easier to "rat run" in the state universities without actually getting knowledge, than in the private ones. Most probably this perception is related to the high number of students in the state universities which makes it difficult to strictly control the quality of studies. However, it should be also underlined that when making such comparisons, only two private universities are identified in the respondents' narratives, while the rest of the 35[38] private HEIs are not mentioned at all.

> *"Not to lose time, I prefer to attract them [graduates] from a good university. Under good I mean the ones [two private HEIs are named] that give a proper material, like second or third graders… I work with them a couple of years and after I get a good product that I use in multiple directions" (employers' focus group).*
>
> *"We needed someone with a strong knowledge of excel at one of the positions. Well, strong means that they would have certain basic skills. So we got in touch with a professor of excel from [private university is named] and asked for a list of top students and selected the staff from them" (employers' focus group).*
>
> *"… in [state university is named] you can rat run much easier and when you have graduated from that university, you have a diploma, your parents are happy and believe for some reason that this is great" (employers' focus group).*

However, as mentioned above, a tendency is revealed in the focus groups that not even "leading" universities are expected to give high-quality knowledge, but rather are expected to develop basic skills in students that will be further developed based on the practical work. It is implied that such cadres would develop a certain level of professionalism and specific

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[38]   Under this number only authorized higher education institutions are envisaged that are enlisted on the website of the National Center for Educational Quality Enhancement: www.eqe.ge

personnel would "grow" that is necessary for a certain company/position. Furthermore, a part of the employers believes that the universities have lost their function at some point as it is much easier to get information nowadays and it is no longer needed to get enrolled in formal educational institutions. Therefore, universities should adapt to a new reality and continue educating students in a different format that would make the graduates more competitive on the market.

> *"I need cadres... that I will raise myself" (employers' focus group)*

> *"Unfortunately, [HEIs] do not give theoretical knowledge as well as any connection with practical work to their students. They [students] know that there are interviews, but this is not translated into practice, they have pure knowledge, no not knowledge, they have information. I believe universities should give them knowledge and not information, as information can be accessed very easily. We can download Harvard materials and listen to very high-quality professors online. I think university is losing its function if they do not switch on practice" (employers' focus group).*

In general, both big employers and startupers quite heavily criticize the knowledge and skills of the employees. It was mentioned multiple times during the focus group discussions that the demand on the professional cadre cannot be met either in the case of low-qualification or high qualification occupations. This is explained by the fact that employees (or potential employees) might have theoretical knowledge but lack those practical skills that are more essential for the business.

> *"They got theoretical knowledge in [certain discipline is named], they have mastered theories and then came to the organization and cannot understand, cannot orientate how to apply those theories into practice, how to act at the interview, compile a questionnaire, write a test" (employers' focus group).*

> *"For instance, a stainless steel welder that is needed in the factory, cannot be found in Georgia. You have cadres that we have raised for 20 years, they studied and that's it, there is no*

other person with similar knowledge in the country" (employers' focus group)

When discussing the demand for knowledge and skills in general, it should be also underlined that the research participants pay attention to basic and interpersonal skills more than to certain theoretical knowledge that is not necessarily related to the university functions or responsibilities. For instance, our employers and startupers made a special focus on personal skills such as a sense of responsibility, interest/loyalty towards their work and adaptation skill to get adjusted to the demands of one's job, analytical skills, time management and communication.

"Personal characteristics are very important, sometimes even more important than knowledge of something. Skills such as loyalty, engagement in one's work, and dedication is essential. Ok, there are some stuff that cannot be easily trained, but still can be trained, can fill the gap of knowledge, but changing personal ones is difficult" (employers' focus group).

"Responsibility is essential. Anything can be taught. In any case, a person should fit in your business" (startupers' focus group).

"There can be a less qualified cadre, but at the same time, with very strong personal characteristics and an organization can be ready with all the forms and values to invest maximal resources in such cadre" (employers' focus group).

The possibility to adapt to a constantly changing environment in respect to both low and high-qualification personnel is underlined by the respondents multiple times. According to them, it is essential for a person to adapt to the existing reality, while the rest of the knowledge necessary to fulfil the job obligations can be acquired in a short period of time.

"Unfortunately, hard skills are taking a lot of attention. I personally struggle a lot not to pay so much attention to hard skills as it takes about three months for a talented person to develop those skills. I don't know, I cannot imagine anything that cannot be studied by a flexible, communicative, development-oriented individual" (employers' focus group).

Demand on the abovementioned skills was also observed not only within the present qualitative research but also in the quantitative employers' survey conducted by the Center for Social Sciences with the funding of four private universities (GICE Partnership) in spring-summer 2019.[39] This study shows that the major focus of the employers fall on the interpersonal skills such as teamwork, adaptation skill, application of knowledge into practice, while different technical competences, such as multimedia skills, report writing, presentation, English language or ICT skills are less demanded (see table 3.1).

Table 3.1 Employers' demand on skills

	Would be very important
Team work	88%
Meeting deadlines	86%
Applying knowledge into practice	85%
Adapting to new environment	85%
Independent work	79%
Argumentative reasoning	77%
In-depth field knowledge	76%
Working under stress	73%
Verbal communication	69%
Written communication	58%
Creative thinking	58%
Searching for information in the internet	50%
Working with Microsoft Office programs	42%
Verbal and written English proficiency	32%

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39 The project was conducted within the consortium of four private universities of Georgia (Georgian Institute of Public Affairs, International Black Sea University, Caucasus University and East European University) under the name of GICE Partnership. The study comprised of a survey of 1176 employers (private, public and non-governmental entities) in 9 cities of Georgia that was representative of the involved cities and economic fields of the organizations. The project was conducted in 2019 by the Center for Social Sciences. It aimed to see the demand on the university graduates, and the collaboration practices of employers with the local universities.

Presentation/public speech basic skills	28%
Basic skills of project writing and management	16%
Basic skills of preparing business reports	15%
Multimedia skills	14%
Basic skills of preparing business plans and budgets	13%
Basic skills of preparing research reports	12%
Basic skills quantitative research	10%
Basic skills qualitative research	8%
Basic skills of preparing policy documents	5%

One more extremely important topic that popped up during the focus group discussions, especially in the case of employers, is related to the student internship and collaboration with universities for this purpose. According to their opinion, even the students have rather negative attitudes towards internship as it envisages working for free. [40] At the same time, based on their own experience, our focus group participants underline that internship helps students develop those practical skills that are so much in necessity and in deficit in the labor market.

> *"Many of them don't want to do internships and directly look for jobs. And this is a problem. I have heard such attitudes from many as if 'how can I work for free', 'I am wasting my time'…The mentality needs to be changed" (Employers' focus group).*
> *"I think it [internship] helped each of us a lot as who started with an internship, has stayed to work within the same company later on and continued career; and those who didn't – could not develop even elementary skills. When one enters the company on a beginner's position, they should know how*

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40 In September 2020, the Labor Code of Georgia was amended and the internship was redefined once again as both refundable and non-refundable: "Intern is a physical person performing specific tasks for employer in exchange of certain remuneration or without it, for enhancing qualification, professional knowledge, skills or for gaining practical experience" (Article 18).

to behave: how to act in the organization, what is permissible and what is not" (Employers' focus group).

As we observed from the focus group discussions, several important tendencies were revealed in respect to the importance of education and mostly, transferable skills for forming the employment perspectives and the labor market itself. Mainly, the startupers find it difficult to directly connect university education with their business activities. However, the deeper discussion showed that education still plays a role in market formation but not necessarily a decisive one. Our participants believed that the skills, knowledge and experience they received at the university on a basic level but are developed as a part of lifelong learning is much more important. Overall, when discussing the role of the university from a positive angle, networking is underlined, while from the negative perspective, the participants talk about the lack of specific knowledge related to the basics of doing business. It is also noteworthy that similar to the startupers, the employers discuss universities as a space for developing basic, elementary knowledge/skills and a general worldview that prepare students as raw materials one can further retrain and adjust to one's own needs. In addition, it is obvious that the employers prefer skills of applying knowledge into practice over the profound theoretical knowledge itself, which is connected with the internship programs (and networking).

It is also noteworthy that the abovementioned qualitative data are interestingly in compliance with the quantitative data about assessing internship and practical teaching methods. For further details on this issue, please refer to the next chapter that discusses the findings of the quantitative research.

CHAPTER 4. MAIN FINDINGS OF THE QUANTITATIVE STUDY

4.1 Overall Profile of the University Graduates

As it was mentioned in the methodology part, a total of 1202 respondents participated in our quantitative survey who graduated from Bachelor's studies in 2008-2020 (after Georgia joined the Bologna Process in 2005). According to the research data, the biggest portion of the surveyed individuals have graduated in 2013-2014 (12.8% and 13.3%, respectively) (see diagram 4.1).[1]

Diagram 4.1

Graduates' distribution, 2008–2020
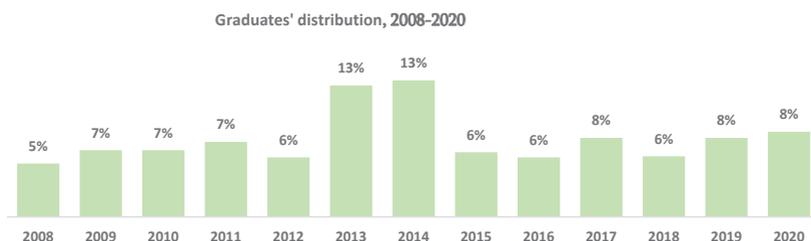
It should be underlined that in respect to the graduates' sex, females are clearly leading and this tendency coincides with the GeoStat data,[41] however, they are not identical (see Diagrams 4.2 and 4.3).

Diagram 4.2

Sex distribution of the graduates (2008-2020)

Male   Female

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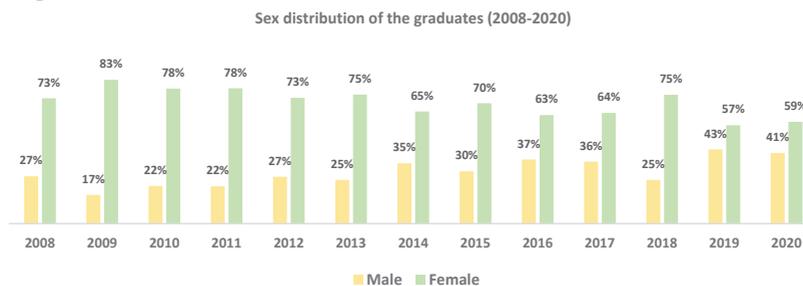
41   This data (number of Bachelor graduates for both state and private universitiesi) is available since 2011 on the website of the National Statistics Office of Georgia. The data is calculated based on the Geostat PC-AXIS database. See: http://pc-axis.geostat.ge/PXWeb/pxweb/ka/Database

Diagram 4.3

Sex distribution of graduates 2011-2020, Geostat

Year	Male	Female
2011	41%	59%
2012	41%	59%
2013	36%	64%
2014	38%	62%
2015	37%	63%
2016	38%	62%
2017	40%	60%
2018	44%	56%
2019	45%	55%
2020	44%	56%

■ Male ■ Female
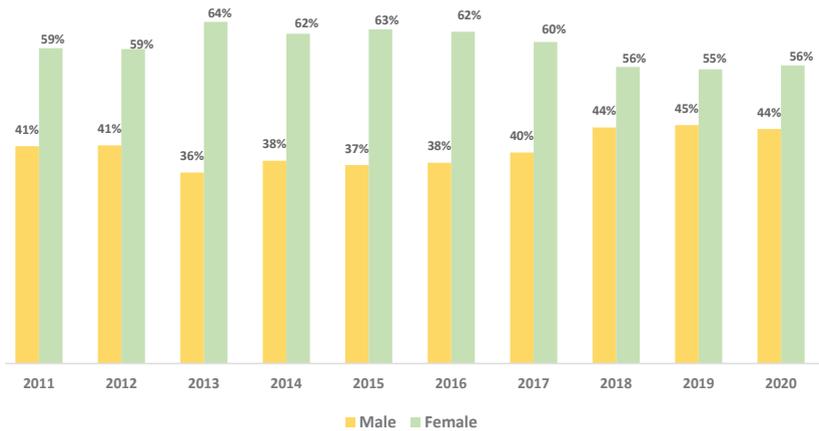
According to our statistical data, almost half of our respondents (46%) is a graduate of Tbilisi State University, 8% represents Georgian Technical University, and 7% - Ilia State University (see table 4.1 for the detailed distribution)

Table 4.1. Higher education institutions[42]	№	%
Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University	550	45.8
Georgian Technical University	96	8.0
Ilia State University	86	7.2
Akaki Tsereteli State University	60	5.0
Tbilisi State Medical University	46	3.8
Batumi Shota Rustaveli State University	40	3.3
Georgian-American University	29	2.4
Sokhumi State University	21	1.7
Georgian National University	20	1.7
Shota Rustaveli Theater and Film State University	17	1.4
Tbilisi State Academy of Arts	17	1.4

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42 The table does not contain those HEIs that were represented by less than 5 graduates in our research.

Caucasus University	17	1.4
The University of Georgia	16	1.3
Free university of Tbilisi	15	1.2
The Agricultural University of Georgia	14	1.2
Iakob Gogebashvili Telavi State University	14	1.2
International Black Sea University	12	1.0
Georgian Aviation University	10	0.8
Grigol Robakidze University	10	0.8
Batumi State Maritime Academy	10	0.8
Gori State Teaching University	9	0.7
Guram Tavartkiladze Tbilisi's Teaching University	9	0.7
Caucasus International University	8	0.7
Saint Andrew the First-Called Georgian University of the Patriarchate of Georgia	7	0.6
Samtskhe-Javakheti State University	7	0.6
David Aghmashenebeli University of Georgia	7	0.6
V. Sarajishvili Tbilisi State Conservatoire	5	0.4
David Aghmashenebeli University of Georgia	5	0.4
Georgian Institute of Public Affairs (GIPA)	5	0.4

As the results showed, 47% of the surveyed individuals hold only Bachelor's degree, while 40% also holds Master's. By the time of the fieldwork, around 10% was still studying at the Master's level, while only 3% held PhD.

Thye majority of the university graduates holds the Bachelor's in Business and Administration (24%) and Social Sciences (11%). The graduates of other disciplines were also represented in the research, but to a lesser extent: political sciences (6%), philology (6%), psychology (7%), economics (7%) and law (8%) (for further details, see the table 4.2). It is also noteworthy that the study results look similar to the GeoStat data that shows that in 2018-2021 the majority of the overall university graduates (26,794) represented social sciences, business and law (GeoStat, 2018-2021).

Table 4.2 Academic programs[43]	№	%
Management, business and public administration	291	24.2
Social sciences	134	11.1
Law	99	8.2
Economics	79	6.6
Psychology	79	6.6
Linguistics/philology	74	6.2
Political sciences and international relations	68	5.7
Medicine	52	4.3
Journalism	44	3.7
Natural sciences	39	3.2
Computer engineering and informatics	35	2.9
Arts, film, music and performance	34	2.8
Finances, banking and insurance	28	2.3
Construction, civil engineering, architechture	20	1.7
Social works	14	1.2
Motor vehicles, ships and aircraft	14	1.2
Teacher training without subject specialization	13	1.1
Pharmacy	13	1.1
History and Archaeology	13	1.1
Oriental Studies / American Studies / European Studies / Caucasus Studies	11	.9
Energy and electrical engineering	11	.9
Vegetation and livestock	6	.5
Fashion, interior and industrial design	6	.5
Audiovisual art and graphic design	6	.5
Food processing	5	.4
Mining	4	.3
Ecology/environmentalism	4	.3
Military affairs and defense	2	.2

43 The academic programs are identified and grouped together in accordance with the 2019 national classification of academic fields.

Interestingly, the majority of the graduates (66%) distinguished personal interest towards the field as a major motivator for enrolling in the academic program. As it turned out, obtaining higher education (without a specific interest) motivated 15% of our respondents, 14% considered family members' advice, while 13% believed that the chosen academic program would ensure better employment opportunities for them (see diagram 4.5).

Diagram 4.5[44]

Reasons/motivation for applying for a particular program

Reason	%
Consulted by the career development specialist	1%
Information on the program obtained beforehand	6%
Points received at the national exams	8%
Better employment opportunities	13%
Recommendations of family members	14%
Desire to obtain higher education	15%
Interest towards the sphere	66%
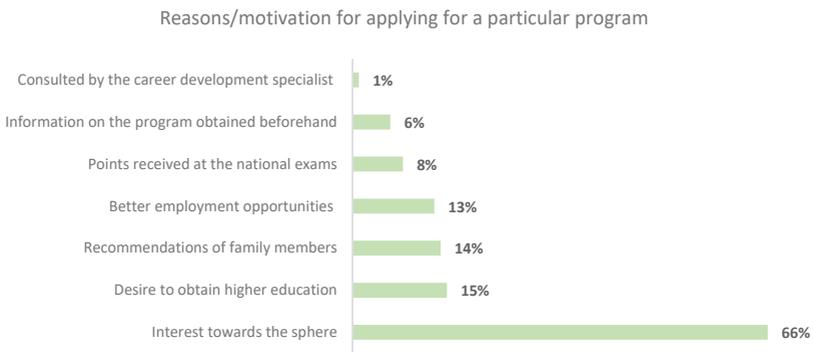
Despite the fact that a special interest towards the field was identified as a major motivator by the majority of the respondents, it is interesting to look at the distribution of the response according to the academic fields the respondents graduated from (this is particularly important considering the fact that the respondents could tick two answers to the question in the questionnaire).

Considering our research focus, the employment opportunities as a determinant for enrolling in a specific academic program is of essential interest. The answer "employment opportunities" occupies the second place in the ranking even for those respondents who graduated from electrical engineering (36%), finances and banking (29%, computer engineering (26%), and management and business administration (25%). Even though these data cannot be generalized, it still points at certain trends making it noteworthy (for detailed distribution, see table 4.3).

44 Note: on any diagram throughout the publication that the total sum of the indicated percentage is not 100%, we should consider the following reasons: each respondent could tick more than one answer (in such cases, the sum exceeds 100%); the respondent needed to omit the question (legal skip) and/or the respondent has omitted the question deliberately/refused to answer (in such cases, the sum is normally less than 100%).

Table 4.3[45] **Motivation for enrolling in a Bachelor's academic program.**	Interest towards field	Family advice	Career counseling	Preliminary information on the program	Points received [at the state exams]	Employment opportunities	Will to obtain higher education
Management, Business Administration and Public Administration [№ = 291]	57%	13%	0%	6%	10%	25%	18%
Oriental Studies / American Studies / European Studies / Caucasus Studies [№ = 11]	45%	0%	0%	9%	0%	9%	45%
Energy and Electrical Engineering [№ = 11]	45%	18%	0%	9%	9%	36%	0%
Social Sciences [№ = 134]	63%	16%	0%	16%	4%	4%	22%
Teacher training without subject specialization [№ = 13]	54%	0%	0%	0%	23%	8%	23%
Medicine [№ = 52]	90%	10%	0%	0%	4%	2%	2%
Arts, film, music and performance [№ = 34]	74%	12%	3%	6%	12%	0%	12%
Economics [№ = 79]	58%	16%	0%	5%	1%	18%	15%
Construction, civil engineering, architecture [№ = 20]	80%	10%	0%	0%	0%	15%	0%
Pharmacy [№ = 13]	38%	38%	0%	0%	15%	31%	0%
Linguistics/philology [№ = 74]	62%	20%	1%	4%	8%	7%	20%
Finance, Banking and Insurance [№ = 28]	75%	7%	0%	11%	14%	29%	7%
Natural sciences [№ = 39]	69%	10%	3%	15%	5%	5%	18%
Psychology [№ = 79]	84%	10%	0%	5%	5%	4%	15%
Computer engineering and informatics [№ = 35]	51%	20%	0%	3%	6%	26%	14%
History and archaeology [№ = 13]	54%	0%	0%	0%	15%	0%	38%
Law [№ = 99]	75%	14%	1%	1%	6%	12%	13%
Social work [№ = 14]	43%	14%	7%	0%	14%	21%	21%
Journalism [№ = 44]	80%	7%	2%	0%	7%	9%	9%
Political sciences and international relations [№ = 68]	71%	15%	1%	12%	9%	4%	10%
Motor vehicles, ships and aircraft [№ = 14]	79%	21%	0%	7%	7%	0%	7%

34% of the interviewed respondents mentioned their grade point average (GPA) ranges between 3.00-4.00, 25% mentions to have a GPA within 2.00-3.00, 7% falls under the category of 1.00-2.00, while 1% has earned the GPA of 0.5-1.00. 33% of the respondents did not respond to this question.

45   The table displays those academic programs that are represented by more than 10 graduates in our sample. The sum of the responses does not constitute 100% as the respondents could tick more than one answer.

According to the results, the majority of the respondents (59%) declare to have "good", "very good" or "excellent" GPA.[46]

Majority of the graduates (32%) underline that the university fees were paid by their families. 27% of the respondents had 100% state scholarship, 17% declared to be funded by the state only by 70%, 13% of the respondents had a state scholarship of 50%, and only 7% received the scholarship of 30%. 4% of the respondents admit that they had received the interuniversity financial aid (diagram 4.6).

Diagram 4.6

Funding of higher education

University internal funding	4%
30% state scholarship	7%
50% state scholarship	13%
70% state scholarship	17%
100% state scholarship	27%
Paid by me/family	32%
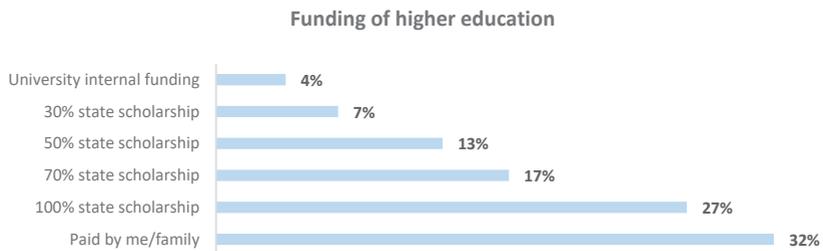
4.2 Evaluation of Academic Programs, Teaching and Learning Methods and Different Components of the Academic Process

The respondents were asked to evaluate different aspects of their education and it should be admitted that overall, their assessment is more positive than neutral or negative (see diagram 4.7).

For instance, as we can see from the diagram that more than half of the interviewed respondents agrees with the statement that together with giving knowledge to the students, the academic program was also focused on developing transferable skills (60%). The statement that the academic curriculum was balanced with theoretical and practical skills, shows different distribution of answers as only 48% agreed with it.

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46 GPA ranges and classification is based on the instructions for preparing and completing a diploma supplement (see URL: https://www.tsu.ge/data/file_db/academic_orders/612011danarti1.pdf)

Diagram 4.7

Assessment of academic program and teaching process

	Disagree	Neutral	Agree
Students were offered international exchange programs	38%	24%	39%
Professors provide written and/or verbal feedback	38%	25%	38%
Students were offered extracurricular activities	33%	27%	40%
University administrative units worked well and in coordination	32%	29%	39%
The university ensured access to literature relevant to the field	30%	24%	46%
The program consisted of both, theoretical and practical courses	29%	22%	48%
Teaching courses considered the modern knowledge around the field	20%	27%	52%
The program was focused on the development of transferable skills	19%	21%	60%
Assessment methods were relevant for objective evaluation of the knowledge	14%	26%	60%
Course topics and academic literature corresponded to the program…	10%	27%	63%
The courses were delivered by the professors with respective competences	7%	17%	76%

■ Disagree ■ Neutral ■ Agree

The evaluation of the teaching courses is also noteworthy. The majority of the respondents thinks that overall, the professors' competences and the course content was related to one another (76%). At the same time, relatively less, about 52% agrees with the statement that the teaching courses offered modern field knowledge to the students.

We also have looked at what the graduates think on the system of the academic grading. Apparently, 60% believes that they were objectively assessed at the university. As for getting feedback from professors (both verbal and written), the responses vary: agreement and disagreement with this statement is similar and equals to 38%. 1/4 of our respondents does not have a definite answer to this question.

As for evaluating the university processes and services, 30-40% disagrees with the statement that the HEIs ensured international exchange programs and extracurricular activities to the students, the university administration worked in coordination with one another and modern learning literature was available to the students. Also, more than 39% agrees with the abovementioned statements.

Moreover, we asked our respondents to identify those specific methods and activities that they encountered during the university studies (see diagram 4.8). The results show that individual (verbal) presentations and group work/projects, as well as practical tasks both individual and in group were mostly used teaching methods (were identified by more than 80% of the respondents). Less than half of the study participants mentioned simulations

and tasks based on role play, self-assessment (e.g. self-reflection on the task) and student peer feedback.

Diagram 4.8

Teaching and learning methods and activities

Method	%
Preparing individual presentations	91%
Teamwork/working on projects	83%
Practical assignments in groups/individually	81%
Debates/discussions around the topic	75%
Usage of additional materials by professor	72%
Discussion of actual case studies/problem-solving	67%
Simulations and role play	49%
Self-assessment by students	40%
Students peer review	36%

It is also should be underlined that in respect to the knowledge acquisition, all the abovementioned teaching methods are evaluated as effective by the university graduates (only those are considered here who mentioned to have encountered these methods at the university, and such respondents constitute the majority of our sample) (see diagram 4.9). More than 705 of the interviewees thinks that among the most effective methods used during their studies were case study and problem solving, preparing presentations, simulations and role plays and practical work.

Diagram 4.9

Assessment of effectiveness of teaching/learning methdos

Method	Not effective	Neutral	Effective
Discussing case studies, problem solving	6%	21%	73%
Preparing individual presentations	8%	20%	72%
Simulations and role play	7%	22%	71%
Practical assignament performed as a group/individually	9%	21%	70%
Preparing group assignments/projects	9%	23%	68%
Usage of additional literature by professor	7%	25%	68%
Discussions/debates around the topic	7%	27%	67%
Students peer review	10%	24%	66%
Self-assessment by students	8%	29%	63%

■ Not effective   ■ Neutral   ■ Effective

4.3 Assessing the Role of Higher Education for Developing Transferable Skills

We were interested to see how the university graduates evaluated the role of higher education they received in the development of their transferable skills (for details on transferable skills, see the methodological chapter). In other words, whether or not they believe that in parallel to obtaining the field knowledge they also were able to get certain transversal competences (not necessarily the level of professionalism is meant here, but rather the basic level of those skills with a potential for further development). According to the achieved results, the majority of the interviewed individuals think that a set of skills they have were actually developed as a result of the university studies (see table 4.6). It is noteworthy that an exception from this is related to the entrepreneurship and technological skills category: in this case, majority of the respondents admit that they have not acquired those skills at the university. This is related to the skills such as how to develop a business plan, conduct a preliminary market analysis, etc. The same tendency is observed in respect to the digital skills. For instance, more than 60% admits that they have not developed data analysis skills at the university.

Table 4.6 Role of higher education in the development of transferable skills (on a basic level)			
Group work	**Yes**	**No**	**Don't Know**
Spelling out one's own ideas and initiatives in a group	71.7%	14.8%	13.5%
Readiness to share peers' feedback (even if too radical from your position)	72.0%	15.5%	12.6%
Distributing of functions among the team members, coordinating activities and monitoring	67.1%	17.3%	15.6%
Communication	**Yes**	**No**	**Don't Know**
Presenting/speaking in front of a large audience	67.6%	19.9%	12.6%
Ability to establish necessary business contacts	49.8%	35.7%	14.5%

Research and Analysis	Yes	No	Don't Know
Preparing academic/scientific literature review	63.1%	25.5%	11.4%
Applying quantitative and/or qualitative research methods	57.6%	27.0%	15.5%
Primary or secondary data (quantitative and/or qualitative analysis	59.0%	25.0%	16.1%
Problem Solving and Decision Making	**Yes**	**No**	**Don't Know**
Identifying and analyzing the causes to the problem	69.2%	17.6%	13.1%
Defining and assessing the problem-solving opportunities	69.0%	16.6%	14.5%

Learning, self-development	Yes	No	Don't Know
Capacity to evaluate once own competences (field knowledge, professional working skills, transferable skills): identifying strengths and weaknesses (for further improvement)	70.0%	15.7%	14.2%
Studying with the minimal supervising from others: independent management of the learning process	72.2%	13.5%	14.3%
Entrepreneurial Skills	**Yes**	**No**	**Don't Know**
Innovative and creative thinking	56.7%	24.9%	18.5%
Drafting business plans	35.9%	48.8%	15.3%
Conducting business analysis	36.4%	47.8%	15.8%
ICT Skills	**Yes**	**No**	**Don't Know**
Knowledge of Microsoft Office basic programs (Word, Excel, PowerPoint)	72.2%	22.7%	5.1%
Data analysis (e.g programming, SPSS, R)	28.6%	61.4%	10.0%

It is also interesting to see the graduates of which academic directions declare to have obtained the entrepreneurial and technical skills at the university. Several broad academic directions lead in this respect: economics, finances, banking and insurance, business administration and public administration (see table 4.6.1). As for the analytical skills to use statistical programs, this direction is led by psychologists, social scientists and economists (see table 4.6.2).

Table 4.6.1

Drafting business plans	Yes	Conducting market research	Yes
Economics	77%	Economics	71%
Finances, banking and insurance	71%	Management, business administration and public administration	65%
Management, business administration and public administration	67%	Finances, banking and insurance	64%

Table 4.6.2

Data analysis	Yes
Psychology	62%
Social Sciences	58%
Economics	46%

In order to reveal certain links between the teaching/learning methods and development of transferable skills we conducted correlations and, in some cases, have received notable results. Namely, statistically significant positive correlation of average strength was revealed between the method of conducting debates/discussions around the topic and the following transferable skills:

- o Spelling out one's own ideas and initiatives in a group ($r = .31$, $p = .000$)
- o Readiness to share peers' feedback ($r = .31$, $p = .000$)

Case studies and discussing problems correlated with the following skills:

- o Spelling out one's own ideas and initiatives in a group ($r = .36$, $p = .000$)
- o Readiness to share peers' feedback ($r = .32$, $p = .000$)
- o Distributing of functions among the team members and coordinating activities ($r = .32$, $p = .000$)
- o Identifying and analyzing the causes to the problem ($r = .30$, $p = .000$)
- o Defining and assessing the problem-solving opportunities ($r = .32$, $p = .000$)
- o Self-reflection ($r = .31$, $p = .000$)

Group work/conducting project correlated with the following transferable skills:

- o Spelling out one's own ideas and initiatives in a group ($r = .32$, $p = .000$)
- o Readiness to share peers' feedback ($r = .31$, $p = .000$)

As the results show the best correlation is observed in case of the case study/problem solving that is evaluated as one of the most effective methods by the university graduates (see diagram 4.9). Also, apparently the skills such as spelling out one's own ideas and initiatives in a group and readiness to share peers' feedback correlate with all the abovementioned teaching methods.

It is a notable observation that a set of transferable skills (although higher education is not considered here as the sole developing environment of these skills) are self-evaluated rather positively by the research respondents; especially, this is obvious in case of working and studying independently (without external supervisor), and also, when it comes to considering different ethical-sensitive elements during the identification of causes to the problem and problem solving process (see diagram 4.10).

Diagram 4.10

Self-assessment of transferable skills

	Low self-assessment	Average self-assessment	High self-assessment
Studying/working without supervision	7%	14%	78%
Considering ethical principles during the problem solving	10%	15%	75%
Identifying/analyzing causes to the problem	7%	19%	74%
Problem solving	7%	20%	73%
Teamwork: distributing functions, coordinating, following a common goal	9%	18%	73%
Providing argumentative feedback	7%	21%	72%
Identifying one's own strengths and weaknesses	8%	21%	71%
Conflict resolution skills	8%	22%	70%
Identifying objectives and ways to achieve them	8%	23%	69%
Swiftly adapting to changes	8%	23%	69%
Accepting different opinion	9%	25%	66%
Presentation/public speaking skill	13%	22%	65%
Identifying disinformation	14%	24%	62%
Preparing analytical paper/essay	14%	25%	61%
Demonstrating initiative	11%	29%	60%
English language proficiency (B2)	17%	23%	60%
Networking skills	16%	27%	57%
Participation in debates/discussions	18%	27%	55%

4.4 Evaluating the Quality of Higher Education

Considering the abovementioned, it is interesting to look at how the university graduates evaluate the quality of education in general. As it turned out, almost half of the respondents believe that they received high

quality education at the Bachelor's level (49%). This attitude is not shared by 16%, while up to 1/3 has not a decided opinion on this topic (see diagram 4.11).

In addition, we were interested to see whether or not the graduates would agree with an assumption that the Georgian education is in compliance with the European standards. The results were divided in three equal categories: 36% agrees with the statement, 32% disagrees with it, while 32% cannot decided (Ibid).

Diagram 4.11

Higher education you received
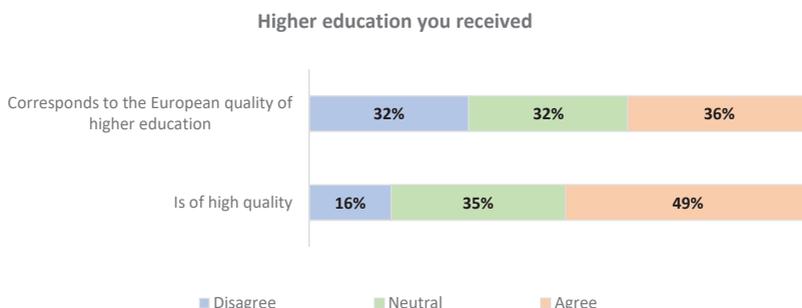
The evaluation of those graduates who mentioned to have an experience of participating in the exchange programs [N=87] is also noteworthy. 48% of such individuals declare that the Georgian education is of high quality, while a bit less (40%) believes that it corresponds to the European standard (see table 4.7).

Table 4.7. Evaluation of the echange program participants	Disagree	Don't know	Agree
High quality	14%	38%	48%
European standard	29%	31%	40%

In the context of evaluating the quality of education it is important to consider how the graduates define this provision. It turned out that the majority of the graduates believe education is of high quality if they can apply

the obtained knowledge into practice (not staying within frames of theoretical knowledge and not needing to study everything at the workplace). Employment with one's own specialty comes second, i.e., when the university knowledge and skills are enough to get employed in the respective field of occupation (see diagram 4.12).

Diagram 4.12

Higher education is of high quality if a graduate can:

	Disagree	Neutral	Agree
Actively apply obtained knowledge and skills at work	20%	24%	56%
Get employed in one's own specialty	24%	24%	52%
Get employed although not in one's own specialty	22%	29%	49%
Continue studying abroad	26%	27%	47%
Get employed on a prestigious job	27%	29%	44%
Start an enterprise using the obtained knowledge and skills	31%	28%	42%
Get high remuneration	32%	30%	39%
Get employed abroad	40%	26%	34%

We also observed the links between academic program, teaching courses, assessment of administrative processes and the quality assessment of the obtained education. The statistical analysis showed that there is an important[47] statistically significant correlation between these two variables ($p<0.01$). For instance, those graduates who believe that they have received modern knowledge at the university also believe that they have received high quality education (see table 4.8).

_____

47   < 0.2 – there is no correlation between two variables
  0.20-0.29 – weak correlation
  0.30-0.39 – Average correlation
  0.40-0.69 - Strong correlation
  >= 0.70 – Very strong correlation

Table 4.8 Correlation		High quality higher education	Literature relevant for the academic programme	Modern knowledge	Transferable skills	Theoretical and practical courses	Competent lecturers
High quality higher education	Pearson Correlation	1	.451**	.508**	.385**	.377**	.375**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
	N	1202	1202	1202	1202	1202	1202

Table 4.8 (continued)		Objective assessment	Written or/and oral feedback from lecturer	Access to academic literature	International exchange programs	Coordinated work of the administrative units	Extracurricular activities
High quality higher education	Pearson Correlation	.446**	.360**	.461**	.239**	.415**	.401**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
	N	1202	1202	1202	1202	1202	1202

** Correlation statistically significant at level 0.01

4.5 Graduates' Employment Status

By January-February 2021, 88% of the research respondents were or had been employed in the past. 6.3% have never been employed in a paid job[48] while 5.6% is self-employed (see Annex 1, table 4.9.1). According to the data, 53% of the employed individuals is employed in the private sector, 21% in the public sector, 4% - in non-governmental, and 4% in international organizations (see Annex 1, table 4.9.2). As for the field of occupation, 15% is employed in the financial sector (bank, microfinancing organization, leasing company, etc.), that is followed by the educational (11%) and health (7%) sectors (see Annex 1, table 4.9.3).

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48 Among those who have never been employed in a paid job (N=76), 74% are women and 26% are men.

Majority of the employed individuals[49] (42%) works on the position of a professional (e.g. teacher, journalist, accountant, banker, technician, web developer, etc.), 18% on the position of the midrange manager, 8% on the position of a service personnel (casher operator, sales consultant), while 7% is an office personnel (office manager, call center operator). Up to 4% is employed on the top managerial positions (see Annex 1, table 4.9.4).[50]

Monthly net salary of the 32% of our respondents falls under the range of 500-1200 GEL (see diagram 4.13, for more detailed distribution, see Annex 1, table 4.9.5).

Diagram 4.13

Monthly remuneration (NET)

Up to 150 GEL	150-500	501-1200	1201-2000	2001-3000	More than 3000 GEL
1%	9%	32%	16%	8%	6%
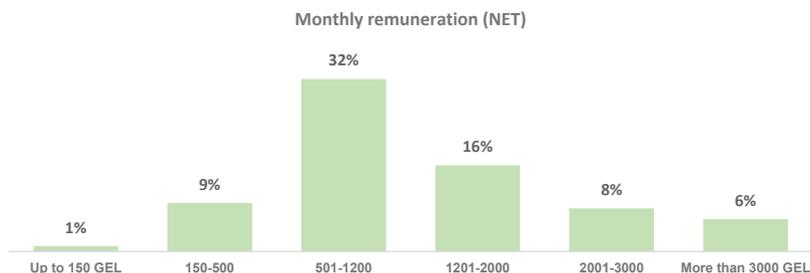
As for the ways of employment, 36% of the graduates mention they have got jobs with the help of employment websites, 18% have used the help of relative/friends, while 15% - the past networks (see table 4.9.6).

62% of the respondents mention that they have spent less than 4 weeks or more than 6 months to find the current job. Only 13% says that it took more than 1 year to get employed in the current job (see table 4.9.7).

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49 This chapter only covers the statistical analysis of employed individuals as well as those who have been employed in the past. Overall, the number of such respondents equals to 987 (majority of our sample).

50 It is noteworthy that among 838 female participants of the research, only 2.7% works on the top managerial positions, while the same indicator equals to 5.32% in case of 364 male respondents.

Table 4.9.6[51] Ways of employment	№	%
Via employment websites	436	36.3
With the help of my friend/relatives	215	17.9
With the help of networks from my previous job(s)	175	14.6
Via social media	54	4.5
Via career development/employment centers of the university	45	3.7
I was offered the job	13	1.1
Via lecturer's recommendation	12	1.0
As a result of an internship (volunteering)	9	.7
I offered my candidacy to the organization	2	.2

Table 4.9.7 Time dedicated to the job search	№	%
Less than a month	376	31.3
1-2 months	208	17.3
3-6 months	155	12.9
7-12 months	89	7.4
More than a year	159	13.2

According to the received results, almost one and the same number of the graduates are employed (49%) and not employed (51%) in their own specialty (under specialty we mean the field they have received Bachelor's degree in).

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51 Note: when the sum of the responses does not equal 100% in any of the presented tables, the reason behind this is a legal skip, or error/missing data. The percentage of such cases is not presented in the tables.

Majority of those who are employed in their specialty[52] agrees with the statement that their education corresponds to the requirements of a real job (54%) and that HEI have prepared them well for the labor market (47%) (see tables 4.10.1 and 4.10.2).

Table 4.10.1 If yes: I have used the knowledge and skills obtained at the university for my current job as they were matching the real requirements	№	%
Disagree	97	20%
Don't know	126	26%
Agree	263	**54%**

Table 4.10.2 If yes: overall, the university has prepared me well for the labor market	№	%
Disagree	116	24%
Don't know	144	30%
Agree	226	**47%**

Majority of the interviewed respondents not working in their specialty name the deficit of respective jobs on the market as a major reason for this (see Annex 1, table 4.10.3). Among such respondents are linguists, art specialists and the graduates of other humanities, as well as social sciences and pedagogy (see diagram 4.14). Slightly more than 50% of those employed in their specialty are business administrators, social workers, engineers/IT specialists, and pharmacists. More specific professions are distinguished with 100% of employment with specialty, however their actual number is less than 10 in our sample (Ibid).

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52 We should consider that these two questions are asked only to those who are employed in their own specialty. Therefore, it is not possible to compare these responses to those who are not employed in their specialties.

Diagram 4.14

Employment in one's own specialty [yes/no] by academic directions

Academic direction	No	Yes
Arts, Cinema, Music and Performing Arts [N=34]	65%	35%
Motor Vehicles [N=14]	57%	43%
Area Studies [N=11]	82%	18%
Psychology [N=79]	54%	46%
Finances, Banking and Insurance [N=28]	50%	50%
Pharmacy [N=13]	46%	54%
Audiovisual Arts and Graphic Design [N=6]	83%	17%
Food Processing [N=5]	80%	20%
Social Work [N=14]	43%	57%
Social Sciences [N=134]	66%	34%
Military [N=2]		100%
Mining [N=4]		100%
Law [N=99]	67%	33%
Natural Sciences [N=39]	56%	44%
Journalism [N=44]	61%	39%
Political Sciences [N=68]	72%	28%
Construction, Civil Engineering, Architecture [N=20]	50%	50%
Fashion, Interior and Industrial Design [N=6]	83%	17%
Management, Business Administration and Public Administration...	47%	53%
Vegetation, livestock [N=6]		100%
Medicine [N=52]	54%	46%
Teacher training without subject specialization [N=13]	69%	31%
Linguistics/Philology [N=74]	78%	22%
History and Archeology [N=13]	77%	23%
Engineering and Informatics [N=35]	49%	51%
Energy and Electrical Engineering [N=11]	55%	45%
Economics [N=79]	63%	37%
Ecology [N=4]	50%	50%

■ No　■ Yes

Majority of those currently employed in their specialties was working in their specialties at the first job as well (73%) and vice versa, those who are not, have never not done so at the first job (88%) (see table 4.11). Therefore, we can conclude that the first job is a significant factor that contributes to staying in a specialty and further professional development.

Table 4.11	Was employed with specialty at the first job	Was not employed with specialty at the first job
Currently works in specialty	**73%**	27%
Currently does not work in specialty	12%	**88%**

Also, the majority of the respondents (54%) mention their current working position has improved compared to the previous one (being promoted position-wise). The similar number of graduates (57%) mention that their remunerations have improved as well (see table 4.11.1 and table 4.11.2).

Interestingly, 37% of the graduates mention that they have not changed the employment sphere; 22% have changed it only once, 18% - twice or three times,

while 5% have changed it for more times (see table 4.11.3). Herewith, a total of 51% of the respondents have more than 5 years of working experience (see table 4.11.4). As for staying in one and the same field for a long time, this can be indirectly linked to the fact that the labor market is rather homogeneous in Georgia (Rutkowski, 2013, Kupets, 2015, Amashukeli et al, 2017) and the economic progress of the country is not necessarily reflected on the employment indicators (Bochorishvili and Peranidze, 2020, p. 38). Therefore, mobility between the employment spheres is not easy due to the limited number of positions. Specifically, we should consider that the majority of our respondents are employed in the sectors not necessarily characterized by the labor market elasticity (Ibid, p. 41).

Table 4.11.1 Compared to the first position, your current position is:	№	%
Higher	651	54.2
Same/similar	159	13.2
Lower	32	2.7
My current job is my first job and I can't make any comparisons	145	12.1

Table 4.11.2 Compared to the first job, your current remuneration is:	№	%
Higher	690	57.4
Same/similar	100	8.3
Lower	43	3.6
I currently work without remuneration	19	1.6
My current job is my first job and I can't make any comparisons	135	11.2

Table 4.11.3 Have you changed the employment sphere?	№	%
No, I work in one and the same sphere	450	37.4
Yes, only once	261	21.7
Yes, twice or three times	220	18.3
Yes, more than three times	56	4.7

Table 4.11.4 Overall, what is your working experience?	№	%
0-6 months	33	2.7
7-12 months	37	3.1
1-2 years	108	9.0
3-4 years	196	16.3
More than 5 years	613	51.0

4.6 Evaluating the Role of Higher Education in Employment and Increasing employability

45% of the interviewed respondents[53] mention that for enhancing their employability, the higher education institution would take certain measures, while 55% admits the opposite – mostly the respondents would tick the statement that the HEI would not do anything in order to enhance employment opportunities/employability of its students.

In case of the other responses (45%), about 26% of the respondents underline that the HEI would offer internship opportunities to them, distribute information on existing (relevant) vacant positions (24%) and organized job fairs (14%). Relatively fewer graduates mention that the HEIs would also organize certain trainings directed at improving basic skills necessary for the market (see diagram 4.15).

Diagram 4.15

Role of HEI in enhancing student employability

Organizing proposal writing trainings	5%
Organizing trainings for employbility skills development	7%
Offering internships within the university	9%
Organizing job fairs	14%
Distributing information on job vacancies	24%
Offering internship	26%
University did nothing	55%
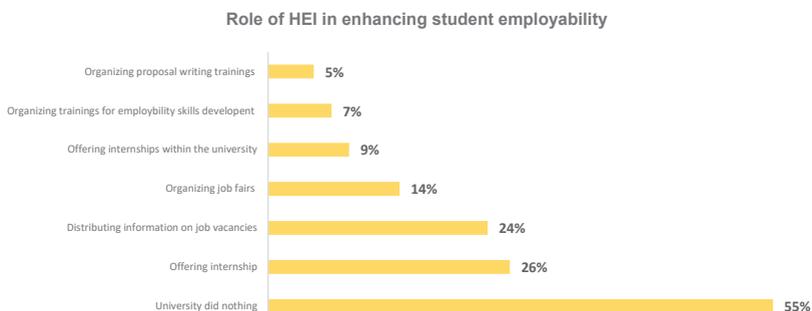
It is noteworthy that 53% of the respondents have never participated in the internship program during their studies as this component was not mandatory. Different from them, 18% mentions that they have done internship themselves. Among those who have mentioned internship as mandatory activity (29%):

➲ 13% says that the university would ensure internship placements for all students

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53 Statistical analysis presented in the current subchapter is based on the entire database of the graduates despite their working status (different from the previous subchapter that only considered the employed individuals).

- ⮕ 7% underlines that the students were obliged to find internships themselves

- ⮕ 6% was exempt from internship obligation as they were already employed with the profile relevant for their specialty

- ⮕ While 2% mentions that the university ensured internship placements only for students with high academic performance.

As it turned out, the majority of those who have completed internship programs belong to the field of finances, banking and insurance (61%), pharmacy (62%), law (52%) and others (for detailed distribution, see table 4.12).

Table 4.12. Internship experience according to the specialty[54]	Yes[55]		No	
	№	%	№	%
Management, business administration and public administration [№=291]	144	49%	147	51%
Area studies [№=11]	2	18%	9	82%
Energy and electrical engineering [№=11]	4	36%	7	64%
Vegetation, livestock [№=6]	2	33%	4	67%
Social sciences [№=134]	45	34%	89	66%
Teacher training without subject specialization [№=13]	8	62%	5	38%
Medicine [№=52]	21	40%	31	60%
Mining [№=4]	1	25%	3	75%
Art, cinema, music and performing arts [№=34]	11	32%	23	68%
Economics [№=79]	40	51%	39	49%
Construction, civil Engineering, architecture [№=20]	6	30%	14	70%


54 In this case we consider those directions that were represented by at least 10 graduates in our sample.

55 „Yes" [№=492] response incorporates those who have completed internship with their own initiative and based on the requirement from the university (by obligation). This response does not count those who were exempt of the internship obligation due to being already employed.

Pharmacy [№=13]	8	62%	5	38%
Military [№=2]			2	100%
Linguistics/philology [№=74]	17	23%	57	77%
Finances, banking and insurance [№=28]	17	61%	11	39%
Natural sciences [№=39]	13	33%	26	67%
Psychology [№=79]	19	24%	60	76%
Ecology [№=4]	3	75%	1	25%
Engineering and informatics [№=35]	9	26%	26	74%
History and archaeology [№=13]	2	15%	11	85%
Law [№=99]	51	52%	48	48%
Social work [№=14]	7	50%	7	50%
Journalism [№=44]	19	43%	25	57%
Fashion, interior and industrial design [№=6]			6	100%
Audio-visual arts and graphic design [№=6]	1	17%	5	83%
Food processing [№=5]	2	40%	3	60%
Political sciences [№=68]	30	44%	38	56%
Motor vehicles [№=14]	7	50%	7	50%

We wanted to find out what sort of activities (tasks) did the internships envisage (in case of both mandatory and voluntary internships). Based on the obtained results, we can conclude that the students were asked to fulfill more analytical work rather than the technical one (e.g. Xerox, document distribution, etc.) (see diagram 4.16)

Diagram 4.16

Components of internship

Component	Percentage
Delivering documents/stuff	2%
Preparing translations	4%
Technical work	7%
Working on local/international documents	8%
Comunication with target audiences/clients	9%
Data/information collection	13%
Analyitical work	15%
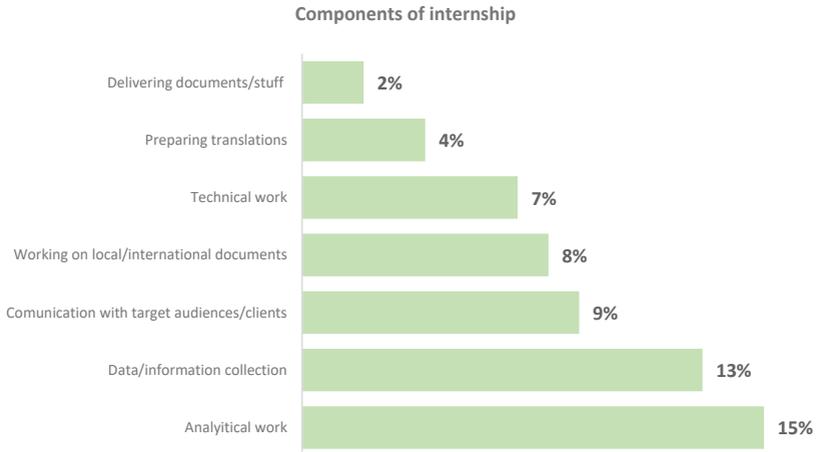
59% of the respondents mention that they were obliged to present a written description of the job fulfilled and respective hours for the internship monitoring purposes. 17% mentions that this was only formally done (without actual verification), while 12% underlines that the university was in constant communication with the employer and received respective information directly from them. 11% mentioned that no internship monitoring was performed at all (even a formal one).

A big number of those who had internship opportunity during studies, rather positively evaluate their experience and outcomes in this respect. For instance, 30% says that internship field and activities were in compliance with their academic discipline. Almost the same number of respondents underline that they were offered a flexible working schedule and the internship contributed to the development of their transferable skills (see diagram 4.17).

Diagram 4.17

Evaluation of internship

	Disagree	Neutral	Agree
Environment was tollerant and equal	10%	16%	74%
Internship corresponded to my specialty	10%	16%	74%
Working schedule was flexible	12%	16%	71%
Internship supported me to degvelop transferable skills	15%	19%	66%
Work was interesting	10%	16%	74%
Communication with my superviser was easily possible	18%	18%	63%
Internship enabled me to apply knowledge into practice	21%	18%	61%
Internship supported to increase my netrworks	25%	24%	51%

As for the role of the transferable skills, (currently or formally) employed individuals (80%) mention that analytical and argumentative skills, basic ICT skills and adaptability helped them in getting employed. Quite a big number of the respondents evaluated self-reflection and learning skills as well as English proficiency very positively. It is interesting to observe that the more concrete and specific the skills become, thus being easily verifiable (research, data analysis, drafting of business plans and proposals, academic writing), lesser is the number of the graduates who say that these skills helped them in employment (see diagram 4.18)

Diagram 4.18

Role of transferable skills in employment

	Help	Neutral	Does not help
Argumentative reasoning	3%	14%	83%
Applying Microsoft Office basic programs	7%	11%	82%
Adapting to changes	3%	16%	81%
Conducting comparative analysis	4%	15%	80%
Self-reflection	5%	17%	79%
English proficiency (on working level)	12%	18%	70%
Conducting presentation	14%	21%	66%
Data analysis	13%	22%	65%
Academic writing	15%	24%	60%
Applying qualitative and quantitative research methods	20%	25%	55%
Preparing business offers	28%	25%	46%
Preparing grant proposals	31%	26%	44%
Learning in limited schedule	5%	20%	25%

Considering the objectives of the present study, we were interested to link the transferable skills with the employment with one's own specialty, thus, we have conducted more in-depth analysis using the logistical regression. However, any of the abovementioned transferable skills (see statistics of transferable skills) did not turn out to be the predictors of employment in one's own specialty. As for the specialties (academic directions our respondents graduated from), only the management, business administration and public administration is statistically significant ($p<0.05$) factor meaning that the probability that its graduates will be employed in the same specialty is higher. However, we should also underline that this probability is valid in statistical model that combines other independent variables as well (see table 4.13). Based on the achieved results, we can assume that the chances of getting employed in one's one specialty increases if:

- GPA exceeds 2.00 (falls in the category of "good", "very good" or "excellent");
- Student does an internship in parallel to studies;
- Motivation for enrolling in a specific academic program was an internal interest towards this sphere;
- Motivation for enrolling in a specific academic program was an expectation for better employment opportunities.

Table 4.13. Logistical regression model: Predictors of employment with one's own specialty

Model Summary			
Step	-2 Log likelihood	Cox & Snell R Square	Nagelkerke R Square
1	1028.988[a]	.095	**.128**

Variables in the Equation									
		B	**S.E.**	**Wald**	**df**	**Sig.**	**Exp(B)**	**95% C.I.for EXP(B)**	
								Lower	Upper
Step 1[a]	Management, business administration and public administration	.761	.178	18.286	1	**.000**	**2.141**	1.510	3.034
	GPA >=2.00	.229	.102	5.033	1	**.025**	**1.257**	1.029	1.536
	Internship experience	.562	.152	13.699	1	**.000**	**1.755**	1.303	2.363
	Enrollment motivation: interestd towards the field	.793	.175	20.472	1	**.000**	**2.210**	1.567	3.115
	Enrollment motivation: better employment opportunities	.924	.238	15.082	1	**.000**	**2.519**	1.580	4.015
	Constant	-2.140	.375	32.524	1	**.000**	**.118**		

As we could see, the transferable skills and related topics are paid particular attention in the quantitative survey as this was a central topic for our research. Therefore, the summative discussion will be mostly focused on this topic. Firstly, we should mention that the research respondents evaluate the quality of their university education as well as the learning process rather positively (see diagrams 4.7 and 4.11). In respect to developing the transferable skills on a basic level, the role of HEIs is positively assessed for developing skills of group work, communication, analytical thinking and self-development (see table 4.6). However, this tendency of strictly positive assessment falls down a bit when we discuss entrepreneurship and technological skills (Ibid). As it turned out, these skills are more associated with those fields that they belong to from the field-specific perspective (e.g. business analysis and drafting business plans for economists, business administrators and financial managers, while data analysis – for sociologists and psychologists). Therefore, we can assume that for the modern labor market, a set of skills that are necessary for innovations and entrepreneurship/self-employment is more locked within the field competences and are sort of deprived a transferable role. Also, we should also mention that in order to verify this assumption, a more statistically representative study is necessary that would diversify the research according to the fields.

As mentioned earlier, teaching/learning methods serve as an important component for developing field competences as well as transferable and field-related skills. According to our research respondents, a numerous teaching methods were used and quite effectively (see diagrams 4.8 and 4.9). In case of some methods and transferable skills a statistically significant correlation was even observed. It is noteworthy that these are the methods that require more active involvement of students in the learning process (discussion, role plays, problem discussion, group work).

As for the role of HEI and higher education in enhancing employability and employment opportunities of students, more than half of our respondents (55%) mention that the universities did not fulfill their functions at all. In case of others, internship opportunities (26%) and its obligatory character (26%) turned out to be important. In case of such obligation, only 13% of the respondents mentioned that internship opportunities were available for

every student (or at least for a big portion). Therefore, the majority of the students (if they were not exempt from the obligation), had to find internships themselves.[56] Herewith, it should be admitted by all means that a quite big number of students who did internships during their Bachelor's studies underline that this component helped them to apply theoretical knowledge into practice, develop transferable skills and establish useful contacts (see diagram 4.17). The results of the logistical regression also show that internship experience increases the possibility to be employed with one's own specialty as well (see table 4.13).

In respect to the role of transferable skills in employment, a big number of our respondents mention that verbal and analytical skills category is particularly useful as well as ICT and English language proficiency (see diagram 4.18). Interestingly, the graduates show a rather high self-assessment tendency for transferable skills (see diagram 4.11). This tendency was observed in the research conducted by the Center for Social Sciences in 2017[57] as well, although, the results were different for the competence category. Namely, a relatively higher evaluation was observed in case of field knowledge, analytical reasoning, application of knowledge into practice, working under stress/deadlines, time management and group work. While a relatively lower evaluation was observed for: management, ICT skills, creative thinking, presentation skills, English proficiency and others (Amsahukeli et al, 2017, p. 64). Even though the 2017 study respondents represented different age category and the majority had completed their education in Soviet or post-Soviet era, we assume that the respondents were giving socially desirable answers. In order to determine the actual level of the field-related or general competences, we need to conduct specialized, standardized direct assessments both in case of adult education and the students/graduates, but this practice is not yet introduced in Georgia.

As mentioned above, in general, the university graduates evaluate the

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56 Majority of our research respondents are the graduates of the state universities, and in most cases the number of students at the state universities is twice as big as in case of private universities (see https://www.geostat.ge/ka/modules/categories/61/umaghlesi-ganatleba). Therefore, when discussing internship, the logistical problems related to the big number of students should also be considered.

57 A country representative survey of 1488 respondents was conducted in June-July 2016. The report is available at: http://css.ge/?p=873&lang=ka

Bachelor's education rather positively. Also, 49% of the respondents believe that their education is of high quality. Interestingly, majority of them associate the quality of education with its practical outcomes, such as application of knowledge into practice, employment in one's own specialty and employment (despite the specialty) (see diagram 4.12). Herewith, we should underline that the most part of the individuals who are employed in their specialties think of their education as of high quality, and on the contrary, the most part of those employed in other fields, disagrees with this statement (see table 4.14). This difference turned out to be statistically significant (Independent T-Test, t(1192.7)= 3.09, p=0.000). A big number of the graduates employed in their specialties also agrees with the statement that their education corresponds with the job requirements (54%) and overall, HEI prepared them well for the labor market (47%) (see tables 4.10.1 and 4.10.2). Additional statistical analysis did not show any of the transferable skills are predictors of employment in one own's specialty.

Table 4.14	Received education is of high quality	Received education is not of high quality
Employed in specialty	54%	46%
Not employed in specialty	43%	57%

Overall, we observe a tendency that the majority of the university graduates (at least on the Bachelor's level) measure the quality of higher education considering its ability to support employment, including employment in specialty. At the same time, more than a half of the interviewed respondents complain that HEI would do nothing to enhance their employment or employability (in the rest of the cases, internship, distribution of information about different jobs, job fairs and other activities were mentioned). Nevertheless, the graduates still rather positively evaluate the teaching process and the education they received. Even though those assessing the higher education as of high quality are mostly employed in their specialties, but still, this difference is not dramatically big. Interestingly, according to the employment status[58] a statistically significant difference was not revealed in

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58 We mean employed in a paid job, self-employed or both altogether; employed in past, and without having an employment experience.

respect to evaluating the quality of education (Independent T-Test, p>0.05). Considering all the abovementioned, an answer to the question why the majority evaluate Bachelor's education as of high quality, would be as follows: since graduate employment (even without being employed in specialty) is perceived as an indicator for quality, and in our sample, majority of the respondents are employed in paid jobs (only 6% have never been employed), this very factor of being employed determines the quality of education being positively assessed. On the other hand, we could assume that the respondents use other indicators in this assessment that was also obvious in our study when they evaluated the academic programs, teaching/learning methods, a positive role of the university education in development of transferable skills and others (see diagrams 4.7-4.9). We can link this outcome with the usage of the knowledge and skills at the workplace which is identified as an indicator of quality but is not necessarily directly connected with the university's activities to support employment (e.g. organizing meetings with employers). Therefore, based on all the aforementioned, we can discuss that even though the quality of education is measured with rather practical indicators overall, but it is not limited to the assessment of actual activities conducted in support to increasing employment/employability. Herewith, we should admit by all means that in order to support this hypothesis, additional profound research should be performed.

CHAPTER 5. MAIN OUTCOMES AND CONCLUSIONS

Interrelation between higher education and the labor market is a complex phenomenon, especially, for the states of the European Higher Education Area, as it envisages the preparation of the qualified graduates for local and global labor markets at the same time. This demand poses considerable challenges to the Georgian higher education system as well. The first objective of our research was to study these challenges, which is important considering the fact that the modernized quality assurance system requires from the HEIs to reflect the demands of the national labor market into their teaching curricula.

Economic dimension of higher education (including the linkages between the educational system and the labor market) is underlined in multiple normative and strategic documents of the country. Majority of the higher education experts involved in our research identify the politicization of the education system as one of the major challenges among others. The constantly changing policy of human resources in the field of education and science since 2004 (12 ministers have changed)[59] were accompanied by the decisions motivated by the narrow political interests that resulted in the inconsistent and non-sustainable policy of education (and not only). Neither it is based on the in-depth analysis of actual needs nor is aimed at improving the outcomes. In other words, the state has a higher education policy that is determined by the formal fulfilment of the international obligations and is not translated into the substantial improvement of the system. According to the educational experts, the abovementioned is also echoed in the fact that there is no political will or appropriate financial support for the development of the knowledge-based economy. Therefore, the links between the academic knowledge and science, labor market (in respect to creating new jobs and economic occupations) and the economic development simply do not exist and they function independently from one another.

59 See the list of the Ministers of Education at the URL: https://mes.gov.ge/content. php?id=110&lang=geo

When discussing the reflection of the labor market challenges into the higher education policy, we should also consider the need for conducting permanent, multi-component, segment-wise labor market researches in order to have a precise information on the requirements of each field/sphere and the competences that are in deficit. Therefore, it is only possible to plan a proper policy if based on such a constantly updating data. Since currently the labor market research, and especially in correlation with the higher education, is fragmented,[60] the issue of reflection the challenges into the policy remains to be questionable. Even though considering the labor market requirements is declared to be mandatory for HEIs by the authorization and accreditation standards, it is financially very difficult for the universities to conduct such a profound market studies.

Second important issue discussed in our study was related to the role of higher education in the development of competences that are necessary for employment or self-employment (entrepreneurship). The research respondents discuss the role of education differently: on the one hand, the education experts and HEI representatives believe that the major role of higher education is to create new knowledge, while the employers, startupers and university graduates focus on a practical aspect of the education. Namely, employers and startupers discuss HEIs as a space for basic education that should create a ground for networking. According to them, it is much more important for a graduate to be able to have practical skills that would be further refined by the employer, than to possess profound field knowledge. As for the graduates, they believe that the higher education is of high quality if it is possible to use knowledge at the workplace and get employed (in one's specialty or not).

When discussing the role of education in developing competences required by the labor market, it was observed that the university graduates evaluate their Bachelor's education as of high quality.[61] Considering the

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60 The studies conducted by the state are more general and at the same time, not very frequent. For instance, there is a modest list of such studies on the information system of labor market, especially in respect to higher education. See the URL: http://www.lmis.gov.ge/Lmis/Lmis.Portal.Web/Pages/User/Surveys.aspx

61 Herewith, we should underline once again that this is based on self-assessment and not the results of direct, objective evaluation.

overall critical attitudes towards the education system and quality of education, as well as the performance of Georgia in the Global Competitiveness Index, it was unexpected to get such positive evaluations. Herewith, we should consider that the majority of the graduates define the quality of education by its practical outcomes, such as employment. Majority of the respondents (88%) were employed in paid jobs (either in their specialties or not) by the time of the fieldwork that most probably determined such a positive evaluation. It should also be mentioned that the positive attitudes towards education does not differ much by the employment status (employed or unemployed). [62]

The graduates do not evaluate the activities performed by the universities in support of employment (e.g. job fairs, internships, etc.) so positively. More than a half of the respondents admit that their HEIs did not bother to organize such activities. At the same time, they assess other components of the learning process (academic program, teaching and learning methods, etc.) rather positively. Namely, a big portion of the graduates connect a set of transferable/transversal skills they have with the university education; moreover, they identify most of these skills as ones that supported their employment. We can assume that the skills developed within the university studies play an important role in enhancement of students' employability.

The graduates positively evaluate the role of the university in the development of such skills as teamwork, communication, problem-solving and analytical skills. While the tendency of positively assessing entrepreneurial and technological skills decreases. It is important to underline that the startupers repeated the same during the focus group discussions. Based on their own experience, they complained about the lack of courses at HEIs on how to draft a grant proposal, business plan and connect with investors, potential business partners, etc. As we found out, such skills are more characteristic of those academic directions that consider them as field-specific (e.g. business administration). It is a real problem that this deficit of knowledge was underlined by the graduates of practically all universities that fall

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[62] It should also be considered that up to date not massive survey of the university graduates (especially in timeseries) have been conducted in Georgia that would actually assess their education. Therefore, it is not possible to compare the outcomes of the present research with other studies.

under our sample, including the leading ones. Even though the study was not representative university-wise, major tendencies were still observed. It is a fact that despite being mentioned in the strategic document, creation of a knowledge-based economy is not paid special attention to in the educational sphere neither in respect with giving specific knowledge to students nor with establishing a triangle of education, science and innovation (see Chapter 3). [63]

In order to put the education-science-innovation trendy model into action and the operation of result-oriented, well-functioning educational system, one should consider the missions and resources of universities, definition of priorities and implementation of the respective educational models instead of automatically transmitting isomorphic principles. Similar approach is necessary not only on the HEI (mezzo level), but on the educational policy level (macro level) that envisages the determination of priorities in accordance with the material and non-material resources. In this case, isomorphic models can work effectively considering the local context.

Harmonization of the national higher education system with the European one is a part of the country's European integration. Joining the Bologna Process envisages the Europeanization of the national educational system, i.e. its transformation and modernization according to the European model. Georgia got involved in this process deliberately, however, this was a top-down process and represented an attempt to take care of the domestic problems in parallel to demonstrating the European aspirations. Implementation of the painful reforms in the post-Soviet higher education system (from eliminating corruption to the restructuration of the system) was legitimized by making references to the Bologna Process and the Western experience (Lezhava and Amashukeli, 2016). Therefore, legislative and organizational [on the HEI level] changes were enforced and caused a serious dissatisfaction among the academic personnel (Chitashvili, 2020; pp. 99, 108-109). Consecutive reforms that were related to the introduction of the

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63 These data correspond to the American and European practice of so-called special centers/courses for enhancing the graduate employability or self-employment. It is possible to introduce interfaculty/interdisciplinary courses that would offer the entrepreneurial and technological competences to the students of economics and humanities with the same success. In this case, these skills categories would serve the function of transversal/transferable skills and not a sector or field-specific function.

quality assurance standards (pilot started in 2015) were also perceived as "punitive operation" by the academic and administrative personnel of the HEIs (Lezhava and Amashukeli, 2016, p. 32).

Changes implemented in the Georgian higher education system represented the examples of normative and coercive isomorphism that aimed at creating a formal framework for the modernization of the educational space. Through introducing the isomorphic models, the system was restructured from the organization and content-wise perspective. However, translation of these formal changes into the substantive changes (actual improvement of the quality of education) is still under question.

Annex 1 - Tables

Employment status and adjunct issues by January-February 2021

Table 4.9.1. Employment status (all respondents)	№	%
Currently employed in paid job	830	69.1
Currently not employed in paid job but was employed in the past	157	13.1
Never been employed in paid job	76	6.3
Currently employed in paid job and self-employed at the same time	72	6.0
Currently self-employed / was self-employed in the past	67	5.6
Table 4.9.2. Sector of employment	**№**	**%**
Private	635	52.8
Public	253	21.0
Non-governmental	51	4.2
International	48	4.0
Table 4.9.3. Employment sphere	**№**	**%**
Financial activities (bank/microfinance/leasing organizations, etc.)	181	15.1
Education	136	11.3
Healthcare	79	6.6
Retail trade	45	3.7
Information technologies	42	3.5
Construction	30	2.5
Arts	30	2.5
Research (sociological, marketing)	31	3.0
Law	23	1.9
Public administration	23	1.9
Wholesale trade	21	1.7
TV broadcasting	20	1.7
Tourism	20	1.7
Transportation	17	1.4
Insurance	16	1.3
Agriculture	14	1.2
Advertising	14	1.2

Civil order and security	14	1.2
Food sector (café, restaurant, bar)	12	1.0
Accountancy and audit	12	1.0
Manufacturing industry (food / beverages / equipment / clothing / furniture / etc)	11	0.9
Entertainment	11	0.9
Service (not specified)	11	0.9
Management and administration (not specified)	11	0.9
Energy	10	0.8
Consulting	9	0.7
Hotel industry	8	0.7
Media/online media	7	0.6
Public relations and marketing	7	0.6
Architecture	6	0.5
Mental health	6	0.5
Customer services (operator, currier)	5	0.4
Sport	5	0.4
Crafts	4	0.3
Sales	4	0.3
Business (not specified)	4	0.3
Social service	4	0.3
International relations and diplomacy	4	0.3
Human rights protection	4	0.3
Production and distribution (not specified)	4	0.3
Translation and editing	4	0.3
Mining	3	0.2
Aviation/military aviation	3	0.2
Water supply	3	0.2
Archive	3	0.2
Personal services (beauty salons, personal protection)	2	0.2
Culture	2	0.2

Computer programing	2	0.2
Environmental protection	2	0.2
Table 4.9.4. Working positions of employed individuals	№	%
Professionals (teacher, journalist, accountant, banker, technician, web developer, researcher, stylist)	504	42.0
Mid-range manager (head of department)	223	18.6
Service personnel (cashier-operator, sales consultant)	97	8.1
Office personnel (office manager, call center operator)	83	6.9
Top management (executive director, administrative director)	42	3.5
Support staff (cleaner, distributor)	10	0.8
Table 4.9.5. Monthly remuneration (net)	№	%
0 Gel [not paid job]	6	0.5
Up to 150 Gel	7	0.6
150 – 300 Gel	28	2.3
301 – 500 Gel	90	7.5
501 – 800 Gel	187	15.6
801 – 1200 Gel	194	16.1
1201- 1500 Gel	104	8.7
1501 – 2000 Gel	84	7.0
2001 – 3000 Gel	93	7.7
More than 3000 Gel	75	6.2
Table 4.10.3. Employment in other specialty: reason?	№	%
Jobs relevant to my specialty are scarce on the labor market	173	14.4
The knowledge and skills acquired at the bachelor's level do not correspond to the job requirements	90	7.5
Remuneration relevant to my specialty does not satisfy me	79	6.6
I had no desire to be employed in my specialty	111	9.2

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Notes

1. We present here the official quantitative data of the National Statistics Office of Georgia (GeoStat) for 2011-2020 (see diagram below). These data (both for public and private universities) is available from 2011 on the GeoStat website. The data are calculated based on the GeoStat PC-AXIS database: http://pc-axis.geostat.ge/PXWeb/pxweb/ka/Database

Distribution of university graduates, GeoStat (thousand)