
Academic and Social Integration of Ethnic Minority Students Relocating from Regional Areas to Tbilisi: Barriers and Supportive Environments

Research Report

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Executive summary

This research report presents the findings of a qualitative study conducted in October–November 2025. The study aims to examine the academic and social integration of students of Azerbaijani and Armenian ethnicity who relocate from regional areas to Tbilisi for their higher education. Specifically, the research examines the barriers and challenges these students face in higher educational institutions and assesses the existing supportive environment within universities.

The study's findings verify existing knowledge and expectations regarding this issue: inadequate proficiency in the Georgian language remains a fundamental challenge for students of Azerbaijani and Armenian ethnicity. This language barrier operates as a "domino effect" principle, triggering academic setbacks in various other areas. The root of this problem lies not in the universities, but in the primary and secondary schools. According to the respondents, the quality of school education is critically low, frequently stemming from a shortage of qualified teachers and the reliance on outdated educational resources. Consequently, limited linguistic competence hinders students' ability to engage in lectures, participate in discussions, and comprehend academic terminology. Ultimately, this leads to deteriorating academic performance and student passivity.

Although respondents evaluate the "1+4" program¹ as a critically important mechanism for ensuring access to higher education, the research also identified its unintended negative consequences. Specifically, during the preparatory Georgian language course, ethnic minority students study in isolation, surrounded only by their minority peers. Because of this, they struggle to cope with the competitive, entirely Georgian-language environment when transitioning to the first year of their bachelor's studies. Instead of integration, a clear tendency toward segregation is evident within the university space, where students of Azerbaijani and Armenian ethnicity form insular "ethnic clusters" and interact predominantly with members of their own ethnic groups. According to the research, the burden of integration rests almost exclusively on the ethnic minorities. While Georgian students maintain a neutral attitude toward them, their behavior is characterized by passivity and a lack of initiative in forming relationships. Notably, in some instances, this isolation is further exacerbated by gender barriers. This is particularly true for female students of Azerbaijani and Armenian ethnicity from certain regions, where strict family control and traditional values severely limit their socialization with "others."

Institutional support from universities is weak. In state universities, particularly, this is driven by large lecture group sizes, which severely limit the feasibility of individualized approaches. Furthermore, respondents note that a significant portion of lecturers lack the necessary skills to

¹ Since 2010, representatives of ethnic minorities in Georgia have been able to access higher education through a simplified system known as the "1+4" program. This program allows students to take the General Aptitude Test in Armenian, Azerbaijani, Abkhazian, or Ossetian languages and, upon accumulating the required score, gain access to higher education. These students undergo a one-year Georgian language preparatory course; after securing 60 credits, they continue their studies in their desired faculty (Office of the State Minister of Georgia for Reconciliation and Civic Equality, n.d.).

effectively manage multicultural groups. In some cases, this deficiency manifests in unethical or overtly discriminatory behavior from academic staff.

The research also highlighted significant identity-related issues. Even though the participating students of Azerbaijani and Armenian ethnicity consider themselves citizens of Georgia, having grown up in the country, they still occasionally feel like "foreigners." Notably, young adults of Azerbaijani ethnicity demonstrate an affinity with Turkish identity. According to one expert's interpretation, this may serve as a coping mechanism to evade the stigmas and stereotypes prevalent in broader Georgian society.

The study concludes that, at present, the integration of ethnic minorities remains superficial, leaving students of Azerbaijani and Armenian ethnicity to confront a dual challenge of academic and social hurdles. Addressing this situation requires a comprehensive approach. This must include fundamentally improving the quality of instruction at the school level, alongside introducing and strengthening targeted social programs and mentoring systems at the university level. Furthermore, the research demonstrates a critical need to train academic staff in cultural sensitivity and multicultural classroom management.

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1. Contextual Overview

Research conducted in Georgia indicates that young adults from ethnic minority backgrounds come across both academic difficulties and significant barriers to integration.

The challenges associated with academic integration frequently originate at the general education level. Existing studies highlight that non-Georgian language schools suffer from acute shortages of qualified teaching staff, outdated pedagogical methods, and the ineffective implementation of bilingual education. Consequently, these students enter higher educational institutions with deficits not only in language proficiency but also in general academic skills, deficiencies that the "1+4" program cannot fully compensate for (Tabatadze & Gorgadze, 2017).

This perspective is reinforced by research from the Social Justice Center (2021), which found that after completing the "1+4" preparatory course and transitioning to the undergraduate level, students struggle to master academic language. Lecturers frequently fail to accommodate the students' linguistic proficiency levels, leading to demotivation and a decline in academic performance (Social Justice Center, 2021). Furthermore, Tabatadze and Gorgadze (2017) emphasize that language is not merely a tool for communication but an initial instrument for academic instruction and content comprehension. Students lacking advanced linguistic competence often find themselves unable to engage in lectures and discussions, which weakens their motivation and increases the risk of university dropout.

Existing research also reveals a tendency toward ethnic segregation within universities. Reports by the Public Defender of Georgia note that ethnic minority students primarily interact within their own ethnic groups and often struggle to form friendships with Georgian students. This is largely attributed to linguistic insecurity, specifically, the fear of making mistakes and facing ridicule, as well as cultural distance stemming from differing traditions and values (Public Defender of Georgia, 2020).

The literature further indicates that the attitudes of the receiving society, namely the ethnic majority, are critical for successful integration. Data from the Caucasus Research Resource Centers (CRRC) demonstrate that a degree of social distance² toward ethnic minorities persists in Georgia. Often, students from the ethnic majority lack the initiative to establish relationships, leaving minority students with a sense of alienation and a feeling of being treated as second-class (CRRC Georgia, 2019; Wheatley, 2017).

The role of university personnel and support services is also critical. Both international and local organizations (e.g., the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities) emphasize that universities must foster an inclusive environment that extends beyond formal education. In the

² According to 2021 data, 75%–77% of ethnic Georgians stated they would approve of a Georgian engaging in business relations with an Armenian or Azerbaijani living in Georgia; however, only 42%–50% reported they would approve of a Georgian woman marrying an Azerbaijani or Armenian living in Georgia.

Georgian context, however, student services are frequently oriented exclusively toward administrative matters, offering limited psychosocial support or opportunities for intercultural dialogue (Tabatadze, 2019).

A review of the existing literature makes it evident that, despite the broader successes of the "1+4" program, ethnic minority students in Tbilisi face a dual challenge: **academic struggles driven by linguistic barriers and social isolation.**

The present study, which investigates these issues through qualitative methods (in-depth interviews and focus groups), aims to expand upon this existing knowledge by exploring the personal experiences and emotional perspectives of the students themselves.

2. Research Findings

2.1 Challenges Related to the Language Barrier

According to the research findings, the language barrier constitutes the primary challenge for students of Azerbaijani and Armenian ethnicity who relocate from regional areas to study in Tbilisi. This barrier significantly impacts both their academic performance and their broader social integration.

The Academic Process and the Language Barrier

Participating students of Azerbaijani and Armenian ethnicity report that the language barrier frequently impedes their ability to express their thoughts during lectures. They find it difficult to comprehend spoken lectures, and subject-specific terminology in Georgian is often inaccessible to them. The lecturers participating in the study corroborate these issues. They note that these students frequently struggle to comprehend lecture material, prepare for seminars, and complete coursework assignments. As one lecturer from a state university observed, while students may manage to memorize and recite material, they struggle with providing in-depth analysis or contextual examples.

Understanding of technical and professional terminology poses an additional challenge. Furthermore, lecturers observe that the language barrier leads to student passivity during seminars; many harbor linguistic insecurities regarding speaking Georgian and actively avoid delivering presentations. In some instances, these students request to deliver their presentations individually at the end of the class, after their peers have left the room. During group projects, they tend to avoid leadership roles. Lecturers attribute this avoidance to a fear of inadequately presenting the group's collective work. Beyond difficulties in absorbing lecture material, several participating lecturers highlighted challenges associated with written assignments. According to

one lecturer, this deficit is most apparent during examinations, where students struggle both to comprehend the exam questions and to articulate their thoughts in writing.

The focus group analysis tells that ethnic minority students employ various coping mechanisms to overcome difficulties in comprehending lecture material. They frequently utilize dictionaries and occasionally seek assistance from their peers and lecturers. In a few instances, however, participants expressed hesitation in approaching their lecturers for assistance due to shyness. As noted by the participating lecturers, to cope with the academic difficulties stemming from the language barrier, students occasionally request lecture materials in Russian. Additionally, they rely on artificial intelligence tools (such as ChatGPT) to manage their assignments.

Notably, the research showed a spectrum of both positive and negative experiences regarding student-lecturer interactions. The majority of students in the focus groups reported supportive environments, noting that lecturers frequently encourage them, communicate using simplified language, and positively reinforce their participation. At the same time, however, instances of overt discrimination and aggression were documented. For example, a student of Azerbaijani ethnicity from a private university reported that some lecturers display hostility, directly confronting them with remarks such as: *"Why don't you know [the Georgian language]? How can you be a citizen of this country...?!"*

Self-Assessment of Georgian Language Proficiency

In their self-assessments of language proficiency, only a small minority of the participating students of Armenian and Azerbaijani ethnicity reported having an adequate command of the Georgian language. These instances were observed predominantly among students of Azerbaijani ethnicity and were primarily attributed to their completion of the final stages of their secondary education in Georgian-language schools. Additionally, positive self-assessments were noted in a few cases among respondents who did not attend Georgian-language schools but benefited from having highly qualified Georgian language teachers at their local schools.

The majority of participants who reported that their language skills improved primarily through everyday communication with Georgian friends and acquaintances are enrolled in private universities. This reliance on social interaction is largely due to the absence of preparatory language courses at private institutions. Conversely, students who attributed their linguistic improvement to formal preparatory courses are enrolled at state universities. Notably, in one specific case, a participant enrolled in a state university preparatory course, who had already completed their general education in a Georgian-language school, indicated that the course was ineffective for advancing their language proficiency. The student explained that the university curriculum merely repeated foundational material they had already mastered in school.

“ *"I feel that the material we are currently covering is something I already knew from school. I am not learning anything new, and therefore, my proficiency will not improve."* - Female student of Azerbaijani ethnicity, state university.

Additionally, focus group discussions showed that respondents who were employed alongside their studies demonstrated greater fluency in Georgian. The participants themselves acknowledged that active immersion in a Georgian-speaking work environment significantly contributed to the improvement of their language proficiency. The research analysis also indicates that participants of Azerbaijani ethnicity who commute from the regions to attend lectures, rather than residing in Tbilisi, interact with the Georgian language exclusively during class hours. After their lectures conclude, they return to predominantly Azerbaijani-speaking environments. Notably, this lack of broader linguistic immersion was documented in one specific instance, even with a respondent who had relocated to live in Tbilisi.

“ *"I have one particular problem that holds me back. At the university, during lectures, I speak, write, and listen in Georgian. But as soon as I return home, I switch to speaking Azerbaijani. When I go out with friends, we also speak Azerbaijani. This really hinders my progress..."* - Female student of Azerbaijani ethnicity, state university.

Demotivation in Learning the Georgian Language: Systemic Deficiencies in General Education

Ultimately, the participating students attribute their inadequate command of the Georgian language to the poor quality of instruction at the school level. They report that Georgian is rarely spoken even during Georgian language classes, and that teachers fail to deliver high-quality instructions. Several respondents noted that their Georgian teachers were from their own villages of Armenian or Azerbaijani ethnicity who themselves had limited proficiency in Georgian, according to the students' assessments.

Participating lecturers also draw attention to the substandard quality of education in the regions. Respondents unanimously agree that the fundamental root of the linguistic and social barriers facing ethnic minority students lies not within the universities, but rather in the systemic failures of regional schools. According to the lecturers, the teaching of the Georgian language in regional schools is virtually non-existent. As one respondent emphasized, *"the Georgian language is practically not taught at all"* and *"bilingual education does not exist."* This systemic failure necessitates the "1+4" program, a remedial measure that, ideally, a citizen of Georgia who has graduated from a public school should not require. Furthermore, another lecturer pointed out that there is no genuine motivation to learn Georgian at the school level, as language proficiency is essentially not a prerequisite for university admission under the current system.

As one lecturer, who is also a co-founder of the "1+4" program, observes, universities are left to deal with the *"symptoms"* rather than the root causes. These symptoms are multifaceted, encompassing both a severe deficit in general academic skills and the critically low quality of prior Georgian language instruction. Students arriving from the regions frequently exhibit *"very low general cognitive skills."* They have not developed fundamental *"learning-to-learn"* skills and, since their school years, have been habituated to *"copying"* (academic dishonesty) rather than genuinely comprehending the material. The respondent further notes that socioeconomic factors exacerbate this issue; for instance, in agrarian regions during seasonal labor periods (such as the harvest), the educational process is often *"completely disrupted."*

This deficit in academic skills was also highlighted by a representative of a non-governmental organization and an expert researcher on ethnic minority issues. According to this respondent, frequently labeling the issue merely as a *"language barrier"* is an attempt by the state to turn a blind eye to a deeper crisis. The true challenge is that schools fail to equip these students with the foundational academic skills (such as reading comprehension and critical thinking) required for higher education. The expert explained that while a student might successfully learn conversational Georgian, they will still struggle to master academic material due to this underlying lack of substantive intellectual preparation.

Low teacher qualification is identified as a primary driver of this educational failure. A program director at a private university recalled that during the national teacher certification reforms, many regional educators who failed the competency exams were nonetheless retained simply because *"there was no alternative."* This is compounded by the inadequacy of educational materials. One lecturer observed that these students frequently study using textbooks bearing the *"flag of Armenia or Azerbaijan."* Concurrently, Georgian history textbooks completely omit their communities, leading these students to *"fail to see their own role"* in the history of Georgia.

The issue is further complicated by the fact that many students lack formal proficiency not only in Georgian but also in their native languages. One respondent noted that they *"often do not even have books in their native language"* and rely on local dialects; there have even been instances when students learned their native alphabet only in the ninth grade. Furthermore, an NGO representative suggested that the systemic issues in schools are exacerbated by the socio-linguistic landscape. In regions densely populated by ethnic minorities, the school acts as virtually the only environment where students are exposed to spoken Georgian. As confirmed by experts, lecturers, and several students, the broader social spaces and local communities are non-Georgian-speaking. Consequently, students have no opportunity to practice the language outside the classroom. This starkly contrasts with the realities of urban centers like Tbilisi or Rustavi, where the social environment organically facilitates language acquisition. In the regions, the entire burden of language immersion falls on the schools, a function they are currently failing to fulfill.

In light of these deep flaws within formal education, a representative from a non-governmental media organization emphasized the effectiveness of informal learning methodologies. The

respondent highlighted a practice introduced in select Armenian-language schools, where students remain for an hour after regular classes to watch Georgian cartoons or films and subsequently hold discussions. According to their assessment, this approach has proven far more effective in developing communication skills than standard classroom instruction; however, such initiatives are unfortunately not yet widespread.

Demotivation in Learning the Georgian Language: Socio-Political Factors

The lack of motivation to acquire the state language at the school level is also rooted in deep socio-political factors. As one expert explains, in regions with limited labor markets, young people observe that employment in the public sector frequently depends not on professional competence or state language proficiency, but rather on familial connections and "clan-based" governance. When qualified professionals are bypassed in favor of *"someone's relative,"* it triggers widespread demotivation toward education within the entire community. Young people become convinced that language proficiency offers no guarantee of upward social mobility.

Furthermore, these employment barriers are not confined solely to regional public institutions. The expert notes that while the business sector is significantly more developed in Tbilisi compared to the regions, the private sector's receptiveness to hiring ethnic minorities remains remarkably low. Frequently, employers form prejudices based solely on an applicant's surname and actively avoid hiring them. This fosters a pervasive sense among students that, regardless of their linguistic proficiency and academic qualifications, their career prospects are severely constrained—both in the regions (due to nepotism) and in the capital (due to discriminatory stereotypes).

The perception of insurmountable labor market barriers and a lack of genuine state support is further validated by specific instances where even exceptional qualifications fail to guarantee success. A university program director recounted the case of an outstanding student who, following the "1+4" program, achieved absolute fluency in both Georgian and English, participated in multiple European exchange programs, and completed a master's degree. Yet, despite these stellar academic achievements, the relevant state agency (the Office of the State Minister of Georgia for Reconciliation and Civic Equality) rejected their application even for an internship. Regardless of the objective reasoning behind this rejection, the respondent stressed that such decisions are perceived as the state willfully discarding highly qualified, successfully integrated professionals. This inevitably has a profound negative impact on the motivation of the broader student body.

Beyond informational deficits and ingrained stereotypes, employment challenges are further exacerbated by the complete absence of a structured career guidance system. A program director at a state university noted that no comprehensive labor market research is conducted in the regions. Consequently, university applicants choose their professions "blindly." For instance, it is highly common for students to enroll in law programs despite a massive oversupply of lawyers in the current job market, completely overlooking sectors where actual demand exists. The respondent strongly recommended that the state conduct targeted regional labor market studies

and disseminate these findings directly to prospective students, thereby empowering them to make informed, viable career choices.

Ultimately, respondents universally agree that universities are left to grapple with deep-seated systemic failures that should inherently be resolved at the school level.

“ *"The university is already dealing with... the symptoms. It is not the university's role to fix these foundational issues... On the contrary, the schools should be resolving all of this."* - Lecturer, state university.

Additional Factors Exacerbating the Language Barrier

Regarding the factors that exacerbate the language barrier within the university environment, student accounts reveal a strong tendency to interact predominantly with peers from their own ethnic groups. Only in rare instances did a few students mention actively seeking socialization with Georgian-speaking peers specifically to improve their language proficiency. Furthermore, the research findings indicate that during in-class group assignments, the composition of groups is largely left to the students' discretion. Lecturers typically allow students to form groups freely, which invariably results in segregation along ethnic lines. Consequently, opportunities for meaningful communication with Georgian-speaking students are significantly diminished.

Participating lecturers corroborate this observation, noting that ethnic minority students—particularly those struggling with the language barrier—tend to form insular "clusters." They sit together during lectures, collaborate exclusively with one another on group projects, and spend their breaks together. According to one lecturer from a state university, this issue has been exacerbated by the increasing enrollment numbers of minority students. In the past, when there were fewer ethnic minority students in a given cohort, they *"had no other choice"* and were compelled to integrate with their Georgian peers. Additionally, some lecturers point to underlying psychological barriers: these students frequently present as *"shy"* and *"withdrawn,"* harboring deep hesitations about asking for help or seeking clarification during class.

When discussing their peers from ethnic minority backgrounds, ethnic Georgian students generally characterize the university environment as friendly and non-discriminatory, asserting that they face no challenges in interacting with different ethnic groups. However, deeper probing reveals that these interactions are largely superficial and strictly confined to the university premises (e.g., during lectures and breaks). Almost all Georgian respondents, from both private and state universities, observed that ethnic minority students *"stay in their own groups," "always sit together,"* and *"speak their own language."*

Furthermore, ethnic Georgian students acknowledge that outside the university context (such as at cafes or the cinema), Georgian students predominantly socialize separately. Some Georgian

students perceive this separation as a conscious choice by the minority students, assuming that they simply do not wish to integrate. *"They communicate more with people who speak their language than with us... they probably just prefer communicating with their own over us."* - Female ethnic Georgian student, private university

“ *"We go out frequently, but it always ends up being just the Georgians... I don't have a close enough friend [from an ethnic minority background] to invite them out with us."* - Male ethnic Georgian student, state university.

Participating lecturers also addressed the interactions between ethnic minority students and their ethnic Georgian peers. In their assessment, the attitude of Georgian students is predominantly neutral: while they do not actively ostracize minority students, they also do little to actively facilitate their integration. However, one lecturer attributes this dynamic largely to class size. Based on their observations, integration occurs far more organically in small groups (15–20 students) compared to the large lecture cohorts typical of state universities. This lecturer noted that in private universities, Georgian students are significantly more inclined to help, communicate actively, and even engage in shared discussions regarding their respective cultural traditions.

Despite the abovementioned barriers, the participating students of Azerbaijani and Armenian ethnicity report that they have never contemplated discontinuing their studies.

“ *"No, I have never had such thoughts. I live in Georgia, and the most important thing is to learn the language. The fact that I am ethnically Armenian does not change anything; I am in Georgia, and this is my country. I must know my country's native language."* - Male student of Armenian ethnicity, state university.

However, rather than dropping out, there was a documented instance of a student transferring to a different university. A student of Azerbaijani ethnicity currently enrolled in a private university reported initially attending a state university. However, due to a highly demanding curriculum coupled with discriminatory treatment from lecturers, the student felt compelled to transfer to a private institution. Another state university student admitted to considering transferring to a less demanding institution, an "easier university", because their current institution is "very strict," referring specifically to the heavy academic workload. Nevertheless, they never considered abandoning their education entirely. The remaining participants stated that they had not considered transferring, expressing satisfaction with the quality of education at their respective universities.

According to the participating expert, when ethnic minority students choose to change universities or academic programs, the decision is frequently driven not solely by academic challenges, but by a deeper search for a *"safe environment."* The expert observes that during student mobility periods

(transfer windows), there is substantial demand for programs specifically tailored to the needs of ethnic minorities, such as the Multilingual Education program. These programs offer a student-centered environment that provides essential psychological comfort, standing in stark contrast to standard programs where these students frequently feel marginalized.

“ *For example, consider the Multilingual Education program at TSU [Tbilisi State University], which is designed specifically for them and trains future teachers. You should see the immense demand for transfers from other programs whenever the mobility window opens. It is because the environment there is tailored to their needs; it is a student-centered program that holistically supports their learning process.* ” - Expert, NGO representative.

The perspectives of university academic staff and administration regarding student dropout rates differ markedly from those of the participating students. During interviews, these respondents noted a high enrollment of ethnic minority students in first-year courses; however, they observed a sharp decline in their presence in upper-level subjects. Lecturers report that because these students frequently lack the linguistic competence required to successfully navigate undergraduate studies, the faculty is often faced with a dilemma: either fail the student - which directly leads to the loss of their financial aid and subsequent dropout - or award a passing grade through a form of positive discrimination. As one respondent highlighted, many of these students rely on external funding sources, such as SOCAR scholarships or other grants. A decline in academic performance inevitably results in the termination of this financial support, which often serves as the primary catalyst for dropping out.

“ *I have had many more ethnic minority students in my first-year courses, but when I move on to teaching third-year subjects, these students are no longer there. I cannot say for sure whether they simply did not end up in my specific classes by chance or if their overall numbers actually decreased over those two years. I cannot say definitively, but I have certainly made this observation: there are significantly more of them in the first year, and by the time we reach third-level subjects, I rarely encounter them.* ” - Lecturer, state university.

According to a representative of a non-governmental media organization, there are even more extreme instances where students, overwhelmed by the language barrier, perceive leaving the country as their only viable solution. For example, the respondent highlighted a recurring practice wherein students discontinue their studies in Tbilisi and transfer to institutions in Armenia, simply because pursuing higher education in their native language proves significantly more manageable. Ultimately, this indicates that even after completing the "1+4" preparatory program, a segment of the student population remains unable to successfully adapt to the academic environment.

“Several of our staff members studied in Tbilisi, and we frequently discuss how the Georgian language preparatory program at Ilia State University is stronger than the one at Javakhishvili State University. Consequently, when students transition to their first year after completing these programs, there is a noticeable disparity in their Georgian language proficiency. Once they begin their undergraduate studies, they struggle significantly... Some students simply cannot cope with the language barrier and ultimately leave to pursue their education in Armenia.” - Expert, NGO representative.

The participating Georgian students of Azerbaijani and Armenian ethnicity generally report that, aside from the language barrier, they do not face other significant obstacles that hinder their studies. Only in rare instances do they draw attention to logistical challenges, such as transportation. Specifically, students of Azerbaijani ethnicity identify commuting from the regions to the university as an additional barrier. They note that due to unreliable transportation infrastructure, they are frequently forced to arrive late to lectures or leave before they conclude.

2.2 Identity and Socio-Cultural Factors in the Integration Process

As the previously described data illustrate, issues of identity and social integration among students of Azerbaijani and Armenian ethnicity are inextricably linked to linguistic competence. However, the profound influence of other socio-cultural factors is also evident.

Identity Transformation and Social Stigma

Overall, the majority of participating ethnic minority students assert that they consider themselves full-fledged citizens of Georgia, as they were born and raised in the country. Participants also identify several other factors that foster their sense of belonging to Georgian society: the tolerant attitudes of ethnic Georgians and—specifically for those who are proficient in the state language—their mastery of Georgian and their circles of Georgian friends.

“We were all born in Georgia, we live here... I love Georgia very much, and I could not imagine living anywhere else.” - Student of Azerbaijani ethnicity, private university

“I am in Georgia. The fact that I am ethnically Armenian changes nothing; I am in Georgia, and this is my country.” - Student of Armenian ethnicity, state university.

Conversely, a segment of the respondents admits to feeling like “foreigners” because they lack a deep familiarity with Georgian culture, its people, and the language. Consequently, the language barrier makes it exceedingly difficult for them to form friendships with Georgians. Upon deeper probing, it becomes apparent that a portion of the students of Azerbaijani ethnicity maintains a stronger emotional bond with Turkey than with Georgia. These participants note a fundamental difference in “mindset” between Georgians and the Azerbaijani and Turkish communities,

attributing this divergence to distinct family traditions, child-rearing practices, and religious factors.

“ *As I see it, Georgians are simply different. Turks and Azerbaijanis are different [in their own way]. Whether it is the lifestyle, the environment—really, everything. Georgians have a distinct mindset, whereas Muslims—meaning Turks and Azerbaijanis—have a completely different way of thinking. That is probably what causes this [feeling of distance].*” - Female student of Azerbaijani ethnicity, state university.

“My roots trace back to there [Turkey]. Looking at history and talking to my father, I know my roots originate from there. No matter how long I live here, when your family background comes from somewhere else, you naturally gravitate toward it. I like Georgians, and I love Georgia very much, but I also feel deeply drawn to Turkey.” - Female student of Azerbaijani ethnicity, state university.

“I do not even watch football... [however] I would probably still root for Turkey... but I wouldn't want Turkey to win and Georgia to lose.” - Female student of Azerbaijani ethnicity, private university.

Furthermore, according to the assessment of a participating NGO representative, the alienation between Georgians and ethnic minorities stems from a prevailing values crisis within the broader society. In their view, the Georgian reality is still dominated by *“ethnic patriotism,”* where only those who are ethnically Georgian and Orthodox Christian are perceived as fully-fledged citizens. Until society transitions to a model of *“civic patriotism,”* where the primary unifying factor is citizenship rather than ethnic affiliation, ethnic minorities will consistently be viewed as a *“security risk”* or merely an extension of a neighboring state. This deeply hinders their integration. Additionally, a representative from a non-governmental media organization points out that, beyond the language barrier, socialization is impeded by the absence of a shared cultural context. According to this respondent's observations, the population in the regions generally does not consume Georgian television programming; consequently, young people arrive unfamiliar with Georgian show business, cinema, or pop culture. This creates a *“cultural vacuum,”* making it exceedingly difficult for ethnic minority students arriving from the regions to find common topics of conversation with their Georgian peers at the university.

Another underlying cause of alienation among students of Azerbaijani and Armenian ethnicity is the discriminatory treatment they occasionally encounter. While the majority of participating ethnic minority students characterize the environment both within and outside the university as generally non-discriminatory, several students—or their close friends—have nonetheless experienced discrimination, not only from ordinary citizens but even from university lecturers. It is noteworthy that every instance of discrimination shared during the focus groups occurred within state universities. This may correlate with the fact that state universities enroll a

significantly larger number of ethnic minority students compared to private institutions. Some of these discriminatory experiences are tied to ethnic or gender markers, while others stem from the unconscious or unethical behavior of academic staff. Several participants described instances where lecturers explicitly stated they did not want students of Azerbaijani ethnicity in their classes, or told a student of Armenian ethnicity that their studies were *"pointless."* One student recalled an incident at a state university (where they previously studied) where a lecturer announced in front of the entire class: *"I do not want to work with Azerbaijanis."* A similar experience was recounted by a state university student of Armenian ethnicity, whose sister and other non-Georgian students were addressed by a lecturer with the words: *"What are you doing here?! Why are you studying here?! You won't achieve anything anyway."*

Participating ethnic Georgian students also corroborate these accounts of discrimination by university lecturers. One respondent highlighted a case of intersectional gender and ethnic discrimination during an exchange program selection process: male students were prioritized because of an underlying prejudice against female students of Azerbaijani ethnicity, framed as, *"They are going to get married anyway, so it's a waste of a spot."* Furthermore, another instance of unethical behavior was recorded when a lecturer explicitly thanked a Georgian student for choosing a peer of Azerbaijani ethnicity as a partner for a group assignment, displaying a highly patronizing attitude.

According to the expert's observations, such unethical attitudes from lecturers can be attributed to a low level of preparedness and cultural competence within the academic sphere. The expert asserts that professors in Georgia who possess international experience and high cultural sensitivity constitute only a small fraction of the academic personnel. The majority lacks the necessary skills to manage a multicultural classroom—a deficiency that frequently manifests in radical forms, such as overtly insulting religious or ethnic minorities during lectures.

Regarding experiences of ethnic discrimination and stigmatization outside the university in everyday life, such as in schools, workplaces, and public transportation, the accounts of respondents of Azerbaijani and Armenian ethnicity are heavily dominated by linguistic stigmatization. They describe the immense psychological pressure resulting from being criticized for their imperfect command of Georgian, as well as being publicly reprimanded for communicating in their native languages. This is compounded by verbal aggression, xenophobic demands to leave the country, and having their right to employment questioned based solely on their ethnicity. Cumulatively, this fosters a profound sense of alienation and of being unwanted among the respondents. One focus group student of Azerbaijani ethnicity noted that Azerbaijanis sometimes harbor resentment toward Georgians precisely because they feel repeatedly humiliated by them.

“ *...they called me 'Tatar' [a derogatory slur] and things like that. Then my father went to the school and told them that this was unacceptable; he spoke with their parents. After that, they*

didn't say anything else. None of them did." - Female student of Azerbaijani ethnicity, private university.

"We were speaking Armenian on the bus, and someone asked why, saying that since we live in Georgia, we should only speak Georgian." - Male student of Armenian ethnicity, state university.

Notably, the ethnic Georgian participants in the focus groups were largely unable to identify the stereotypes regarding minorities that might be prevalent in Georgian society; only two participants managed to recall and name such stereotypes during the discussions.

Socialization Dynamics and Segregation

As discussed in the previous section, state university lecturers observe that students frequently self-segregate by ethnicity in lecture halls and engage minimally with the rest of the class. This behavior is indicative of broader social distancing and socialization challenges. According to one lecturer's observations, the tendency of ethnic minority students to cluster together is facilitated both by prior acquaintances and by shared living arrangements. The lecturer notes that a portion of these students already know each other prior to university enrollment. Furthermore, arriving from the same regions, they naturally *"seek out their own kind"* in a new environment to help navigate their surroundings. Additionally, parents frequently encourage these students to rent apartments together, which further reinforces their insularity: *"they arrive together, and they leave together."* Positive exceptions to this trend are students of Armenian and Azerbaijani ethnicity who were raised in Tbilisi. Participating lecturers and ethnic Georgian students emphasize that those raised in the capital possess high proficiency in the Georgian language and are fully integrated. For instance, a private university lecturer recalled a student of Armenian ethnicity who *"always hung out with the Georgian students"* and was entirely socialized.

Interviews indicate that socialization challenges are further exacerbated by gender-based restrictions. A state university lecturer highlights that the degree of control exerted over female students of Azerbaijani and Armenian ethnicity varies significantly by region. According to their account, students originating from Marneuli and Bolnisi face fewer restrictions in this regard; however, female students of Armenian ethnicity from Ninotsminda and Dmanisi *"do not interact with anyone at all"* because they are *"raised under strict stereotypes."* This perspective is shared by a lecturer from a private university, who notes that ethnic minority students often *"fear initiating contact with others"* and employ an *"isolationist and cautious strategy"* in their interpersonal interactions. The lecturer explains that this caution likely stems from their upbringing: in the regions, they lived in highly homogeneous environments where both their peers and the adults around them belonged exclusively to their own ethnic group. Consequently, upon arriving in Tbilisi, they struggle to open up to an unfamiliar environment because *"they grew up their entire lives... in a specific region"* completely devoid of exposure to diversity.

These socialization dynamics are particularly stark during the breaks between lectures. According to the observations of a private university lecturer, the behavioral patterns of ethnic Georgian and non-Georgian students during these intervals differ radically. While Georgian students utilize breaks for active socialization, *"they are much more active; they go downstairs, grab a coffee, smoke, do something"*, ethnic minority students predominantly adopt a passive approach, spending their breaks inside the lecture halls: *"they usually just sit inside during the breaks, waiting."*

Furthermore, the majority of the participating ethnic minority students themselves confirm that post-lecture socialization, such as gathering in the university courtyard, occurs almost exclusively with members of their own ethnic groups. However, the students rationalize this behavior by attributing it to pre-existing familiarity rather than ethnic allegiance.

“ *"I can say that, yes, for the most part, they keep to themselves. But it depends more on familiarity rather than nationality, I mean, those who already know each other stick together. Nationality is not really the driving factor here."* - Male student of Armenian ethnicity, state university.

When discussing integration, it becomes evident that a segment of the respondents is actively engaged in civic life. Students of Azerbaijani and Armenian ethnicity generally report a strong interest in current national events and make a conscious effort to stay informed. In stark contrast, however, the majority of ethnic Georgian students perceive their ethnic minority peers as largely disengaged from civic life, specifically noting their reluctance to participate in politically oriented discussions. In certain instances, this disengagement appears to stem from familial restrictions; one respondent, for example, observed that a classmate was explicitly forbidden by their parents from participating in civic activities. Only in rare cases do Georgian students report that their peers of Armenian and Azerbaijani ethnicity engage in civic discussions and processes as actively as ethnic Georgians do.

“ *"Regarding the Azerbaijanis around me—the ones I know and have had direct contact with—I can say about one of them that she genuinely took all of this [current events] to heart. But as for the others, and the majority in general, I would say absolutely not; they were neither involved nor interested... They themselves do not want to be fully Georgian. I would say this because, for instance, when that one person was rooting for Turkey [the national football team], she explicitly said, 'We are not Georgians, we are Turks.' She said it herself, and that is how they perceive themselves—that they are Azeris, they are Turks, and they speak Turkish very well. So, overall, the problem is not solely that they experience discrimination from Georgians; it is also that they themselves do not actually want to be Georgians."* - Female ethnic Georgian student, state university.

2.3 Institutional Environment and Support Mechanisms: Existing Practices and Perceived Effectiveness

For students of Azerbaijani and Armenian ethnicity facing the aforementioned challenges, the presence of an appropriate institutional environment and robust support mechanisms is crucial. However, as the research findings indicate, systemic support mechanisms are largely absent; instead, support relies heavily on the goodwill and individual initiative of specific personnel, such as university program directors and lecturers.

Mechanisms for Educational Access: Evaluation of the "1+4" Program

In evaluating the institutional environment and support mechanisms, university program directors and lecturers unequivocally assess the "1+4" program as a vital and positive step toward ensuring access to higher education. A representative from a state university (and a co-founder of the "1+4" program) noted that without this initiative, the enrollment rate of ethnic minority students in universities would be critically low. Nevertheless, respondents also highlighted the program's unintended negative consequences. They explained that during the one-year preparatory course, students study in isolation, interacting exclusively within an ethnic minority environment. Consequently, when these students transition to their first year and integrate into the mainstream Georgian-language cohorts, they experience a profound "shock" and a "rude awakening" as they are suddenly immersed in a highly competitive and linguistically demanding environment.

“ *"We create a greenhouse environment for them... and then they are suddenly thrust into reality, where the lecturer speaks rapidly, and no one waits for them to catch up."* - Program head, state university.

A representative of a non-governmental organization identified the program's primary flaw as its structural rigidity. Once admitted, students are uniformly required to accumulate 60 credits, regardless of their baseline proficiency in Georgian. The expert recommends implementing a differentiated system: the entrance exam should assess the applicant's language proficiency without the risk of failing them, and individualized academic trajectories should be designed based on those diagnostic results.

“ *"We wanted linguistic competence to be assessed through the entrance exam without it negatively impacting enrollment. A student could be admitted with zero competence, but we would know this objectively based on the exam results... and the curriculum would then be planned accordingly based on that data."* - Expert, NGO representative.

Additionally, within the focus group of students of Azerbaijani ethnicity, significant attention was drawn to the tuition fees associated with Georgian language instruction. Several participants shared the perspective that the preparatory courses should be provided free of charge, given that they are studying the official state language.

“ *I am not currently in the preparatory course, but I dislike that it requires payment... I mean, we are learning the language, we live in Georgia, and we are learning the Georgian language, yet we have to pay for it. I do not like this.*” - Female student of Azerbaijani ethnicity, state university.

Discussions regarding the shortcomings of the "1+4" program also revealed a concerning trend of its misuse. According to a university program director, there are instances where Georgian-speaking pupils of Azerbaijani and Armenian ethnicity, who were born, raised, and educated in Georgian-language schools in Tbilisi, intentionally transfer to regional schools for their final year (12th grade) simply to formally qualify for the program. By doing so, they bypass the standard unified national university entrance exams and exploit a concession designed specifically for marginalized ethnic minorities, despite already possessing high linguistic competence and requiring no remedial preparation. This practice highlights a significant systemic loophole, which artificially inflates competition and places an undue burden on the program's resources.

Student Needs and Support Mechanisms

The analysis also reveals significant disparities between state and private universities. Unlike private institutions, where smaller class sizes facilitate active student engagement, state universities struggle with the issue of "*massification*" (overcrowding). In these state institutions, a student's academic and social integration relies entirely on their personal resilience rather than on institutional support. The universities' financial interests are identified as a fundamental driver of this overcrowding and the subsequent decline in academic quality. As explained by a program director at a state university, amidst a sharp influx of applicants (exceeding 2,000 annually at their institution alone), universities seek to maximize class sizes, placing up to 40 students in a single group. This occurs because funding is directly tied to per-student vouchers; thus, forming larger groups minimizes operational costs while maximizing revenue. According to the respondent's assessment, language instruction in such overcrowded classrooms often becomes merely a formality. It fails to facilitate genuine improvement in linguistic competence, inevitably leading to academic underperformance at the undergraduate level.

The narratives provided by lecturers reveal an almost complete absence of institutional support. Universities have yet to develop specialized methodologies or mandate training for lecturers on how to effectively teach multicultural cohorts or assist students facing language barriers. Consequently, the extent and quality of integration rely entirely on the goodwill, enthusiasm, and personal initiative of individual academic staff. Some lecturers employ personal strategies to foster

integration, noting: *"I intentionally seat them next to a Georgian student,"* or *"I assign group projects that mandate the inclusion of at least one ethnic minority student."* Conversely, other lecturers argue that implementing such individualized approaches is impossible given the massive influx of students, particularly at state universities: *"When there are 50 students in a lecture hall, I physically cannot control who sits with whom."*

Furthermore, it is noteworthy that a vast majority of the participating students remain entirely unaware of the support services offered by their universities. Ethnic minority students generally lack information regarding available campus opportunities and extracurricular activities (such as student clubs, excursions, etc.). Only a few students of Azerbaijani and Armenian ethnicity indicated that they were aware of such activities; however, none of them actively participated. They cited various reasons for this disengagement, including a lack of interest, logistical challenges related to commuting from the regions, and a lack of free time. The sole exception was excursions; only two students of Armenian ethnicity confirmed participating in university-organized trips specifically aimed at fostering student socialization.

When discussing potential support mechanisms, several students emphasized the critical need for university-provided dormitories or subsidized transportation. For many, the daily commute from the regions to the university presents a major logistical hurdle that directly impedes their academic progress. Additionally, a small fraction of ethnic minority students suggested that universities could offer valuable support by creating dedicated Facebook groups. These platforms could facilitate networking among peers and serve as a centralized hub for sharing vital information regarding available apartments and housing options.

The narrative concerning students' lack of awareness is echoed by a representative of a non-governmental media organization. The respondent explained that this information deficit extends beyond higher education services to encompass broader state-provided resources. For instance, information regarding paid internships and professional retraining programs offered by the state employment agency is poorly disseminated among students, and sometimes even among the organizations themselves. Due to this communication breakdown, existing state resources frequently remain unutilized. Despite a general skepticism toward state internship programs, the respondent highlighted the Public Service Hall's initiative as a positive exception. According to their account, this represents one of the rare instances where ethnic minority youth successfully secured formal employment within a public institution following their internships, standing in stark contrast to other state agencies where internships rarely translate into permanent positions.

Ultimately, the study participants unanimously agree on the necessity of implementing systemic approaches. They advocate for the refinement of existing programs and the introduction of new ones that intentionally facilitate the socialization and integration of ethnic minority youth.

Several students of Armenian ethnicity highlighted the need for continued support in practicing the Georgian language, specifically recommending that language instruction continue even after

the completion of the formal preparatory course. Furthermore, they emphasized the need to introduce, or reinstate, peer mentoring programs. Such initiatives would allow current students to connect with successful alumni and learn from their experiences.

“ *It would be great to create groups where incoming students can help and guide each other, meaning third- or fourth-year students assisting the first-year students and acting as mentors.*” - Female student of Armenian ethnicity, private university.

According to the expert, this student demand echoes a highly successful practice from the past. Years ago, with the support of international donors, a *"Tutorium Institute"* operated, wherein ethnic Georgian and upper-year students provided direct mentorship to incoming freshmen. However, this program was discontinued once the funding cycle concluded. The respondent critically noted that donor and NGO resources are frequently misallocated toward ineffective, prestige-oriented events (such as hosting conferences in luxury hotels), rather than being invested in funding sustainable, high-impact services like dedicated university academic support centers.

Positive Practices and Recommendations

Against the backdrop of the broader systemic challenges present at the university level, a specific academic department (International Relations) at one state university stands out as a notable positive exception. This department has implemented several highly effective, internal institutional mechanisms explicitly designed to facilitate student integration. Within this department, a student support club operates—founded on the initiative of successful alumni and sustained by a university grant. Through this club, ethnic Georgian student volunteers assist their ethnic minority peers with academic preparation and the completion of coursework. Crucially, this peer support is institutionally incentivized. For the Georgian students, this volunteer work is formally recognized as a qualifying extracurricular activity in the state scholarship rankings, significantly boosting their motivation to actively engage in the integration process.

Furthermore, the department employs a proactive approach to foster social integration. Because students from the "1+4" program frequently join the academic semester slightly later than the mainstream cohort, lecturers conduct preparatory, informational meetings with the Georgian students in advance. This prepares the existing class to actively welcome and assist the incoming minority students during their adaptation period. Within the formal academic setting, the department enforces a strategy of "strategic mixing" for group assignments. During seminars, ethnic minority students are deliberately distributed in small numbers (a maximum of two per group) among their Georgian-speaking peers. This structural intervention prevents the formation of insular "ethnic clusters" and essentially compels students to establish meaningful communication and collaborate directly with their Georgian classmates.

“ *"This is a student support club... funded by the university. It involves successful alumni from ethnic minority backgrounds alongside Georgian student volunteers who wish to assist with extracurricular assignments or provide academic consultation. For the Georgian students, this participation translates into additional points toward their state scholarships."* – Lecturer and program director, state university.

Fostering a supportive environment is crucial not only within the academic sphere but also in informal, extracurricular spaces. However, a specific shortcoming has been identified within the programs organized by the non-governmental sector. According to one respondent's assessment, NGO projects are frequently targeted exclusively at ethnic minorities, an approach that inadvertently reinforces their isolation. Initiatives that bring ethnic minorities and Georgian youth together remain rare. Yet, the creation of mixed environments is an absolute prerequisite for genuine integration. A highly successful example of this approach has been joint summer camps, where intercultural communication and the sharing of experiences occurred organically. Regarding the impact of these joint camps, the experience of one student of Armenian ethnicity is particularly noteworthy. The participant noted that a mere few days spent in a camp environment, interacting closely with ethnic Georgians and youths of other backgrounds, dramatically improved their communication skills.

“ *"Last year, I attended a camp where I was the only Armenian, surrounded by Georgian friends. Conversing with them taught me so much... It was a youth camp, not affiliated with the university, and it lasted four days, if I remember correctly. Honestly, I would equate the progress I made in those four days to an entire year of learning, because I truly learned that much."* - Male student of Armenian ethnicity, private university.

Ultimately, the research demonstrates that the participating ethnic Georgian students acknowledge the difficulties faced by ethnic minorities and express genuine empathy toward them. They conclude that universities must develop a systemic approach to socialization. Specifically, they advocate for the implementation of mandatory institutional policies, such as requiring lecturers to form ethnically mixed assignment groups, and the creation of academic and extracurricular activities that structurally necessitate the active engagement of all students.

3. Conclusions

The research reveals that insufficient proficiency in the Georgian language remains a fundamental challenge, dictating student failure in both academic and social dimensions through a "domino effect." The root of the problem lies not in the universities, but in the public schools. There, the overall quality of education, and particularly the teaching of the Georgian language is critically low, textbooks are outdated or inadequate, and the teachers themselves frequently lack proper command of the state language.

Universities are left attempting to manage the problems inherited from the school system. The existence of the "1+4" program is crucial in this regard. However, despite its critical importance for ensuring access to higher education, the program has specific drawbacks. Academically, it often creates a "greenhouse environment." Consequently, when students transition to their first year after completing the preparatory course, they are unable to cope with the rigorous academic pace and complex terminology. This leads to deteriorating academic performance, classroom passivity, and withdrawal from socialization.

Rather than integration, a clear tendency toward segregation is observed within the university space. The study echoes the findings of Wheatley (2017), affirming that integration is a two-way process wherein the role of the receiving society is critical. The research findings demonstrate that the burden of integration within universities still rests almost exclusively on ethnic minorities, as the ethnic majority makes little effort to break down existing barriers. Driven by linguistic insecurities and cultural distance, minority students form insular groups ("clusters") where they interact solely with members of their own ethnic communities. This is further exacerbated by the structure of the preparatory courses; since these courses enroll only ethnic minority youth, their initial phase of university socialization occurs entirely within their own ethnic circles.

While the attitude of ethnic Georgian students is generally neutral, it is distinctly passive. As the study shows, they lack the initiative to establish relationships, which likely deepens the minority students' sense of alienation. Their interactions are frequently confined strictly to the formal lecture environment. The gendered aspects of this issue are also noteworthy: socialization barriers are particularly severe for female students of Azerbaijani and Armenian ethnicity from certain regions, where strict family control and cultural stereotypes further entrench their isolation.

The study also highlighted an interesting and noteworthy trend regarding the perception of identity. Although students of Armenian and Azerbaijani ethnicity consider themselves citizens of Georgia, the language barrier and the absence of a shared cultural context (such as media, cinema, and music) occasionally cause them to feel like "foreigners." Furthermore, it is significant that in several instances, youths of Azerbaijani ethnicity exhibit a stronger sense of affinity with Turkish identity than with Georgian identity.

The research findings substantiate the criticisms found in the literature (Social Justice Center, 2021) regarding the role of universities. Instead of educational institutions providing an inclusive environment, the study reveals a severe lack, or total absence, of institutional support. Universities, particularly in the state sector, fail to provide individualized support. Large lecture class sizes (30–40 students) and a focus on financial revenue actively hinder quality teaching and integration. Meanwhile, a segment of the academic staff lacks the skills to manage multicultural groups, and instances of both unethical and overtly discriminatory attitudes are documented, severely demotivating students from continuing their studies.

Notably, universities do not support lecturers in acquiring these essential multicultural classroom management skills. The study shows there is no unified, systemic approach to this issue, either at the state level or at the level of individual universities. As the results indicate, the existence of systems that facilitate socialization relies entirely on the goodwill of individual program directors and specific lecturers. For example, a highly successful model of university socialization is the peer mentoring system and the implementation of "strategically mixed" assignment groups introduced by a program director at one state university, which directly improves the quality of ethnic minority integration.

Ultimately, the research findings demonstrate that despite the existence of state programs, the integration of ethnic minorities remains superficial. Students confront a dual barrier: academic difficulties (driven by a lack of linguistic competence and poor foundational school skills) and social isolation (resulting from self-segregation and the passivity of the receiving society). Solving this problem requires a comprehensive approach: fundamentally improving the quality of instruction in schools, introducing targeted social and mentoring programs in universities, and systematically retraining academic staff in multicultural classroom management.

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Annex

Research Methodology

The study employs a qualitative research design aimed at an in-depth exploration of the barriers related to identity, language, and socio-cultural factors faced by ethnic minority students, specifically, Georgian citizens of Azerbaijani and Armenian ethnicity, who have relocated from the regions of Georgia to pursue higher education in Tbilisi. The research examined the direct experiences of the students themselves, alongside the perspectives of university personnel and supporting organizations³.

The study pursued several specific objectives:

1. To examine the perceived level of state language proficiency among ethnic minority students relocating from the regions to Tbilisi, and to assess its impact on their social and academic lives, motivation to study, dropout decisions, and overall sense of belonging to society.
2. To explore the influence of identity, alongside social and cultural factors, on these students' socialization and academic lives, motivation to study, dropout decisions, and sense of societal belonging.
3. To identify additional barriers that may restrict their full participation and to evaluate the impact of these barriers on the educational process, motivation, dropout decisions, and sense of belonging.
4. To investigate the attitudes of ethnic majority students toward their ethnic minority peers and assess the subsequent impact on social relations, social inclusion, and the overall learning environment.
5. To analyze the observations of university staff regarding the social interactions, social inclusion, and educational environment of ethnic minority students.
6. To identify existing support mechanisms and evaluate their perceived effectiveness in fostering the academic success and social inclusion of ethnic minority students.

To achieve these research goals and objectives, qualitative research methods were employed.

The research process was conducted in two primary stages:

1. **Desk Research:** During the initial phase, desk research was conducted to establish a contextual framework. This involved a thorough review of existing policy documents, official reports, and academic papers detailing the needs, challenges, and general conditions of ethnic minority students.

³According to the research design, the study originally intended to include the perspectives of state agencies; however, the authors received no response (neither consent nor refusal) from these entities regarding their participation.

2. **Focus Groups and In-Depth Interviews:** In the subsequent phase, primary data were collected through a series of in-depth interviews and focus group discussions.

Sampling and target groups

Within the framework of this qualitative study, purposive and quota sampling methods were employed. This approach ensured, on the one hand, the identification of respondents possessing the requisite knowledge and experience, and on the other hand, the inclusion of a diverse cross-section of students with varied backgrounds (e.g., representing both public and private universities, as well as different regions).

The research encompassed the following target groups:

- Undergraduate students of Azerbaijani and Armenian ethnicity who relocated from the regions to study in Tbilisi;
- Ethnic Georgian undergraduate students studying alongside ethnic minority peers;
- Academic personnel and lecturers with experience teaching and working with students of Azerbaijani and Armenian ethnicity;
- Representatives of university student service centers responsible for facilitating student integration;
- Representatives of supporting non-governmental organizations (NGOs) focused on issues of ethnic minority engagement and inclusion.

In-depth interviews and focus group discussions were conducted online via the ZOOM communication platform. A quota sampling strategy was strictly applied, utilizing predefined subgroups (Ethnicity × University Type) and specific gender quotas (3 female and 3 male participants per group). To ensure group homogeneity and foster an environment where participants felt comfortable freely sharing their opinions, the focus groups were strictly segmented based on ethnic background and the type of university attended. A total of six focus group discussions were conducted, structured according to the following composition:

Table #1. Focus group composition

University Type	Ethnic Group	Number of Focus Groups	Participant Demographics (Gender)
Private	Armenian	1	3 Female, 3 Male
	Azerbaijani	1	3 Female, 3 Male
	Georgian	1	3 Female, 3 Male
State	Armenian	1	3 Female, 3 Male
	Azerbaijani	1	3 Female, 3 Male
	Georgian	1	3 Female, 3 Male

The focus group discussions were conducted in Georgian. Because one of the study's primary objectives was to examine language-related barriers, students were actively encouraged to participate regardless of their level of proficiency in the state language. To ensure full

comprehension and facilitate participation, a volunteer interpreter was present alongside the moderator during the sessions.

Regarding the in-depth interviews, a total of nine interviews were conducted using a purposive sampling approach. Respondents were carefully selected based on their professional roles and relevant expertise (e.g., lecturers, university administrators, and NGO experts). It is also important to note that several respondents simultaneously represented multiple target categories. For instance, an individual respondent might serve as a lecturer at both a state and a private university, or concurrently hold both an academic teaching role and an administrative position within an institution (see Table 2).

Table #2. In-depth Interviews composition

Target Group for In-Depth Interviews	Number of Participants	Respondent Characteristics
Academic personnel, state university	3	Experience teaching ethnic Georgian, Azerbaijani, and Armenian students
Academic personnel, private university	2	Experience teaching ethnic Georgian, Azerbaijani, and Armenian students
Administrative representative, state university	1	Representative of the student services center
Administrative representative, private university	1	Representative of the student services center
Representatives of supporting organizations	2	Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) representatives

Research Instrument

For the data collection phase, encompassing both the in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, semi-structured interview guides were developed. These guides consisted of open-ended questions directly derived from the primary research objectives. Furthermore, to stimulate comprehensive dialogue and elicit detailed narratives, clarifying probing questions were systematically utilized throughout the sessions.

Data Analysis

Following the completion of data collection, verbatim transcripts were prepared. The data were subsequently analyzed employing thematic analysis, utilizing NVivo qualitative data analysis software. The analytical process encompassed several distinct stages: comprehensive familiarization with the raw data; systematic coding to identify initial patterns; the generation and refinement of primary and secondary themes; and, finally, the mapping and analysis of the interrelationships between the identified codes and the overarching themes.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical standards were strictly adhered to throughout the research process. Before the commencement of the discussions, informed consent was obtained from all respondents. They were provided with a comprehensive explanation of the study's objectives, the voluntary nature of their participation, and the strict protocols regarding data confidentiality.

During the analysis phase, any personally identifiable information that could potentially reveal the respondents' identities was completely expunged from the transcripts. The analysis of the research findings utilizes solely anonymized demographic data (e.g., gender, age), rendering the identification of any specific participant impossible. The risks associated with participating in this study were minimal; furthermore, participants were explicitly informed of their unequivocal right to decline to answer any question that caused them discomfort.

Research Limitations

As with any empirical investigation, the present study is subject to certain limitations.

1. **Generalizability:** Given that the research employs a qualitative methodology, the findings provide rich, in-depth descriptions of the specific participants' experiences. However, these results cannot be statistically generalized to the entire population of ethnic minority students in Georgia. The primary objective of this study is to achieve profound contextual insight rather than broad statistical generalization.
2. **Target Group Specificity:** The study focuses exclusively on students of Azerbaijani and Armenian ethnicity. Consequently, the findings may not be entirely applicable to students representing other ethnic minority groups in Georgia (e.g., Yezidis, Ossetians, etc.), who may encounter distinctly different systemic and social challenges.
3. **Geographical Scope:** The research is geographically confined to students who relocated from the regions specifically to Tbilisi for their studies. It must be acknowledged that their experiences and integration dynamics may differ significantly from those of minority students pursuing higher education in other major university cities across the country (e.g., Batumi or Kutaisi).