

Academic and Social Integration of Ethnic Minorities Moving from Regions to Tbilisi for Higher Education; Identity Issues

Key Research Findings - November 2025

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UG Youth and Social Research Center

The center studies the values, attitudes, and experiences of various social groups and promotes the development of evidence-based policies in Georgia.

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Research goal

Research goal

An investigation into the social and academic integration of regional students of Azerbaijani and Armenian descent studying in Tbilisi. / Methodology: Qualitative Research Design

RQ1

Language, Identity, and Barriers

How do Georgian language proficiency and identity-related socio-cultural factors influence the academic performance, socialization, and sense of belonging of regional ethnic minority students pursuing higher education in Tbilisi?

RQ2

University Environment and Social Dynamics

How do the institutional social climate, specifically the attitudes of the ethnic Georgian majority student body and the pedagogical/administrative approaches of staff, impact the socialization and inclusion of ethnic minority students?

RQ3

Institutional Support and Effectiveness

What institutional support mechanisms are currently available within higher education institutions, and how effective are they in facilitating the academic success and social integration of ethnic minority students?

Research Methodology - Qualitative Research Design

6 Online Focus group

- State and Private Universities
- Ethnic Azerbaijani students;
Ethnic Armenian students;
Ethnic Georgian students.

9 In-depth interviews

- University lecturers (5)
- University administration
representatives (2)
- Non-governmental organization
representatives (2)

Focus group composition

University Type	Azerbaijani	Armenian	Georgian	Participants
State	1 group	1 group	1 group	3 women, 3 men per group
Private	1 group	1 group	1 group	3 women, 3 men per group

Research Methodological Note: Discussions were conducted in Georgian, facilitated by a moderator and an interpreter
Fieldwork was conducted in October-November 2025

Main themes

- 1 **Language barrier** - a fundamental challenge
- 2 **Socialization** - "Ethnic clusters" within the university environment
- 3 **Identity** - Experiencing a sense of alienation
- 4 **Institutional support** - Weak and dependent on individual goodwill
- 5 **Conclusion and recommendations**

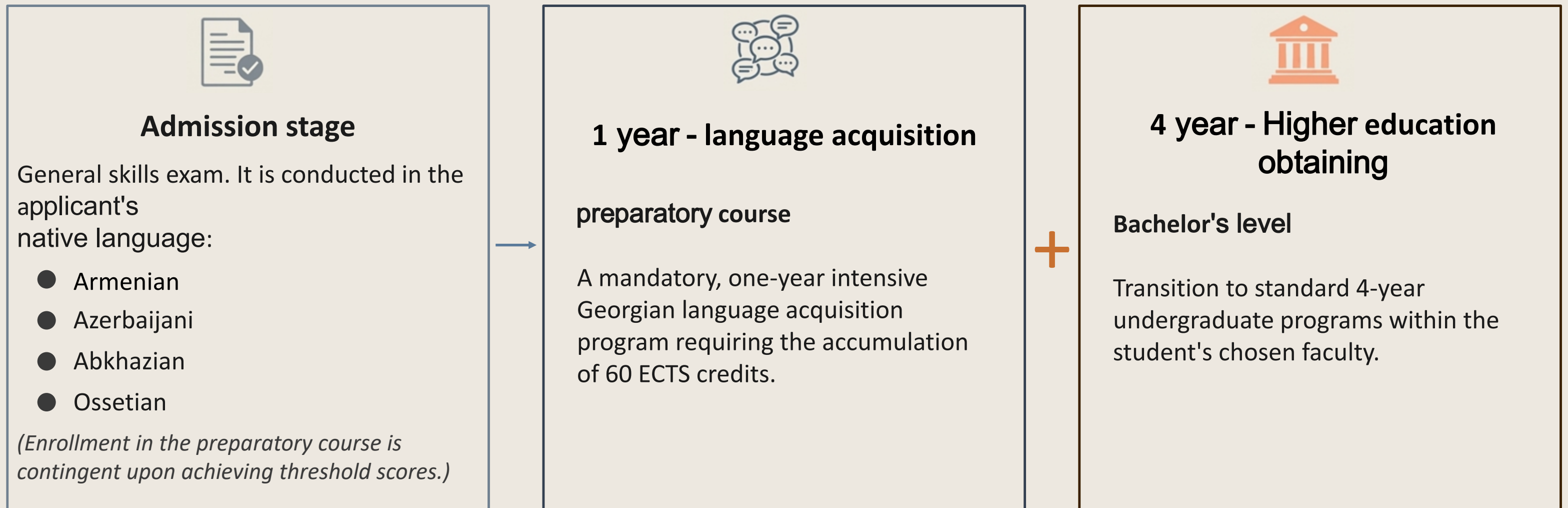
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Language barrier

A fundamental challenge

1+4 educational program: ethnic minority integration model in higher education

An institutional integration model designed to mitigate language barriers and expand access to higher education for ethnic minorities since its introduction in 2010.



Source: Office of the State Minister of Georgia for Reconciliation and Civic Equality. (n.d.). "1+4" Educational program
<https://www.smr.gov.ge/ge/page/58/saganmanatleblo-programa>

Language barrier - a fundamental challenge

Language barrier

Problem: Students struggle to comprehend lectures, master complex academic terminology, and independently complete written assignments. Lecturers note difficulties in text comprehension during exams and written self-expression.

(lecturers' observation)

Academic passivity

As a result: students tend to avoid discussions and presentations (of speaking in Georgian and making mistakes).

(lecturers' observation)

Searching for alternative spaces

Result: While participants state they do not intend to drop out, experts report high overall dropout rates. Lecturers observe that some students feel forced to seek a "safe environment," leading them to change their program or transfer to institutions where studying feels easier. *(students' reflection and lecturers' observation)*

Coping strategies

Requests for individual presentations;
Heavy reliance on dictionaries;
Requests for course materials in Russian;
Using ChatGPT or other AI tools to comprehend course content.

(student reflection and lecturers' observation)

”

“I speak Georgian during university lectures, but when I return home or go out with friends, I speak Azerbaijani... this back-and-forth hinders my progress..” - Female student of Azerbaijani origin, State University

University

Barriers related to learning the Georgian language

According to experts' views, language knowledge deficiencies begin before university: school-level challenges shape students' capabilities.

Teachers and educational materials

Georgian school teachers often do not master the state language themselves.

Textbooks depict Armenian or Azerbaijani flags; Georgian history books do not mention ethnic minorities at all, and students *“do not see their own role”* in society.

(Expert opinions)

Academic skills crisis

Students sometimes cannot even speak fluently in their native language.

The core challenge is a deficiency in basic critical thinking and text comprehension skills.

(Expert opinions)

Non-Georgian-speaking environment

In compact settlements, a non-Georgian-speaking environment, the school is the only space for the Georgian language. Home, social circle, and media are entirely non-Georgian-speaking.

(Expert opinions)

“*“The university deals with the final results. It is not the university's job to solve these foundational problems; on the contrary, the school system should resolve them”* - Expert, State University Lecturer

Demotivation for learning the Georgian language: socio-political reasons

According to experts, the lack of motivation to learn the language is based on structural social reasons

Nepotism in the regions

In the regions, public service hiring is based on nepotism and *'clan rule'*, *"being someone's relative"* rather than competence.

This observation decreased the motivation to pursue higher education in the community.

Stereotypes in the capital

Similarly, the private sector in the capital exhibits bias, with hiring practices influenced by candidates' surnames. A bilingual master's graduate with international experience - the Ministry of Reconciliation did not even take them for an internship. *We are losing integrated candidates for the state*".

Lack of professional orientation

Labor market research is not conducted in the regions. Students choose professions *"blindly"*.

Result: language and qualification cannot become a guarantee for social advancement.

“Local schools need at least a week of career guidance counseling. We don't need 300 or 400 students blindly choosing International Relations when their employment chances are slim. It makes no sense.” - Program Head at the State University

2

Socialization

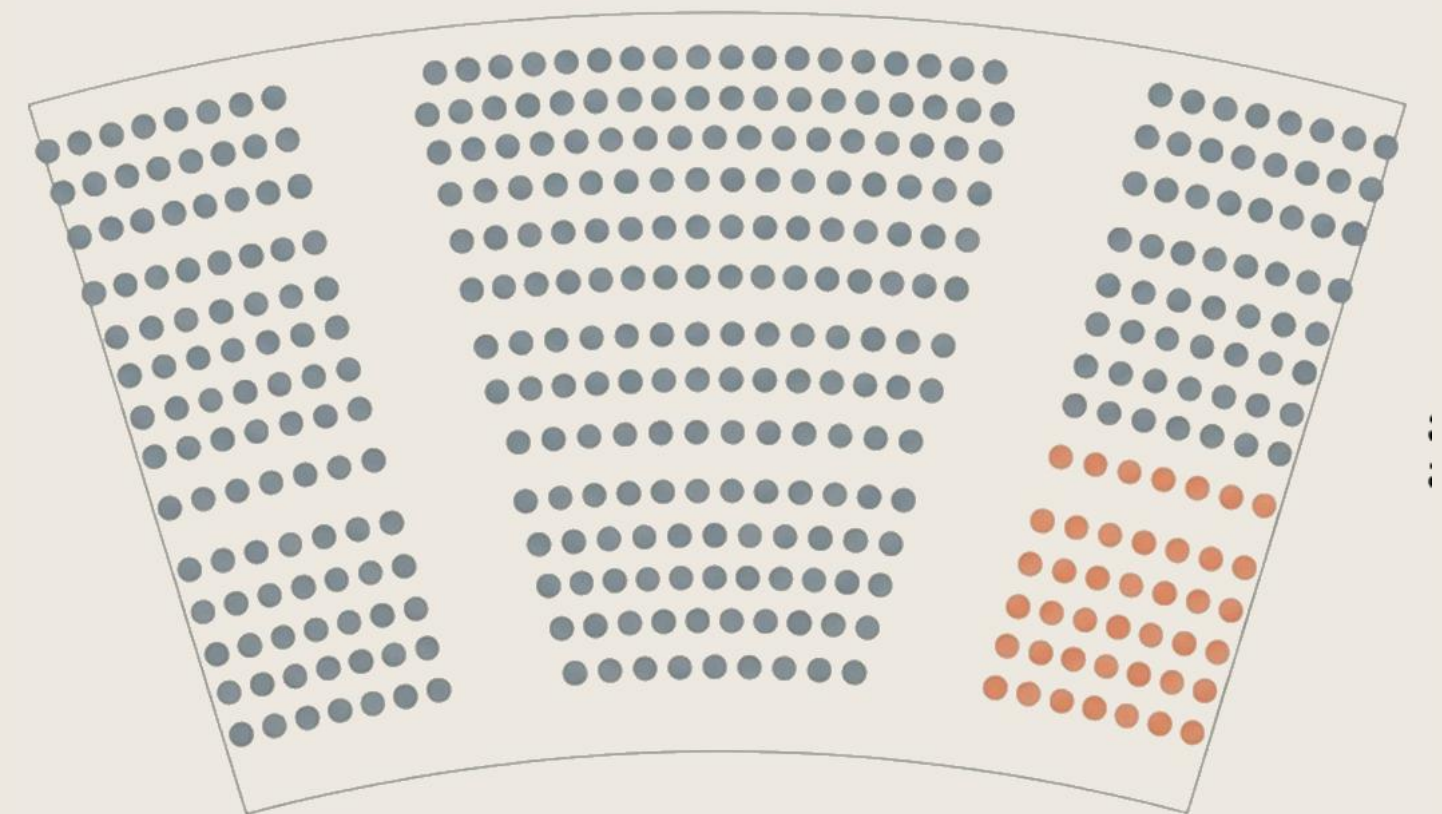
"Ethnic clusters" within the university environment

Segregation instead of socialization

When group work is assigned during lectures, students typically self-select their group members, ultimately leading to segregation along ethnic lines.

As a result, communication with Georgian-speaking students is less than possible.

(lecturers' observation)



Majority-ethnic
Georgian
students

**Ethnic minority
"clusters"**

“

"They interact far more with those who share their language than with us... Perhaps they simply prefer the comfort of communicating within their own group." - Female ethnically Georgian student, Private University

Segregation instead of socialization

Segregation most clearly occurs during breaks in an informal environment.

Georgian students (Active socialization)

- Actively engage outside the classrooms, visiting cafes and building informal networks.
- **Result:** they create common informal networks, in which ethnic minorities are not involved.

Representatives of minorities (Passive socialization)

- Tend to remain in their classroom seats during breaks, waiting for the next lecture.
- **Result:** Contact is limited only to a narrow circle of their own ethnic group.

"Georgians are more active during breaks and such, they go downstairs, drink coffee, do something. Ethnic minorities tend to sit more during the break, inside, they usually wait." - Private university lecturer

Integration is not one-sided: the role of the ethnic majority

The entire burden of integration is currently placed on ethnic minorities.



Social distance



The attitude of ethnically Georgian students is generally **neutral** rather than hostile. While they do not actively marginalize minority classmates, they rarely take the initiative to include them (*lecturers' observation*)

Communication remains **superficial** and confined strictly to the formal classroom environment, lacking shared socio-cultural or recreational interests (*Lecturers' observation*)

” “We often go out usually [to a cafe], but it so happens that only Georgians... I don't have such a close friend [representative of an ethnic minority] whom I would ask to go out.” - Male, ethnically Georgian, state university student

Factors contributing to segregation: discriminatory cases

Violation of professional ethics in higher education institutions: the research reveals that some academic staff lack the capacity to manage multicultural classrooms. This manifests as microaggressions, unethical behavior, and overtly segregationist statements (predominantly reported in state universities). *(Student assessment)*

gender discrimination based on: limitation of academic opportunities (e.g., exchange programs), based on stereotypes (for example, the expectation that female students from specific regions starting a family). *(Student assessment)*

linguistic stigmatization in everyday life: manifested in public spaces and transport due to inadequate proficiency in the Georgian language, or speaking in the native language, verbal criticism. *(Student assessment)*

”

“...They said about me she's a Tatar, then my father went to school, he told them it shouldn't be that way, and since then they haven't said anything.” – Female student of Azerbaijani origin, State University

”

“We were speaking Armenian on the bus, and someone told us that since we live in Georgia, we must speak Georgian.” - Male student of Armenian origin, State University

3

Identity

Experiencing a sense of alienation

Identity-related dilemma

Belonging

Most Azerbaijani and Armenian origin respondents consider themselves full citizens.

(Student reflection)

|| *“I was born in Georgia; the fact that I am ethnically Armenian changes nothing. Georgia is my country.”* - Male student of Armenian origin, State University

“We were all born and raised here... I love Georgia deeply and could not imagine living anywhere else.” - Female student of Azerbaijani origin, Private University

Alienation

Some feel like "foreigners" due to the absence of a common cultural context and a language barrier. *(Student reflection)*

|| *“I know Azerbaijani traditions and culture much better than Georgian ones. That is why, despite being a citizen of Georgia, I feel like a foreigner here, though I am very interested in learning more about Georgian culture.”* - Female student of Azerbaijani origin, State University

Alternative (in some cases)

Among students of Azerbaijani origin, a stronger emotional bond with Turkish identity is evident (conditioned by traditional and religious differences).

(Student reflection)

|| *“I feel that Georgians are culturally very different from us. Turks and Azerbaijanis share a similar lifestyle and environment, which is probably why I sometimes feel alienated here.”* - Female student of Azerbaijani origin, State University

4

Institutional support

Weak and dependent on individual goodwill

Institutional Blind Spots: Universities' Responsibility

Universities often fail to build an inclusive environment structurally, leaving the integration process entirely to the enthusiasm of individual lecturers.



Lack of experience in working with a multicultural audience

Many lecturers have no training or experience in managing multicultural classrooms, which occasionally results in the use of insensitive or discriminatory language
(student and lecturer evaluations)



Institutional vacuum

Crucially, there is an institutional vacuum, with no existing training modules for faculty on managing multicultural classrooms.
(lecturer evaluations)



Low Awareness of Services

Minority students frequently lack basic information regarding student clubs, exchange programs, and funding opportunities.
(students' reflection)

Ethnic minorities' integration strategy - successful example (International Relations program case)



Preparing the welcoming environment

- **Main mechanism:** Informational meetings with students.
- **Process:** Lecturers hold proactive informational meetings with ethnically Georgian students to prepare them for the new intake.
- **Objective:** Ensuring a smoother, more empathetic adaptation process for "1+4" program students



Student support

- **Main mechanism:** student support course (by the initiative of graduates and a university grant).
- **Process:** Georgian volunteers' assistance with academic preparations and assignments.
- **Institutional incentive:** Volunteering counts as additional points for Georgian students in the scholarship ranking.



Structural desegregation

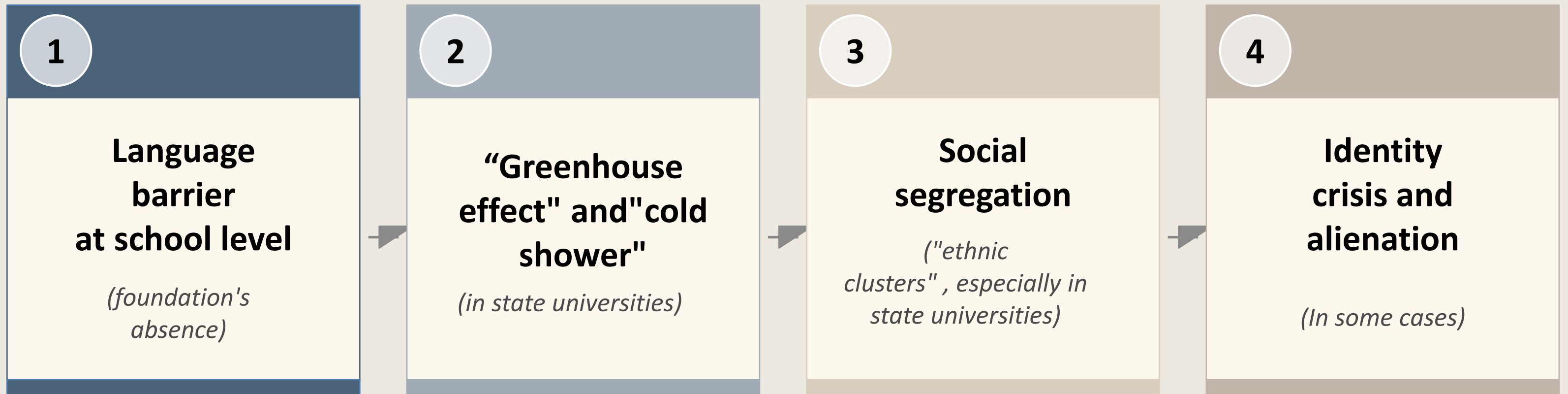
- **Main mechanism:** "Artificial mixing" of groups.
- **Process:** Distribution of small numbers of ethnic minorities (maximum 2 students) into Georgian-language groups at seminars.
- **Result:** Prevention of so-called "ethnic clusters" and encouraging students to socialize with Georgian peers.

The key to success lies in treating integration not as a spontaneous occurrence, but as a managed system that simultaneously aligns student motivation

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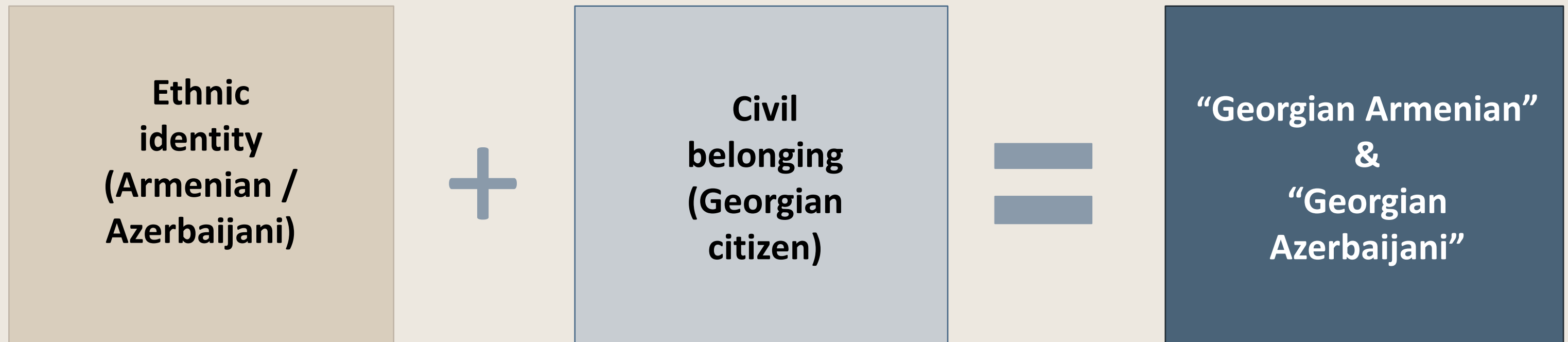
Conclusion and recommendations

Language barrier causes a chain of negative consequences



Solution: Formation of hybrid civil identity

According to the expert, constructing a new identity will eliminate alienation and increase the sense of full belonging.



“

“One of the primary solutions to this structural alienation is actively supporting the formation of 'Georgian Armenian' and 'Georgian Azerbaijani' civic identities.” - Expert, State University Program Head

Solution: Civic strategic model for ensuring integration

Change of value paradigm

Transition to a model of "civic patriotism."

- ✓ Civic citizenship must be recognized as society's primary unifier, superseding ethnic and religious affiliations.
- ✓ De-securitize ethnic minorities (ceasing to view them through a 'security risk' lens).

(Expert's opinion)

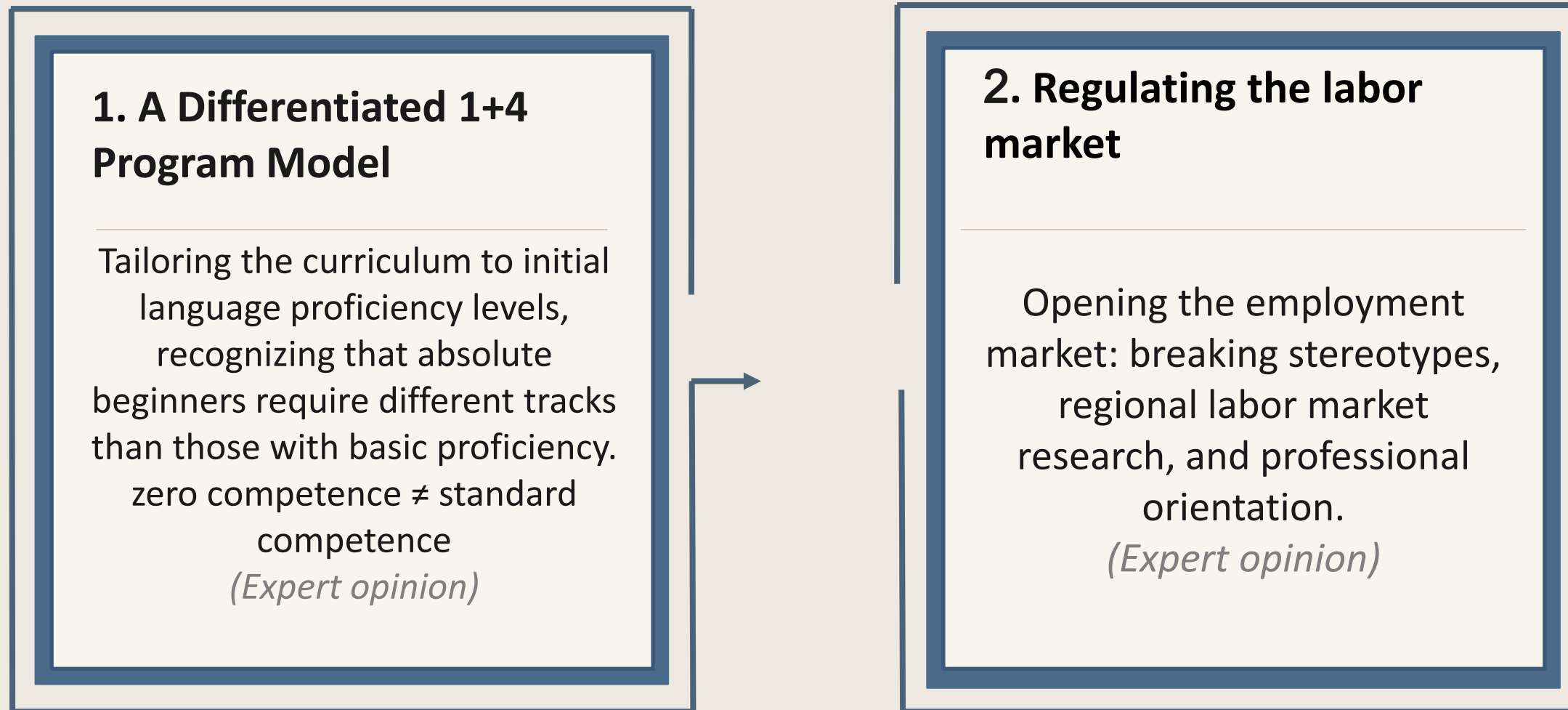
Synchronization of the sociocultural field

Common cultural context creation

- ✓ Elimination of the "cultural vacuum" through the inclusivity of media and art.
- ✓ Creating common conversation topics and socialization spaces among youth.

(Expert's opinion)

Solution: State-Level Recommendations

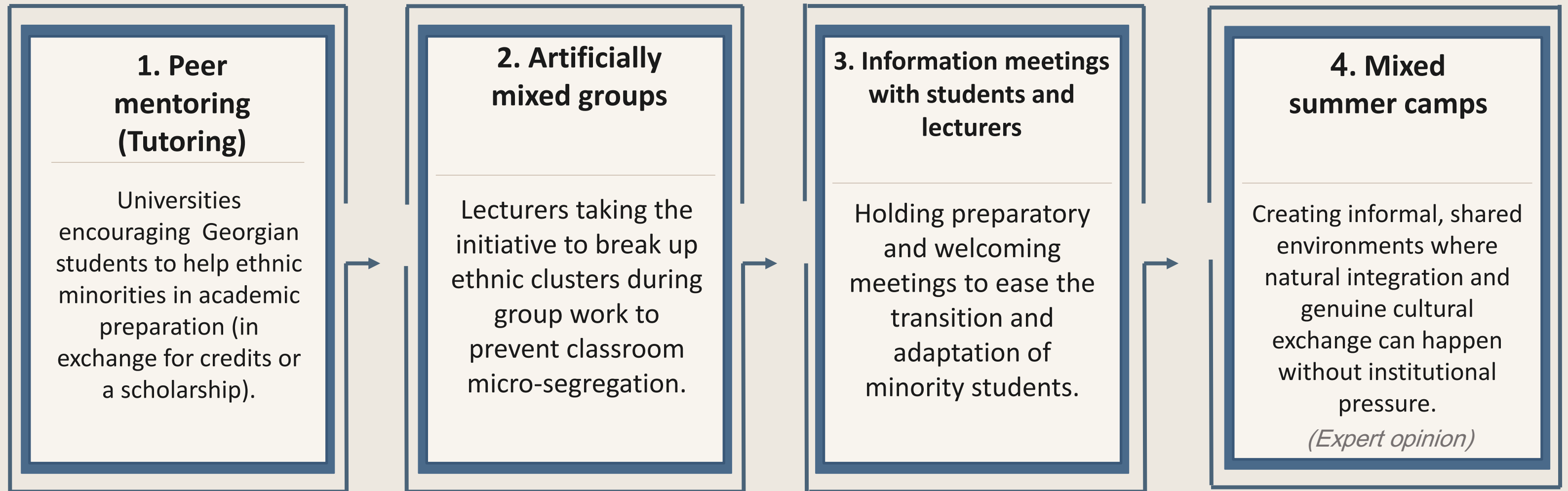


“

We recommend using the entrance exam to objectively assess initial language competence without making it a barrier to enrollment. This allows universities to design tailored language tracks based on real student needs.” - Expert, NGO Representative

Solution: Individual & University-Led Initiatives

When systemic flaws persist, deliberate individual and institutional initiatives can bridge the gap:



“Last year I attended a camp where I was the only Armenian student among Georgian peers. Those four days felt as valuable as an entire year because I learned so much through natural interaction.” - Male student of Armenian origin, Private University

Thank You for Your Attention!

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