

Improving the Administrative Environment to Boost International Student Enrollment in Georgia



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Executive Summary

Georgia has made significant investments to align its higher education system with global standards and integrate more seamlessly into the European Higher Education and Research Area. By adopting the Bologna Process standards and promoting internationalization through various initiatives—such as developing English-language programs and forming partnerships with foreign universities—Georgia has positioned its universities as attractive destinations for international students. This influx has significantly contributed to the national Gross Domestic Product (GDP). However, despite this progress, the sector still holds immense development potential but is hampered by regulatory and procedural challenges. These obstacles prevent universities from fully capitalizing on opportunities to attract more foreign students and secure additional investments, thereby impacting foreign direct investment (FDI) promotion and business development in the country. Therefore, it became necessary to conduct an assessment to examine the procedural and regulatory challenges, conduct policy analysis and develop short- and long-term strategies for sectoral improvements.

This report ultimately provides strategic recommendations designed to increase the number of international students in Georgia. Its primary focus is to address current inefficiencies in administrative processes and policies related to student recruitment, university applications, visa procurement, and residency procedures. Overall, the goal here is to enhance the attractiveness and operational efficiency of Georgia's higher education system, thereby supporting economic growth and strengthening international ties by streamlining processes, reducing bureaucratic barriers, and creating a more welcoming environment for international students.

In 2023/2024 academic year, Georgia accommodated approximately 30,000 international students (14,244 female / 16,446 male), a significant rise from around 5,000 a decade earlier, meaning an average annual growth rate of 20% over that 10-year period. These students are predominantly enrolled in private universities, with about 90% studying medicine¹ and nearly half originating from India. The presence of international students in the country provides significant economic benefits to Georgia, contributing approximately US\$300 million per year, or around 1% of its GDP. Notably, this financial contribution exceeds that of Georgia's wine exports. On top of that, the international students' financial input bolsters the Georgian educational system, increases salaries for educators (particularly in the medical field), supplies a workforce for various sectors (especially tourism), and enhances Georgia's international connections, leading to further increases in tourism and foreign investment. The growth in international student numbers accelerated following the onset of the war in Ukraine as many non-Ukrainian students, particularly from India and Pakistan, who had until then been studying in Ukraine, sought alternative locations for their education. This trend continued into the 2023/2024 academic year. Primarily, the expansion has been driven by demand in the medical sector², while the number of non-medical foreign students has remained stable at around 3,000 since 2015. Between 2015 and 2023, public universities saw their combined international student enrollment increase from about 3,500 to approximately 7,300, while private universities reported a significantly greater rise, going from a similar baseline to 23,400. While India constitutes about half of the foreign student body, there has been notable growth in the number of students from other countries. Fast-growing source countries include Pakistan and Sri Lanka in South Asia;

¹ Education statistics - <https://www.geostat.ge/en/modules/categories/193/education>

² During the 2023/2024 academic year, out of a total of 33,701 international students across all faculties, 27,750 students (F:13,194/M:14,556) are enrolled in medicine and healthcare courses (source: GEOSTAT).

Jordan, Israel, Lebanon and Iran in the Middle East; and Egypt, Sudan, and Nigeria in Africa. However, growth in the number of students enrolling in Georgia from EU member states and the West in general has been minimal. The UK is the only Western European source country from which there has been significant growth, and even that is partly due to connections between Indian students and the Indian diaspora in the UK.

The research methodology employed in this report includes a comprehensive approach to data collection and analysis. In particular, policy analysis and a legal framework review were conducted to gain a fuller understanding of the current landscape and challenges. Meanwhile, desk research was also undertaken to provide an examination of the regulatory framework governing international students' visa applications, admissions processes, and study progression within Georgian higher education institutions. Furthermore, informal interviews and discussions held with key stakeholders, including representatives from 18 universities, international students, and officials from the National Center for Educational Quality Enhancement (NCEQE), the Ministry of Education and Science (MoES), and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), provided insights into the practical implications and operational challenges associated with the current framework.

In the process, several obstacles were identified as hindering the potential increase in international student recruitment. Bureaucratic and administrative inefficiencies in relation to the NCEQE's processes are a primary challenge in this regard. At present, universities must physically submit documents to the NCEQE, which is time-consuming and cumbersome. This involves booking appointments, and then printing documents and presenting in person them to NCEQE officers. Moreover, there is a limit of 10 student applications per visit, which further slows down the process. The introduction of an electronic diary system by the NCEQE to manage appointments has also created additional difficulties for university administrators, exacerbating delays rather than alleviating them. The insistence on physical document submissions, even when documents have already been submitted electronically, adds steps and time to the process and causes delays.

While digitalization could streamline many processes, there is some uncertainty about what level of digitalization would be beneficial. Indeed, there are concerns that attempting to digitize and centralize the entire application and processing system might insert yet another layer of bureaucracy, potentially increasing existing delays rather than reducing them. Developing such a new system would require significant time, resources, and training, and could also face resistance from international recruitment staff if it is not implemented thoughtfully. A significant challenge here is the centralized nature of the student application process in Georgia. Unlike in large international student markets such as those of the UK and the US, where the process of vetting students is largely decentralized and put in the hands of the universities, this responsibility remains heavily centralized in Georgia. This is seen as a barrier because it requires that government agencies check all application documents, which is time-consuming and inefficient.

Visa and residency issues also pose substantial hurdles for international students. The process of obtaining a visa is fraught with delays, and students are often rejected. Even after receiving a visa, students must still navigate additional administrative requirements, such as re-submitting documents at the border and undergoing unpredictable residency application processes. These constant checks and requirements create significant administrative burdens and uncertainties for students. Meanwhile, there is a serious risk of an over-reliance on the Indian market for international medical students. This dependence leaves the

international student industry in Georgia vulnerable to the peculiarities of the Indian educational system and potential policy changes that could disrupt this market. With that in mind, diversification of the international student body, in terms of both source country and subject, is essential to mitigate this risk and ensure a stable influx of international students. Relatedly, the existing 'Study in Georgia' website³, which is supposed to serve as a central platform for student recruitment and support, is inadequately maintained. This hampers the country's ability to market itself effectively as a location for international students. Generally, there is a need for better coordination between educational institutions and government bodies to target key markets and provide more comprehensive support to international students.

Addressing these challenges requires a multi-faceted approach involving administrative reforms, visa process optimization, diversification strategies, and extensive support systems for international students. By tackling these issues, Georgia can enhance its appeal as a location for international education, ultimately leading to increased student enrollment and a more robust educational sector as a whole.

This report offers several recommendations intended to increase the number of international students in Georgia. One key recommendation is to remove physical documentation checks, which currently represent a barrier to preliminary student registration. This could be achieved by transitioning to allow electronic submissions, which would facilitate immediate provisional acceptance without compromising state oversight, thereby cutting waiting time by up to a month. Furthermore, decentralizing the admissions process by delegating document verification responsibilities to the universities could also generate numerous positive outcomes, including an increase in the likelihood of receiving applications from Western students. This adjustment would also open up the possibility of students being accepted before completing their secondary education or prior degrees.

In terms of student visas, streamlining and adequately resourcing the visa processing system will be critical in encouraging diversification and increasing student numbers overall. In its current state, the system imposes significant delays and administrative barriers in some regions, deterring applicants. At the same time, enhanced coordination between universities and the MFA could better align recruitment strategies with security considerations, market opportunities, and MFA/consular resources. For example, the increase in the number of students from India was facilitated to a large extent by the MFA's contract with Visa Facilitation Services Global (VFS Global), the largest visa outsourcing services provider in the world. VFS Global manages non-judgmental administrative processes for client nations, including Georgia, and operates 15 sites in India that provide support for Georgian visa applications. To diversify the international student population further in Georgia, a practical approach would be to consult with recruiting universities and identify two or three high-potential countries where VFS Global could also be contracted to simplify the visa application process.

Another significant hindrance at present concerns the process of obtaining residence permits, which often causes students' notable stress. Although rejection rates are generally low, many students face difficulty in securing necessary documents from landlords, some of whom may be reluctant to provide them without increasing rent, and in dealing with further layers of government bureaucracy. These difficulties appear to be avoidable. Once international students are in the country and attending classes, they should be granted residence permits automatically. Here, the Georgian government should make significant efforts to

³ Study in Georgia website - <http://www.studyingeorgia.ge/>

improve communication and collaborate with universities to provide such students with better support. An obvious starting point in this regard would be the 'Study in Georgia' website, which currently suffers from basic functionality issues. Once fixed and/or upgraded, the site could serve as a comprehensive resource for potential and new international students, providing them with valuable information. Overall, greater effort needs to be exerted by both the universities and the Georgian government to ensure that students receive adequate social services and are protected from exploitation. This includes helping students to find and verify accommodation, providing access to legal and health services, and offering opportunities to learn the Georgian language if desired or necessary for their studies. Meanwhile, promoting cultural exchanges would be another positive step in improving the international student experience in Georgia.

To support the internationalization of Georgia's higher education system, this report issues/submits the following recommendations:

- **Streamline NCEQE Processes:** Remove documentation checks to accelerate preliminary student registration by transitioning to allow electronic submissions, which would reduce waiting times and enhance efficiency.
- **Expand Global Outreach:** Broaden the partnership with VFS Global to break in to additional high-potential markets.
- **Optimize Document Verification:** Delegate verification to universities, streamline and equip the visa processing system with adequate resources, and grant residence permits upon students' arrival and enrollment to boost application rates and improve processing times.
- **Diversify Recruitment Strategies:** Attract students from diverse countries and academic disciplines by enhancing support services such as accommodation assistance, legal and health services, and cultural exchange opportunities.
- **Enhance Online Presence:** Improve the 'Study in Georgia' website by overcoming its functionality issues and provide robust resources for prospective and current international students.

Overall, implementing these recommendations can significantly enhance Georgia's appeal for international students, leading to increased enrollment and a more robust educational sector in general.

Methodology

The research was conducted at the request of the Investors Council of Georgia to capitalize on the increasing number of international students in Georgia, and ensure effective governmental administration to maximize the economic benefits gleaned therefrom. A structured approach was employed to analyze the information, utilizing both qualitative and quantitative research⁴ methods. This combination enabled comprehensive data collection and provided a suitably thorough assessment of the situation.

The key components of the research methodology are outlined below:

- **Review of Official Documents and Literature** - A thorough review of official documents, policy papers, strategies, government regulations, and previous studies related to Georgia's higher education framework was conducted. This review provided a foundational understanding of the current landscape and challenges.

⁴ The consultant utilized qualitative data gathered during the preparation of the report "Policy Analysis and Legal Framework for the Accessibility of Higher Education in Georgia for International Students." This data was comprehensively analyzed and applied in the current report.

- **Desk Research** - A comprehensive policy analysis and legal framework review⁵ was conducted to identify potential strategies to improve the accessibility and attractiveness of Georgian universities to international students. The analysis focused on identifying and addressing policy and regulatory challenges, while fostering the ongoing development of the education sector as a whole. This included examining the regulatory framework governing international students' visa applications, admissions processes, and their study progression within Georgian higher education institutions.
- **Stakeholder Interviews and Discussions** - Informal interviews and discussions were conducted with key stakeholders, including representatives from 18 universities (international directors/managers of programs) and international students currently taking courses in Georgia. Meetings were also held with representatives of the NCEQE and the MoES. These interactions helped to gain a broader understanding the practical implications and operational challenges associated with the current framework.

This paper focuses specifically on the practical benefits and challenges of recruiting more international students to study in Georgia. By doing so, it aims to elaborate on issues highlighted at Investors Council meetings in 2022 and 2023, thereby providing a basis for discussions with the MoES and the MFA.

Challenges in International Student Recruitment

Based on the desk research, a review of the reports developed within this project, and stakeholder interview analysis, several challenges were identified to be hindering the process of increasing international student enrollment. While this paper aims to justify recommendations, the following points should be viewed as a starting point for broader discussions among various stakeholder groups, including government authorities and universities, to determine the optimal course(s) of action. In this regard, key challenges are outlined below:

1. **Bureaucratic and Administrative Inefficiencies** - One of the primary challenges is the bureaucratic and administrative inefficiencies associated with the NCEQE's processes. Currently, universities must physically submit documents to the NCEQE, which involves booking appointments as well as printing documents and physically presenting them to NCEQE officers. Moreover, there is a limit of 10 student applications per visit.

The introduction of an electronic diary system by the NCEQE to manage appointments has created further complications for university administrators, exacerbating delays. The need for physical submission of documents even when these have already been given electronically, represents another step that many users find unnecessary.

2. **Challenges with Digitalization** - While digitalization has the potential to streamline many processes, the extent to which digitalization would be advantageous is the subject of some debate. There are concerns that attempting to digitize and centralize the entire application and processing system could increase bureaucracy, potentially adding to delays. The development of a new system would demand substantial

⁵ The consultant analyzed the following two key documents developed within the scope of this project: "Policy Analysis and Legal Framework for the Accessibility of Higher Education in Georgia for International Students" by Professor Paul Gibbs; and "Desk Research Report of Legal Framework for the Accessibility of Higher Education in Georgia for International Students" by Kakha Uriadmkopeli (legal consultant).

time, resources, and training, and may not be met with international recruitment staff's full cooperation if their capacities and interests are not taken into account.

3. Centralization vs. Decentralization of the Student Application Process - Another significant challenge is the centralized nature of the student application process in Georgia. The centralized system is seen as a barrier because government agencies have to check all documents, which is inefficient.

4. Visa and Residency Issues – Matters pertaining to visas and residency pose substantial hurdles for international students. Delays are common when applying for a visa and some students are declined. For students who do receive a visa, they still have other administrative requirements to deal with, such as re-submitting documents at the border and going through unpredictable residency application processes.

5. Risk of Over-reliance on a Single Market - The heavy reliance on the Indian market for international medical students carries with it a significant risk. In particular, it leaves Georgian universities vulnerable to the shifts in the Indian educational system as well as potential policy changes. Therefore, establishing a more diverse international student body, in terms of both source country and academic discipline, would mark a key step toward mitigating this risk and ensuring a stable influx of international students.

6. Marketing and Support for International Students - At present, the 'Study in Georgia' website, which ought to be a central platform for student recruitment and support, is poorly maintained. Such a shortcoming diminishes the country's capacity to market itself convincingly as a location for international students. Accordingly, there is a need for tighter coordination between educational institutions and government bodies in order to pinpoint viable markets and offer adequate support to international students.

Addressing these various challenges requires a multi-faceted approach, involving administrative reforms, visa process optimization, diversification strategies, and comprehensive support systems for international students. By tackling these issues, Georgia can become a more appealing location for international students, thereby boosting student enrollment and making the education sector more robust in general.

Current Considerations Regarding Internationalization of Higher Education

Georgia has for some time been working extensively to internationalize its higher education. The Unified National Strategy of Education and Science of Georgia for 2022-2030⁶ highlights the many ways in which the Georgian government has succeeded in engaging with international programs and encouraging relationships between Georgian and international institutions (particularly those in the West) to facilitate greater student mobility, as well as research and training enhancement. However, the document does not sufficiently address the need to attract international students, which is essential if its international programs are to become sustainable.

The strategy document notes that Georgia stands out as one of the leading recipients of international short-term mobility scholarships through the "Erasmus+" program, holding sixth position among 141 countries (according to the National Office of Erasmus+; source: www.eurostudent.eu). This includes 10,400 scholarships that have been granted to students and academic staff.

⁶ The strategy document - <https://mes.gov.ge/content.php?id=7755&lang=eng>

On top of that, it highlights that 37 Georgian higher education institutions collaborate with partner universities across 33 European countries, with over 30 Georgian institutions participating in higher education capacity development projects. Here, the strategy document highlights two institutions as particularly significant. First, under the Millennium Challenge Compact, San Diego State University has been operating in Georgia since 2015, running courses and developing programs with three Georgian public universities, while second, the International University of Kutaisi, which is a partner of the Technical University of Munich.

Meanwhile, the goals for internationalization of the Georgian education system set out in the Action Plan for 2022-20247 relate to international accreditation and partnerships.

Specifically, these goals are:

- 1.4.2.1 Support higher education institutions to obtain international accreditation for educational programs (minimum of 3 by 2024); and
- 1.4.2.2 Support the creation of dual and joint academic programs with international partners (minimum 3 by 2024).

The internationalization of academic institutions in Georgia is however rarely connected to the issue of attracting international students. In the main strategy document introduced above, the only reference to international students is where it notes that a higher proportion of Georgia's student body are international in origin than is the case in many other countries. No explicit link is made between this and internationalization more generally. Such an oversight could be amended in the updated version of the strategy, from the need for which will arise in 2025. Moreover, it is hoped that some of the recommendations included here can form part of that future action plan.

This paper addresses the distinct issue of the challenges associated with recruiting international students to Georgia. The important role of international students in Georgian higher education is discussed below. Notably, any international program setting up in Georgia would benefit from, and maybe even require, being able to recruit international students relatively easily for a range of reasons. Most obviously, for an internationally accredited new-entrant university or a local entity looking to gain international accreditation, if its potential pool of students comprises only Georgians, this is unlikely to be a successful business model. There are exceptions to this – San Diego State University has been able to survive without a large pool of international students largely because it has enjoyed considerable state support, while The International University of Kutaisi had managed to prevail in part because of its location and financial support from external charitable sources. All in all, to turn Georgia into a hub for internationally accredited universities, a better system for facilitating the inclusion of international students will be required.

Benefits of Having International Students

In monetary terms, the actual economic benefit to the Georgian economy of having international students in the country can be calculated as the average total living expenses and tuition fees in a given year multiplied by the number of international students. On average, an international student spends around US\$10,000 on these expenses. Therefore, with around 30,000 international students in Georgia at the beginning of the 2023/2024 academic year, this would suggest a contribution of US\$300 million per year.

⁷ The Action Plan for 2024-2026 - <https://mes.gov.ge/content.php?id=7755&lang=eng>

This is about 1% of the country's GDP, and slightly more than the amount recouped from the export of Georgian wine.⁸

This is almost certainly an underestimate too, as the calculations do not take into account the secondary economic benefits brought by international students, such as by attracting additional tourism (e.g. through family visits) or other potential benefits created via networking effects, like increased investments or employment. Meanwhile, looking more broadly, having many people from many parts of the world living in the country can have a positive reputational impact for the country.

It also has a positive effect on the education system. International students pay higher tuition fees than domestic students, fueling economic stability for institutions that might not have toiled on revenues from domestic students alone. As a result, lecturers at such institutions can earn higher salaries and gain better support, attracting a greater quantity and quality of people to the profession. In addition, these additional finances enable universities to pay for better facilities, allowing them to charge lower fees to domestic students than would otherwise have been possible.

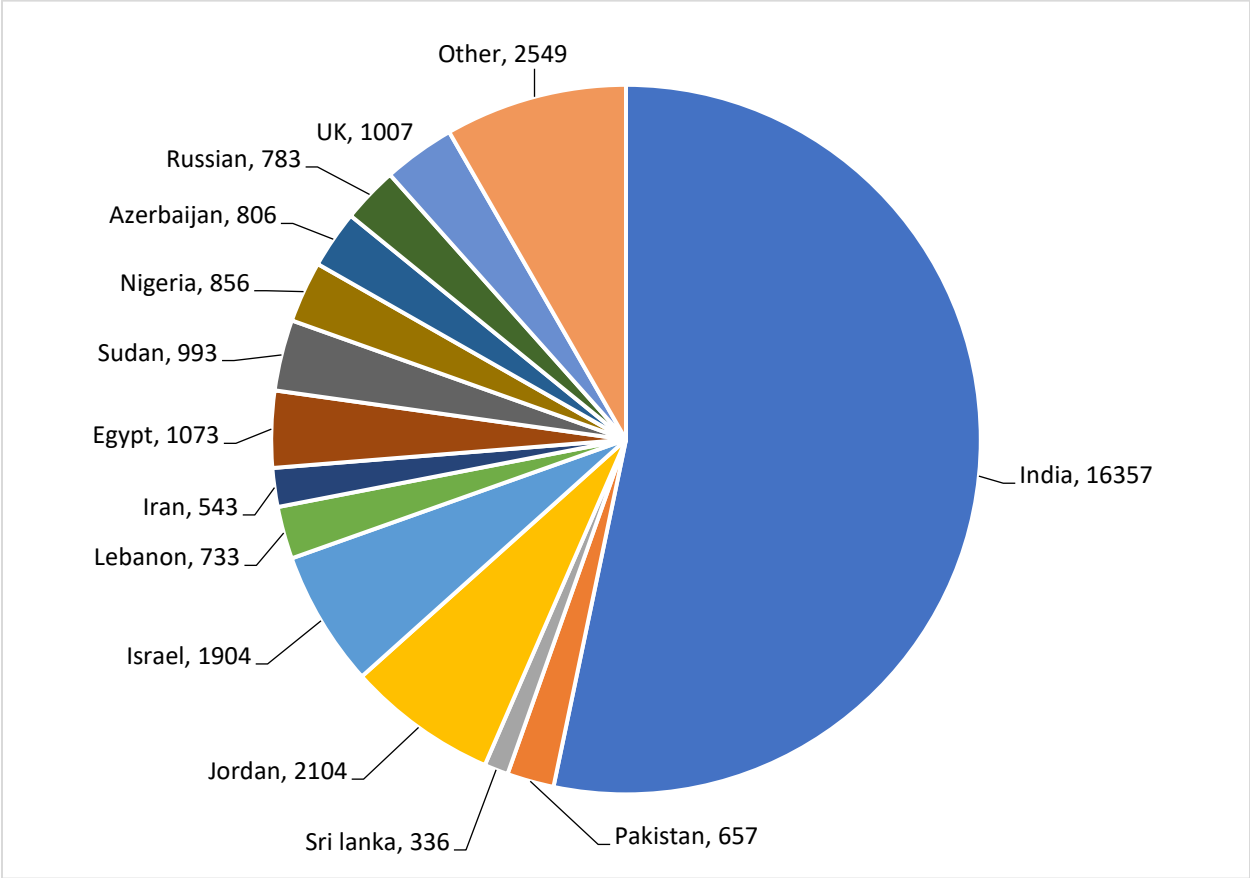
Beyond economic gains, the cross-cultural engagement brought about by having international students can have positive impacts for domestic students at Georgian universities and for the country as a whole, as people of different cultures learn more about each other.

Student Numbers

Growth in international student numbers has been strong and steady in recent years, going from around 5,000 in 2013 to around 30,000 in 2023.

⁸ According to 'Georgian Exports by Commodity Positions' prepared by GEOSTAT, Georgia exported US\$259 million in wine in 2023 (www.geostat.ge).

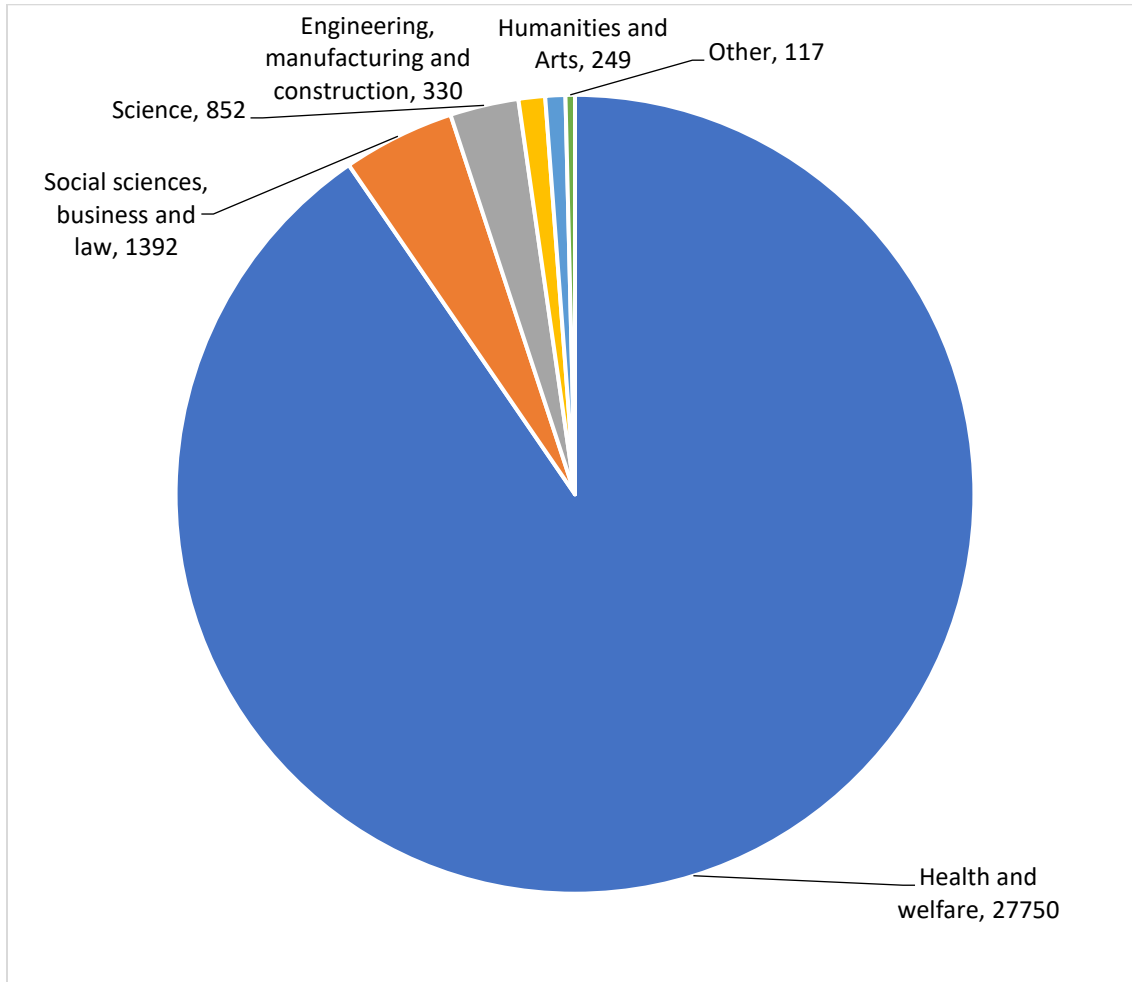
Figure 1: Breakdown of approximate 30,000 international students in Georgia, by country (beginning of the 2023/2024 academic year)



Source: Provided on request by GEOSTAT (1 March 2024)

In 2023, more than half of the international students in Georgia came from India, with significant numbers also coming from the Middle East (around 5,200 from Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, and Iran combined), and another 3,000 or so from the African countries of Egypt, Sudan, and Nigeria. Elsewhere, Azerbaijan and Russia were the main source countries among neighboring states, and the UK was the only significant source from the West.

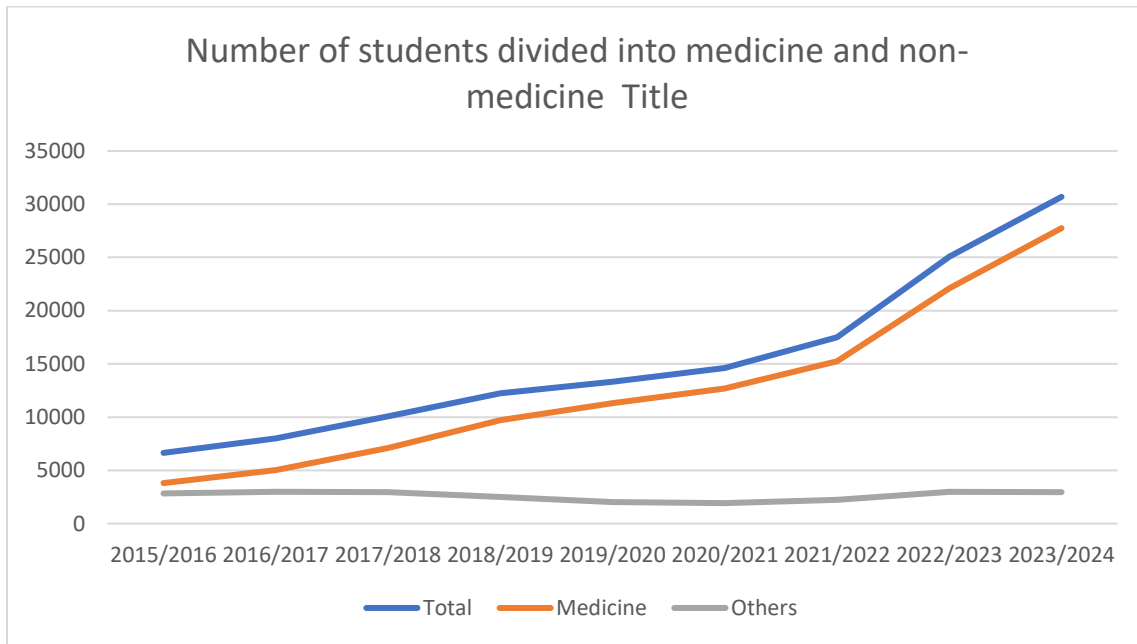
Figure 2: Breakdown of approximate 30,000 international students in Georgia, by subject studied (beginning of the 2023/2024 academic year)



Source: Provided on request by GEOSTAT (1 March 2024)

There is a high concentration of international students in one academic discipline, with over 90% of the students studying health and welfare. Most of these students are undertaking medical postgraduate degrees.

Figure 3: Number of students divided into medicine and non-medicine (2015-2023)



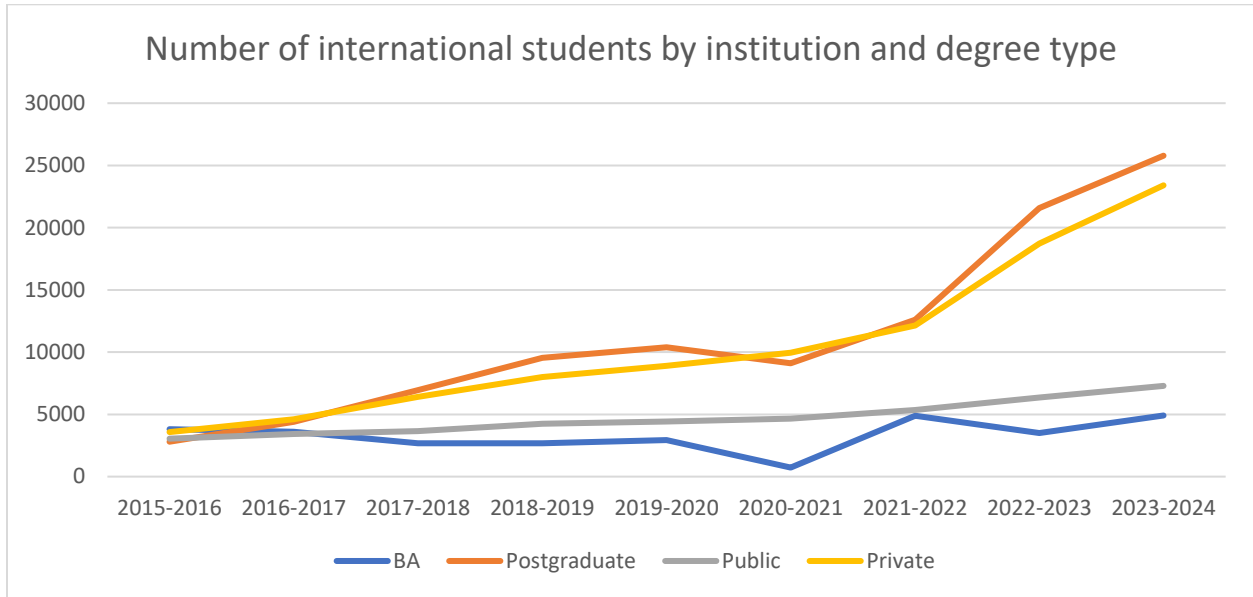
Source: Provided on request by GEOSTAT (1 March 2024)

The dramatic growth in the number of students has been driven largely by the rise in the number of students pursuing medical degrees, which stayed strong and fairly consistent from 2015 to 2021. Thereafter, the significant uptick that happened in 2022 was largely attributable to the war in Ukraine. In particular, this stimulated growth because many students attending university in Ukraine suddenly needed to find new places to study as their institutions closed. Even as Ukrainian universities have opened again, Ukraine is still generally considered unsafe and struggles to attract many international students, thus increasing the number of international students considering Georgia.

Very few of the students relocating from Ukrainian universities to Georgian ones have been Ukrainian. Most of them have been international students from other countries (like India). In 2021/2022 academic year, there were 37 Ukrainian students registered at Georgian universities, after which this increased to 122 in 2022/2023 and dropped back down to 87 in 2023/2024.⁹

⁹ Also based on data provided by GEOSTAT.

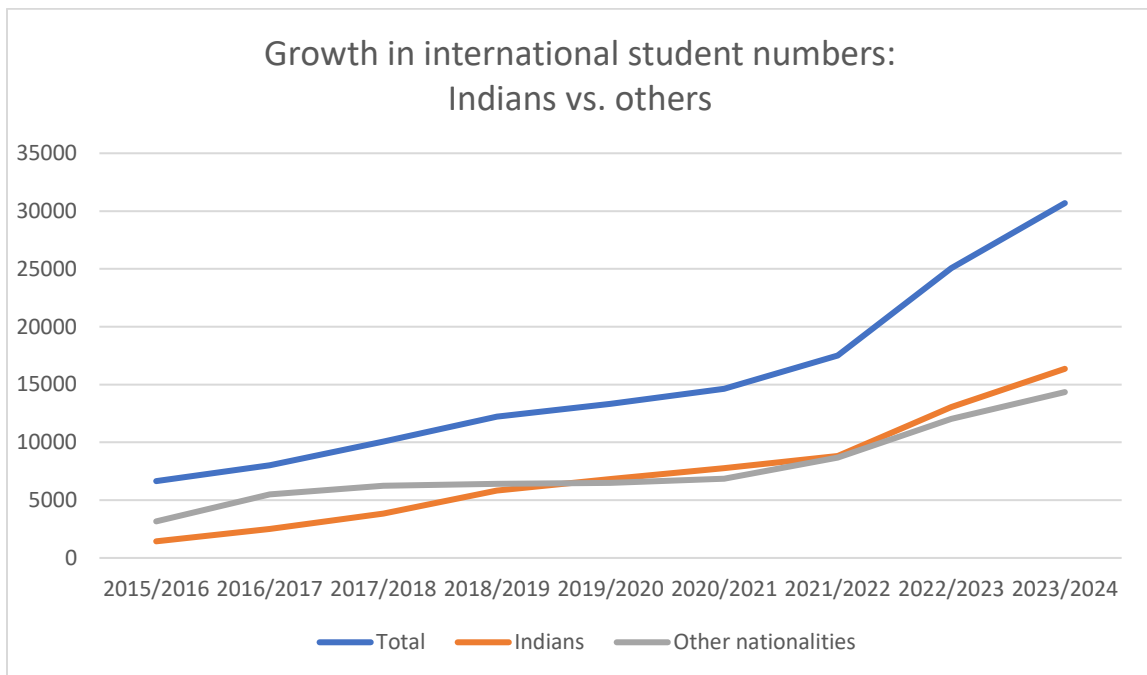
Figure 4: Number of students divided by type of institution (public/private) and degree (undergraduate/postgraduate)



Source: Provided on request by GEOSTAT (1 March 2024)

While there has been some growth in the number of international students enrolling in public institutions, to the rise in the number of students at private universities has been more striking. At the same time, the number of international students taking postgraduate courses has soared compared to those pursuing undergraduate courses.

Figure 5: Growth in the number of international students: Indians vs. others



Source: Provided on request by GEOSTAT (1 March 2024)

While the growth in the number of international students has been overwhelmingly driven by the rise in those pursuing medicine, increases have been reported in other academic disciplines as well. At the same time, although students from India are by far the biggest and fastest-growing group in terms of source countries, notable increases have also been reported for other source countries.

Figure 6: Fast-growing student populations by source countries

Start year	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
India	6 643	2 507	3 834	5 830	6 832	7 771	8 811	13 054	16 357
Jordan	2	4	59	196	295	447	872	2 182	2 104
Israel	16	108	182	330	712	732	989	1 376	1 904
Egypt	22	47	263	329	441	545	598	1 004	1 073
UK	2	4	6	19	31	325	500	755	1 007
Sudan	0	4	31	46	78	158	323	585	993
Nigeria	587	441	439	366	595	649	812	972	856
Lebanon	0	2	9	33	205	284	262	472	733
Russia	253	249	257	306	312	367	322	459	783
Pakistan	5	14	52	70	77	122	196	347	657
Sri Lanka	194	165	139	162	195	218	259	309	336

Source: Provided on request by GEOSTAT (1 March 2024)

The general pattern of growth in numbers per source country has not been uniform. Some countries from which considerable numbers of students were once coming, have declined in terms of their number of students in Georgia in recent years.

Figure 7: Countries from which the number of students coming to Georgia has declined in recent years

	Azerbaijan	Turkey	Iraq
2015/2016	2 388	484	793
2016/2017	2 650	360	974
2017/2018	2 702	224	821
2018/2019	2 124	229	759
2019/2020	1 344	167	539
2020/2021	901	161	264
2021/2022	903	306	93
2022/2023	729	157	93
2023/2024	806	205	86

Source: Provided on request by GEOSTAT (1 March 2024)

Fast-growing source countries can be divided into South Asia (particularly Pakistan and Sri Lanka), the Middle East (Jordan, Israel, and Lebanon), and Africa (Egypt, Sudan, and Nigeria). Notably, the UK is the only Western state that features in the fastest-growing source countries. However, this too has an Indian influence, as many of the UK students are of Indian ethnicity and apply to Georgian universities because

they have connections to other Indian students (usually extended family members) who have already enrolled.

Potential Future Growth in the Sector

Growth in the international student industry and the economic and social impact thereof on the wider economy is clear. With that in mind, to assess the likely prospects for future growth, representatives of a range of universities were consulted.

Figure 8: Summary of projected growth based on survey responses of university representatives:

Status of University	% Foreign Students	% Projected Growth Capacity	Needs
Private	45	0-20	Flexibility in enrollment and visa procedures
Public	4	40-50	Better marketing, and streamlined enrollment and visa procedures
Public	36	10	Simplified enrollment and visa procedures
Private	87	30-40	Clarity in enrollment and visa procedures
Private	3	40-50	Simplified enrollment and visa procedures
Private	60	20-30	Simplified enrollment and visa procedures
Private	46	20-30	Simplified enrollment and visa procedures
Public	1	40-50	Marketing support

Source: Project survey of universities – conducted autumn, 2023

Though responses varied widely, the university representatives generally considered that their institutions had considerable scope for growth. This was often not speculative, as many of those surveyed highlighted that the Georgian government had determined their institution as having capacity for many more international students than they currently accommodated. In some instances, their institution was already in the process of building bigger facilities to house more students.

Aside from this survey, given the relatively high tuition fees paid by international students compared to domestic students, an increase in the number of international students would likely enable greater investment by institutions.

Nonetheless, there may be limits to such growth on account of certain so-called ‘chokepoints’ in service delivery. In particular, the number of lecturers qualified to provide instruction may be restricted, and the number of hospital places where trainee doctors can gain practical experience will be finite.

Such limits are most pertinent in medicine, which remains the most popular academic discipline among international students who have been rising steadily in number over the last decade. Even within medicine itself, there are considerable variations. However, such limits are ultimately short term, as more staff could be recruited internationally if demand was sufficiently high. Another possible bottleneck comes from the number of hospitals which can take students to undergo their practical training. According to discussions with university representatives, this is not currently a limiting factor, and the educational institutions are continuing to expand their connections with medical facilities. In the future, the education sector and the healthcare sector could expand together if Georgia becomes a hub for studying and practicing medicine.

Competitor Countries

When looking at market opportunities, the research also looked into which countries are seen as competitors by the universities recruiting international students. Generally, the countries considered the most likely competitors are Armenia, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan. With that in mind, we compared the different prices offered in Georgia and in these countries.

Figure 9: Breakdown of estimated costs if studying as an international student:

Item	Country			
	Armenia	Kazakhstan	Uzbekistan	Georgia
Tuition fees	US\$3,530 ¹⁰	US\$3,600 ¹¹	US\$3,300 ¹²	US\$4,300
Monthly Cost of Living	US\$680 ¹³	US\$400 ¹⁴	US\$400 ¹⁵	US\$415 ¹⁶
Indicative Annual Cost Overall	US\$11,690	US\$8,400	US\$8,100	US\$9,280

In terms of monthly living costs, Armenia stands out as the most expensive of the four countries. Meanwhile, the highest tuition fees are in Georgia.

One theme that consistently came up during discussions was that in Armenia and Uzbekistan, the administrative processes are easier for students. In particular, Uzbekistan has set itself the goal of becoming a hub for international universities/students. To encourage this, not only have international universities been given the kind of support often associated with foreign investment incentives (e.g. free land and tax-free status), but internationally accredited universities are given almost full responsibility for recruiting and vetting students. The visa procedures can be shortened by the ability to apply directly at the border if students are particularly time pressured. Together, these incentives are giving Uzbekistan some significant advantages, even if the country itself is less marketable due to its Least Developed Country (LDC) status, relatively limited amenities, and distance from Europe.

Concentration and Diversification of International Students

In addition to simply growing the number of international students, it is important that an effort is made to ensure diversity in the international student body in Georgia. At present, Georgia's international student body is dominated by medical students from India.

¹⁰ Used for both Armenia and Georgia with a GBP/USD exchange rate of 1.26 [Study Medicine In Georgia In English 2022/2023 - Study Medicine In Europe](#)

¹¹ [MBBS in Kazakhstan 2023: Eligibility, Fees and Admission \(ucsworld.com\)](#)

¹² [Impuls Medical Institute in Uzbekistan - Medlink Students](#)

¹³ [Study in Armenia | Universities, Colleges, Cost & Visa Process \(jeduka.com\)](#)

¹⁴ [Cost of living in Kazakhstan - Apply & Study in | Universities \(rocapply.com\)](#)

¹⁵ [Cost of living in Uzbekistan - Apply & Study in | Universities \(rocapply.com\)](#)

¹⁶ [Study in Georgia: Housing & Living Costs \(educations.com\)](#)

This concentration of one group and academic discipline can create a number of practical problems and risks. For example, if India decided to no longer accept Georgian medical degrees, it could decimate the international student industry in Georgia.

Another risk of this high concentration is the possibility of supply bottlenecks, courtesy of the finite number of teaching staff available. This might lead to situations where international students, because of the higher tuition fees they pay and the importance of the international student industry to the country, are prioritized over domestic students. Accordingly, the cultural and social impact of educational internationalization might be restricted if students become isolated and interact to only a minimal extent with the educational institutions or with society as a whole.

At first sight, it may seem as though there is little the Georgian government can do with respect to the overall demand and supply factors that have driven growth in some markets rather than others. The demand for places on medical courses from India exists because of that country's massive population and the prestige it attaches to a medical education. At the same time, internal bureaucracy and a unique approach to medical education have put severe constraints on the number of medical training places available in India. As a result, following annual medical entrance exams, there are still tens or even hundreds of thousands of potential students denied the chance to study medicine in India. Such candidates want to study in English, and they are often price sensitive.

On the supply side, Georgia has a relatively high number of medical doctors who can speak English and for whom working as medical professors is an appealing supplement to their work as practitioners.

While these supply and demand factors cannot be affected directly by the Georgian government, how they approach administrative aspects can absolutely affect which international markets may be open to Georgian education institutions. For example, in countries where it is standard to be accepted into universities long before finishing prior studies, the Georgian system may be effectively excluded. Several interviewed university recruiters suggested that this might hinder the recruitment of international students from Western European countries.

Similarly, in terms of visas, the lack of a visa regime with a source country and a shortage of consular services, combined with the need for in-person interviews, might effectively preclude an entire market. However, even if a market is not excluded, significant delays in the issuance of visas or other significant administrative hurdles may make the given market less attractive.

The Administrative Processes for Selecting Students

The key purpose of this paper is to highlight potential areas where administrative processes could be enhanced in order to facilitate a sustainable expansion in the number of international students in a way that would most positively impact upon the Georgian education sector and the economy as a whole. The process through which an international student enrolls at a Georgian university involves the following several steps:

- Identifying the location, institution, and course of study;
- Applying and having their application considered and accepted by the university;
- Confirming the application with the Georgian government and gaining its official acceptance;
- Applying for and obtaining a visa;
- Entering the country;

- Gaining a residence permit.

Identifying the location, institution, and course of study

The first step in becoming a student in Georgia entails accepting the country as a viable location before selecting a university and course to apply for. Generally, the interviewed international students had largely been informed by word-of-mouth, while some has consulted online sources.

One common concern/criticism was that the online resources promoting Georgia as a study location lacked key functionalities. A quick review of the 'Study in Georgia' website indeed exposed many problems ranging from broken links to incomplete or duplicate information.

The website is also short on information and services for students who are in Georgia, for example helping them with residency, accommodation, or simply navigating around the country. This might be better provided in a different site, but given the scale of the international student population, its complete omission is alarming.

University Application

Students applying to universities in Georgia generally do so directly through the given university's website. The process here includes submitting:

- Identification documents (e.g. copy of passport);
- Proof of qualifications (e.g. high school graduation certificate or undergraduate degree certificate); and
- English-language certificate(s).

Once these documents have been sent (electronically), the university may conduct an interview with the candidate. This may be especially necessary if, for some reason, the authorities at the university deem that the students English-language skills need further verification. Where this is required, the Georgian authorities demand that the institution record the interview and make it available for external review. Once accepted, the student is issued with a letter of acceptance and may be invoiced.

Universities may offer provisional acceptance while waiting for the candidate's qualification documents, but they cannot move on to formal acceptance with the NCEQE without the final documents. Therefore, a high school student cannot start their formal application for a university place until they have graduated, and an undergraduate student cannot apply for a postgraduate degree until they have finished their undergraduate degree. Given the likely (or inevitable) delays in the process, this effectively means that students cannot start at a Georgian university until at least one whole semester after they have graduated from their previous course. In most cases, they will have to wait an entire year.

This places Georgia at a considerable disadvantage with regard to other countries. For example, it has been suggested that UK students usually prefer to apply to Bulgarian universities compared to Georgian ones, since they can be accepted on the basis of 'expected grades.' Similarly, one university recruitment head claimed that 'students often expect to get confirmation of a place in a few days and, if they can't get it, they go somewhere else.'

That said, generally the students interviewed in this research did not consider the university application process to be unreasonable or onerous. Moreover, the need for students to have completed their

preceding studies before applying is not a reflection of the university admissions process as a whole, but rather the demands of the NCEQE.

In terms of how much benefit would be gained by accepting students before their high school graduation or university graduation (for postgraduate applications), opinions differed. For the main market of India, the common view was that it would likely make little difference, as the applicants have to wait until they receive results from their exams for Indian medical universities anyway. Meanwhile, in other countries, the current system might significantly reduce Georgia's appeal as a study location. This might indeed be one of the reasons behind the relatively low number of applicants from the West. Generally, European applicants expect to have been accepted to university well in advance of completing high school or their preceding university degree.

Confirmation of Acceptance

In Georgia, as is the case for many other countries in the region, international student applications are subject to external review by a government agency (in this case, the NCEQE). In order to apply for a student visa, the applicant must be registered on the official government system. Before that can happen, the following is needed:

- The NCEQE has to review their application and confirm the veracity of the documents provided; and
- The NCEQE then submits a request for approval to the MoES, which then issues the document to the university, and it is this approval document which is used for visa applications.

Currently, the process through which this is done requires the university to submit the applications for each applicant in person, with corresponding meetings organized through a diary system, which was introduced in an attempt to make the management of appointments smoother. In reality however, it has only further complicated the process.

Visa and Security Checks

Once their application has been accepted and registered by the MoES, the student then has to apply for a visa. Visa applications can usually be made electronically with documents submitted online, after which students are called for interview depending upon the source country.

For students needing a visa, the system is generally considered to have two different sets of problems. For Indian students, particularly in the past few years, problems have concerned delays rather than rejections. Generally speaking, most universities acknowledge that if a student's application has been accepted by the university and the NCEQE, then the student is usually given a visa based on an electronic application and without an interview (although interviews can sometimes still be required).

For other students who need visas, working out how to navigate the application process, the probable need for an interview, and the unpredictability of acceptance/rejection together create a considerable hurdle.

The first set of problems simply concerns administrative challenges and bottlenecks of visa applications. Embassies and consular offices are usually located in capital cities, which in some cases demands a long journey. Moreover, if Georgia does not have at least a consular office in a particular source country, then the in-person interviews, if required, have to be arranged in another country.

Many of the surveyed international managers highlighted that visa applications for Georgia in Africa can only be submitted in Ethiopia and Egypt, thus requiring applicants from other countries to travel to these countries to complete their visa application. This is both time-consuming and expensive. Combined with the possibility of rejection, it is unsurprising that very few applicants come from such source countries.

Another factor to consider is the rejection rate for visas. Below, a sample of visa acceptance rates per country is provided.

Figure 10: Acceptance rates for visa applications (2019, 2022, and 2023)

	2019		2022		2023	
	Applicants	Acceptance Rate	Applicants	Acceptance Rate	Applicants	Acceptance Rate
India	1195	95%	4387	96%	6170	98%
Egypt	76	80%	597	80%	323	87%
Nigeria	156	69%	812	40%	372	35%
Pakistan	3	67%	207	89%	349	66%
Sudan	1	100%	429	83%	313	71%
Iran	28	89%	112	88%	57	82%
Sri Lanka	58	95%	97	93%	45	98%
Bangladesh	3	0%	56	86%	54	80%

Reference: Provided by the Public Service Development Agency (PSDA)

The chart above shows data for 2019, 2022, and 2023 (omitting 2020 and 2021 data because of the COVID-19 pandemic). Almost all of the main source countries have fairly high acceptance rates, suggesting that probable acceptance is one of the main criteria considered by students and universities when applying. Certainly, it became clear in discussions with the international recruitment staff of universities that visa prospects was a key criterion in terms of the source countries targeted by Georgian universities.

Some African countries, in comparison, have very low acceptance rates. In 2023, for example, Zimbabwe had 19 applicants and only 32% (six students) were accepted, while Ghana had 11 applicants and only 18% (two students) were accepted.

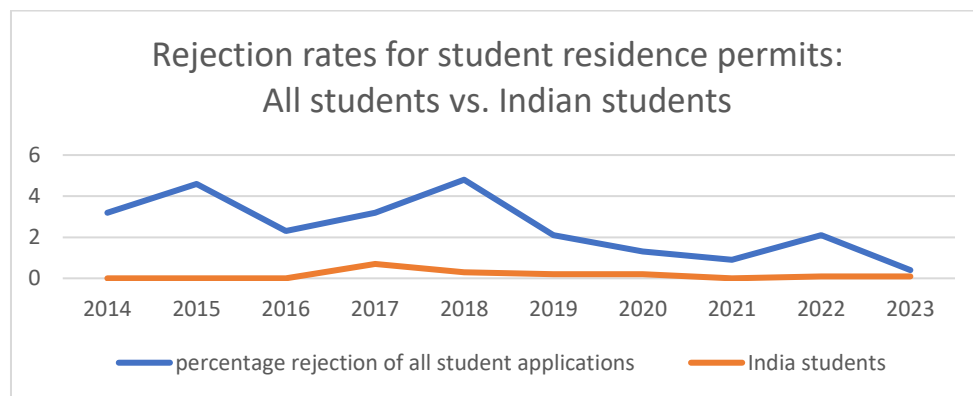
In addition, one of the reasons why the level of resources has improved to facilitate the large increase in the number of students from India is the engagement with VFS Global. It purports to be the biggest visa outsourcing services provider in the world. VFS Global manages ‘non-judgmental’ administrative processes for client nations, including Georgia. In India, they have 15 sites that support Georgian visa applications. This, of course, takes considerable strain off the MFA and the consular offices, and generally makes submissions easier. Furthermore, in many cases, the e-visa process and a familiarity with student applications means that Georgia often grants visas to students from India without an interview.

Residency and Ease of Travel

Acceptance by the university, then NCEQE and the provision of visas for those needing them, were clearly the priority areas for reform, as seen by universities looking to recruit international students. Gaining residency was also highlighted as an issue for students, once they come.

When students are initially provided with a visa allowing them into Georgia, they have to apply for residency soon after. This might seem to be a relatively minor hurdle, as the rejection rate for students applying for residency is fairly low.

Figure 11: Comparison of residence permit rejection rates for all students and Indian students over time (source: PSDA)



However, even with fairly low numbers of rejected residence permit applications, the process is deemed problematic and a source of expense, administrative hassle, and uncertainty that causes considerable stress for new students.

Recommendations

The main purpose of the analysis in this document is to inform recommendations designed to increase the number of international students in Georgia. However, the suggestions that follow should be considered points for discussion rather than exclusively recommendations.

The biggest takeaway from this research is that there needs to be a broader discussion held with private university stakeholders about recruitment processes, in order to agree on the best path for reform. Even where administrative aspects seem to be clear and relatively easy, such as in the changes made to NCEQE processes and the expansion of visa support services, the actual implementation or targeting of these policies should be developed in consultation with universities, in order to ensure optimal impact.

Changes to the NCEQE: Removing documentation checks

The main change made in the NCEQE has been introducing the option to remove the need for physical submission of documents, and its replacement with the electronic submission of documents, which does not require that the students meet with NCEQE officials for an interview. Accordingly, it should be possible for the NCEQE to maintain its control without making the review process a significant hurdle for potential applicants.

Currently, the Georgian government undertakes minimal checks before admitting a student is admitted. When the university admissions officer takes documents to the NCEQE, the latter's officials verify that they have all the required documents, but some of their documentation checks, such as writing to schools for verification, can take several months. Students are provisionally accepted and registered on the system and granted visas based on that provisional acceptance, but the Georgian government reserves the right to remove that status if any of the documents prove to be fraudulent. The system could be revised whereby

universities accept students and register them provisionally, giving them a right to apply for visas. Here, universities would not need to take physical documents anywhere or attend an interview, thereby removing the NCEQE as a hurdle to student registration.

A number of other changes are also suggested for the NCEQE. Most importantly, and most immediately, there was a more or less universal consensus among respondents that the current system through which the NCEQE receives student documents is extremely ineffective. First of all, the universities have to print out physical copies of all documents that have been sent, and then present them to the officer at the NCEQE. Moreover, there is a limit of 10 student applications per visit. This process is hugely time-consuming, requiring university employees to book appointments, print documents, and take materials physically to the responsible government agency.

This process has been worsened by the introduction of the electronic diary system for booking appointments at the NCEQE. Brought in to allow for more effective time management in the face of an increase in the number of applicants following the outbreak of war in Ukraine, the diary system seems to have created serious difficulties for university administrators, and exacerbated delays. Therefore, the diary system should be either changed or cancelled entirely.

The exact degree to which digitalization would benefit such reforms is unclear. Certainly, there does not seem to be any good reason for requiring anyone to physically print documents, particularly if such documents were originally submitted electronically. Therefore, allowing the electronic submission of documents to the NCEQE would seem to bring clear benefits. A software system facilitating the management of the numerous documents involved would also seem helpful.

However, attempting to digitize and centralize the entire application and processing system may also bring some significant challenges, and may simply add another layer of bureaucracy. In addition, the development of a new system would be time-consuming and expensive, while development, training, and the inevitable bug-fixing could perpetuate, or even increase, existing delays. Any potential new software system should thus be discussed in detail with the international recruitment staff at universities, as they are the main clients of the system; if they are not broadly in favor of such a change, then it may not succeed.

A far broader reform, which should be the subject of longer-term discussion, entails identifying ways to allow the decentralization of the student application process. In large international student markets, like the UK and the US, the process of vetting students is largely decentralized to the universities. They are overseen by a government body that monitors their processes and periodically undertakes spot-checks to make sure that the system is not being abused.

For Georgia, such a step may be unappealing to many in government. However, elsewhere, this sort of system works because institutions have a strong incentive to remain diligent and not allow students to break the rules as otherwise, they run the risk of losing this valuable responsibility.

There is precedent for such change to some degree as when San Diego State University set up its program in Georgia, it was given exceptional status, where it did not have to go through the same NCEQE confirmation as other universities.

This exception was allowed under an agreement that San Diego State University initially reached with the Georgian government, as part of the US-financed Millennium Challenge Compact. The main benefit that

the parties hoped to derive from this agreement was that students would be able to apply before they had documents confirming completion of their earlier studies. However, only limited use was made of this exception because other challenges still existed in recruiting some international students, either because of US political challenges (for example, with students from Iran) or problems obtaining Georgian visas. As a result, they only enrolled 30 international students.

According to one university representative consulted for this research, a comparable scheme operates in Uzbekistan, where appropriately registered international universities are allowed to recruit international students and give them the necessary status with which they can apply for a visa. This, combined with an easier visa system, is commonly cited as making Uzbekistan an easier place to recruit international students.

The Georgian authorities have however repeatedly expressed concerns about this kind of decentralization. It has pointed out that some universities have taken advantage of systems made available to them, and used them to allow students to register even when the students are only interested in obtaining a visa. This concern could be largely addressed by starting any program on a pilot basis, and issuing fairly severe penalties for non-genuine applications.

Visas – avoid duplication, mobilize resources better, and place greater emphasis on e-visas

Visas are generally a significant source of difficulty for international student admissions and for the development of the market as a whole. The delays here are long and students may be rejected. They also pose a serious administrative challenge, since they involve security matters.

The introduction of an e-visa system and improvements to the management of applications from India seem to have improved the situation for applications from that country. Indeed, most applicants now know that if they fulfill the requirements, they are unlikely to be rejected.

In particular, contracting VFS Global seems to have significantly relieved administrative burdens. The cost/benefit impact of this arrangement probably needs more detailed consideration, but expanding the contract with VFS Global to include other markets would be worth considering.

The huge number of applicants from India is stretching resources, however. Clearly, it would be worth continuing to look for opportunities to optimize the system, while it may also be valuable for the MFA to re-allocate even more staff and resources to support visa applications (or expand the contract with VFS Global) for students from India at the times of the year where bottlenecks are most prevalent.

Adding newer markets seems to be contingent on applicants from the given source country knowing the likelihood is high that they will obtain a visa. Looking at the fastest-growing source countries for international students in Georgia, most have a high visa acceptance rate.

Figure 12: Top 10 source countries by number of international students and visa relationship with Georgia

Country	No. of students	Visa relationship
India	16 357	VFS Global has been contracted by the MFA and has 15 locations across India. The visa acceptance rate was 98% in 2023, and Indian students rarely had to go for an interview.
Jordan	2 104	Visa free
Israel	1 904	Visa free
Egypt	1 073	Home to one of only two Georgian consular offices in Africa
UK	1 007	Visa free
Sudan	993	No established visa relationship but students from this country face challenges in this regard globally.
Nigeria	856	No established visa relationship but students from this country face challenges in this regard globally.
Lebanon	733	Visa free
Russia	783	Visa free
Pakistan	657	No established visa relationship but students from this country face challenges in this regard globally.

Reference: Based on GEOSTAT data on student numbers and a review of visa relations online.

In order to diversify source countries of international students and ease the dependence on India, it will be necessary to increase the ease with which visas can be obtained by applicants from other potential markets. Based on discussions held with international recruiters in this research, it should be possible to plan ahead and increase resources to target markets/countries considered to have potential.

Document and Administrative Duplication and Student Status for Visas and Residency

A notable problem across the board is duplication of administrative checks. Here, similar documents need to be checked multiple times, which seems redundant. Changes to this process should be the subject of a wider discussion, but there are some obvious areas where checks could be simplified. Some of these areas are outlined below:

- Currently, even after documents have been checked by the NCEQE, new students need to present various educational documents again to obtain a visa.
- Having received a student visa, they are often required to provide a wide range of documents at the border to be allowed into the country.
- After obtaining a student visa and entry into the country, and having shown up to classes, they still have to apply for residency, which can be unpredictable.

Once someone has been accepted as a student at a Georgian university:

- They should be able to receive a student visa with the only additional requirement being a security check. The default position should be that this visa lasts for the duration of the course of study.
- Once the visa is issued, they should be allowed entry into the country without having to prove their identity again (other than by passport and visa), as well as provide evidence of their education, finances, or accommodation.
- Once they have shown up at their university, they should be able to get a residence permits without having to prove their identity again (other than by passport and visa), as well as provide evidence of their education, finances, or accommodation.

Broader Diversification of the International Student Body and International Accreditation

One clear conclusion from the analysis is that the heavy concentration of medical students from India in the international student body poses a significant risk that needs to be managed by public policy. In particular, changes to such policy would need to ensure no disruption to this market, as well as seeking expansion into other source markets. Public policy encouraging diversification would comprise two elements, namely diversification of source countries and academic discipline.

One of the driving factors behind universities and students focusing on particular geographical areas for recruitment is the visa acceptance rate from the given source country. Universities are unlikely to try and recruit, and students are unlikely to apply, from countries where the visa acceptance rate is low or where the visa application process is burdensome.

However, built-in delays in the recruitment process created by the NCEQE encourage concentration in certain markets. In India, students do not apply for places at non-Indian universities until the results of the Indian university entrance exams are announced. This means that Indian students are not deterred by the current Georgian system, which only allows students to apply after they have finished high school. However, in Western markets, the general expectation that one will be able to apply and be accepted well in advance of graduation means that these delays create an insurmountable hurdle.

Expanding the range of subjects studied by international students beyond medicine is another challenge. The high demand for medicine, particularly from developing countries, is a significant economic opportunity for the universities able to serve that demand and for the wider economy. However, its impact on the wider education sector is relatively limited beyond its financial impact on private universities.

Attracting students to other subjects will require, at a minimum, easing or fixing the major administrative challenges listed below. However, the range of factors affecting diversification of students is fairly wide and includes the development of Georgian education as a product in various ways to ensure high quality, an increase in the introduction of internationally accredited degrees, better branding and government marketing strategies, and perhaps a greater focus on the development of a range of ancillary services to ensure that the student experience is as positive as possible.

'Study in Georgia' – Centralization of and Assistance for Marketing, Student Applications, and Student Support

As long as the problems in the administration of student applications remain unfixed, the Georgian government's marketing seems a secondary concern. However, there are clearly opportunities for government support in marketing, student applications, and post-recruitment student support.

Any marketing efforts would be made easier by holding honest discussions with universities about what markets to target, as well as ensuring that the education providers, the MoES, and the MFA are all working in the same direction and deploying resources to achieve the same goals. In addition, once an agreement has been reached on some key markets, it will become easier to target them. University and student marketing could then reinforce one another.

In most of the countries reviewed for this research, their dedicated website to attract international students was a central part of the country's student recruitment and support system. In Georgia, discussions with students and universities revealed that the 'Study in Georgia' website has not been sufficiently maintained and has therefore not been operating as a central source for potential or actual students. Fixing this would seem an obvious step. Clearly, having a better maintained site would improve Georgia's marketing prospects. It is also possible that a centralized application process would make life easier for students, though this would need detailed discussions with universities and would probably take considerable time. Finally, a properly equipped website could provide a range of useful services for existing students, providing clear and practical guidance on finding accommodation, gaining residency, healthcare services, and responding to security concerns. This could be particularly valuable if the Georgian government could accredit different service providers, or at least have a system in place to exclude service providers who exploit students in different ways.

Beyond the website, the Georgian government could also provide a range of other services or encourage universities to provide these, to help ensure a positive and consistent experience. For example, the Georgian government could offer support to universities hosting international students by providing them with:

- Support in finding accommodation and regulating unethical practices in this area.
- Support for cultural integration whereby international students could be a natural resource for 'cultural exchange at home' that would seem an obvious mechanism through which to achieve cross-cultural understanding.
- Language support – many universities and courses provide Georgian-language teaching. For example, it is obligatory in medicine so that students can gain their practical experience in Georgia. Here, the state may consider offering a subsidy to foreign students to help them to integrate more easily and gain a richer experience in the country.
- Legal and advisory services should be made available to students, either through the university or the state, to ensure that they are not exposed to exploitation.
- Feedback and monitoring – there should be regular surveys, focus groups, and follow-ups conducted to ensure that the universities and the state can stay informed about the nature of the student experience and challenges therewith.

To summarize, based on the challenges identified in the current system for recruiting international students to study in Georgia, the following recommendations have been identified. By addressing these,

Georgia can better position itself as an attractive location for international students, thereby boosting economic growth and fostering international collaboration.

- **Streamline NCEQE Processes:**
 - Allow electronic submission of documents to replace physical submission.
 - Issue provisional acceptance based on initial electronic submissions.
 - Consider decentralizing the student application process, allowing universities to conduct document checks themselves.
 - For visas, avoid duplication of procedures, mobilize resources better, and place more emphasis on e-visas.
- **Expand Global Outreach:**
 - Increase resources and staff support for visa applications during peak times of year.
 - Simplify visa procedures, especially for countries where interest among international students in studying in Georgia is high.
 - Remove document and administrative duplication, and provide student status through which visas and residency can be applied for.
- **Optimize Document Verification:**
 - Ensure that once students are accepted and have a student visa, further documentation is not repeatedly required.
 - Simplify the residency application process for students already in Georgia.
 - Diversify the international student body and pursue further international accreditation options.
- **Diversify Recruitment Strategies:**
 - Focus on reducing the reliance on Indian medical students by marketing to other regions/countries and fields of study.
 - Improve international branding and accreditation to attract diverse student populations.
 - 'Study in Georgia' – Centralize and assist in marketing efforts, student applications, and student support.
- **Enhance Online Presence by Improving the 'Study in Georgia' Website:**
 - Coordinate marketing efforts among educational institutions and government bodies to target potentially fruitful international markets.
 - Provide support services for students, including accommodation assistance, cultural integration programs, language support, and legal advisory services.
 - Regularly survey and engage with students to monitor their experiences and address any arising challenges promptly.

Generally, as has been made clear in the paper as a whole, there are a range of administrative challenges placing limits on the expansion of Georgia's international student industry, except in one particular discipline (medicine) and one particular source country (India). If a more diverse range of students is to be attracted, administrative problems will need to be fixed. In addition, other changes improving the student experience will also have to be undertaken. By implementing these recommendations, Georgia can overcome its current challenges in international student recruitment and create a more efficient, welcoming, and diverse higher education environment.

ANNEXES

1. Internationalization of High Education System in Georgia - Desk Research Report
2. Desk Research Report of Legal Framework for the Accessibility of Higher Education in Georgia for International Students.

ANNEX 1:

Internationalization of High Education System in Georgia

Desk Research Report

Acknowledgements

The report has benefitted from a large number of people and organisations. We are grateful to officials from the Ministries of Education and Science (MoES), Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), and the National Centre for Educational Quality Enhancement (NCEQE) for their time, expertise in discussion, and the provision of data.

The report called upon stakeholders from universities, students, and agents. Their contributions were critical to the findings offered in the Report, and I would like to thank them all for their contributions.

This report is produced by Professor Paul Gibbs, who is responsible for the content. George Welton, Executive Director of the American Chamber of Commerce in Georgia, and Kakha Uradmkopeli of the United Nations Development Programme have provided support throughout, including data and written the section on legal analysis.

Abbreviations and Acronyms

BMP	Brief Migration Profiles produced by the (SCMI)
CAGR	Compound Annual Growth Rate
NCEQE	LEPL Georgian National Center For Educational Quality Enhancement of the Ministry of Education and Science
EMIS	LEPL Education Management Information System of the Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia
FMGE	Foreign Medical Graduate Examination -a licensure exam conducted by the National Board of Examination in Medical Sciences in India and candidate must be a medical graduate who hold their primary medical qualification from abroad to be eligible to practice medicine in India
Geostat	LEPL National Statistics Office of Georgia
MFA	Ministry of Foreign Affaires of Georgia
MoES	Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia
NEET	National Eligibility Entrance Test - pre-medical entrance test for students in India who wish to pursue undergraduate medical (courses in government and private institutions in India and also, for those intending to pursue primary medical qualification abroad
PSDA	LEPL Public Service Development Agency of the Ministry of Justice of Georgia
SCMI	The State Commission on Migration Issues
VFS	Visa Facilitation Services
WFME	World Federation for Medical Education

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Forward

The consultancy Report aims to analyse strategies for improving the accessibility of Georgian universities to international students. This involves identifying and addressing policy and regulatory challenges, fostering the ongoing development of the education sector, and providing support to national universities to enhance their attractiveness to international students while maintaining high educational standards. To achieve this the following specific aspects are included:

- Trend analysis report for the last 5-10 years on international students in Georgia, covering the high education sector development and economic effects, as well as information on existing capacity and growth potential of Georgian universities (on a regional basis).
- Gap analysis report of regulatory and procedural framework applying to international students in Georgia together with the set of recommendations on the internalization of the higher education system in Georgia.
- Report on good international practices or support mechanisms/incentives to advance the development of private universities and attract investments in education.

The data collection activities included consulting official data sources, questionnaires, focus groups, interviews and discussions, all intended to review how stakeholders view the application and visa issuance of Georgia.

The context of the report is one of perceived significant growth in numbers of international students, which was attributed to a strong underlying trend, plus an upsurge in students from the war in Ukraine. Due to lack of required data for the Ministry of Education and Science (MoES), it was impossible to determine if this step change in volumes of international student was a single occurrence or a positive and sustainable change in the level of growth. Anecdotal evidence indicates that it was a single upswing in an impressive long-term trend in recruitment. However, regardless of the of students, changes are recommended which place the student at the core of the process.

The Report reviews the engagement with the Ministries of Education and Science (MoES), and Foreign Affairs (MFA) and the Georgian National Center For Educational Quality Enhancement (NCEQE) at the stage of the verification of student qualifications, visa issuance, and residency permit.

Detailed recommendations are made at the end of the report but, in summary, I suggest the following five actions which put the international students, and their needs at the centre of the process:

1. Digitisation of the verifications process or its radical re-engineering (recommendation 2)
2. The delegation of responsibly to universities (under licence) for verification of students' qualifications, marking firm offers and registering such offers with the MoES
3. Explicit recognition and a strategic position taken towards this market by the MoES
4. Improvements in the coordination between the Ministries and the universities on their target countries so as to enable better planning and utilisation of resources in the processing of visas issue and thus easing delays and increasing student satisfaction; and,
5. A combined visa residency process could be developed.

The recommendations do not go so far as to suggest a fully digitised system as is provided by the major recruitment countries as this seems inappropriate, given the costs and the size of the international student community. It does, however, suggest changes to ensure that Georgia retains a competitive position from which it can grow the sector.

PART ONE

Introduction

Georgia has invested strongly to align Georgian higher education with developments elsewhere and to integrate into the European higher education and research area (World Bank 2018:24). This includes adopting the requirement of the Bologna process and various initiatives to stimulate internationalization in Georgian higher education, such as the development of English-taught study programs, linking up with foreign universities and professional organizations such as the World Federation of Medical Education (WFME). Georgia has also become an active partner in various Erasmus+ projects. Georgia is, according to the 2022-2030 strategy document of the Ministry of Education and Science (MoES)¹, among the most successful countries receiving international short-term mobility scholarships within the Erasmus + program and ranks 6th in 141 countries (National Office of Erasmus+; www.eurostudent.eu). Georgia's inward mobility is considerably higher than the European average as a percentage of all students, but the absolute numbers are low². A total of 10,400 scholarships have been awarded to students and academic staff, 37 Georgian higher education institutions cooperate with European partner universities in 33 European countries, and more than 30 institutions are involved in higher education capacity development projects. The MoES has advocated an internationalization at home approach to be introduced in the higher education and scientific research system which is intended to ensure that all students and staff of higher education institutions benefit from internationalization. This appears in NCEQE program objectives (1.1 and 1.4³) required for institutional accreditations. Considering these achievements, Georgia has officially applied for the "Erasmus +" program country status" (2022:14). Finally, after signing the EU-Georgia Association Agreement (AA), the "Horizon Europe" program has been ratified by the Parliament of Georgia.

Yet despite this impressive record, the higher education strategy does not mention the recruitment of international students outside from schemes such as Erasmus + and there seems no strategic intent to develop this aspect of Georgian higher education provision, even though it is growing and provides a robust source of students and national income. The 2022-2024 action plan emphasizes the significance of fostering global learning and internationalization for students within activity 1.4.2. However, its primary focus lies in assisting higher educational institutions to attain international accreditation for educational programs and executing initiatives that facilitate international student mobility.⁴ Indeed, the Monitoring Report for 2022 issued by the Department of International Relations and Strategic Development (Secretariat)⁵ of MoES provided no comment on the development of international students other than through mobility schemes. Notwithstanding this, NCEQE request in accreditation reports from universities how international student integration and educational needs are provided. For example, Section 2.3 of the Authorization Standards for Teaching and Learning⁶ states "in case there are international students involved in the programme, academic, scientific and invited staff take

¹ Unofficial I English translation published on MoES website <https://mes.gov.ge/content.php?id=7755&lang=eng>

² OECD (2023), International student mobility (indicator). doi: 10.1787/4bcf6fc3-en (Accessed on 29 October 2023)

³ [National Center For Educational Quality Enhancement](https://mes.gov.ge/res/NewFolder%207/NewFolder/NewFolder/NewFolder/Annex_3_Cluster_Accreditation_Standards%20-%20ENG_30.09.2022.pdf)

https://mes.gov.ge/res/NewFolder%207/NewFolder/NewFolder/NewFolder/Annex_3_Cluster_Accreditation_Standards%20-%20ENG_30.09.2022.pdf

⁴ The action plan for 2022-2024 - <https://mes.gov.ge/content.php?id=7755&lang=eng>

⁵ [\[ENG\]-2022-Monitoring-Report -MoES.docx \(live.com\)](https://mes.gov.ge/res/NewFolder%207/NewFolder/NewFolder/NewFolder/Annex_3_Cluster_Accreditation_Standards%20-%20ENG_30.09.2022.pdf)

⁶ [National Center For Educational Quality Enhancement](https://mes.gov.ge/res/NewFolder%207/NewFolder/NewFolder/NewFolder/Annex_3_Cluster_Accreditation_Standards%20-%20ENG_30.09.2022.pdf)

https://mes.gov.ge/res/NewFolder%207/NewFolder/NewFolder/NewFolder/Annex_3_Cluster_Accreditation_Standards%20-%20ENG_30.09.2022.pdf

their cultural and/or other needs into account while establishing teaching and learning, and assessment methods”. (Annex 3: 8)

Even without such focus, Georgian higher education recruitment of international students has experienced a rapid growth phase. Figures for 2023 enrolments and attrition rates are not yet available, but student visa issues do indicate continued growth over 2022 but at a lower rate than over the two previous years, and a reduced rate of rejections. This makes any long-term projections of the potential of the market of higher education risky as any diversification of disciplines, students’ home nations and change in attrition (suspension rate) are not yet known. Without this information it would be unwise to assert much about the sustainability of the market, especially as much of the increase is dependent on one core discipline and one national flow of international students. The percentage increase they represent, however, may shape the educational structure of Georgia’s higher education sector (Campbell and Gorgodze, 2016, Iosava, 2018 Lanahan, 2020, Chachkhiani, and Tabatadze, 2023 and Oleksiyenko, 2023) which has political implications for geopolitical agendas in the internationalization of higher education. This is due to economic dependency on a very small number of nationalities providing high numbers of students and the risks of disruption due to national disagreements on this very focused dependence for growth. There has been significant growth over the past 10 years. It has recently also experienced rapid growth in its medical education provision, which has a number of risks associated with it.

Based on the Investor Council’s information and on the analysis contained in Galt and Taggart’s (July 2023) Report on General and Higher Education in Georgia⁷, the potential growth for private institutions slowed in 2022 to a year-on-year increase of 5.1% compared to a 12 year CAGR of 12.4%.⁸ Moreover, public institutions CAGR over the 1-year period to 2022 was lower at 6.1% and its decline in 2022 was comparatively less at 4.2%. Given that the majority of international students are now in private institutions, this might indicate a market response from private institutions to lower their fees or increase costs to maintain quality.

The stakeholder research within the sector (rectors, international managers, agents and students of public and private universities) indicate that there is an overall capacity potential of around 30% and if opportunities are taken, and sustainable markets identified, this may rise considerably. The NCEQE managers anticipated growth potential of institutions via their allocation of places in response to resources existing for teaching. These figures are not available and are potentially commercially sensitive, but would help to refine the current capacity. This information, on a regional basis when accessible, would help to define a regional picture.

Background notes on International Student Mobility

International education is a field of globalised policy discourses, with multiple power differentials. These are often justified by a variety of rationales, including skilled immigration revenue generation, political motives of soft power, expected improvement of the quality of education and other academic interests. In international education, this includes broader global processes. The ascendancy of neoliberalism, together with new public management, have produced a fundamental shift in the way educational institutions defined and justified their institutional existence during the 1980s and 1990s. Under neoliberalism, education has been transformed from a public good to a private

⁷ Galt and Taggart Report, July 2023 - https://api.galtandtaggart.com/sites/default/files/2023-07/report/general-and-higher-education-in-georgia_eng_0.pdf

⁸ The tuition fees from foreign students decreased from the 2018-2019 academic year. For the 2020-2021 academic year, the average tuition fee decreased from 2,602 USD to 2,445 USD (SCMI, 2022:13)

good whereby parents and students, as the “consumers” of education, are positioned as rational and self-interested in making choices in education.

Statistics show that the international mobility of students in higher education is expanding at a fast pace and the recruitment of international students is high on the world-wide agenda of universities and national governments, creating fierce competition between countries. Many governments also seek opportunities to establish and solidify a robust reputational and economic position in this growing market.

Academic studies into international student mobility are largely focused on explaining the motivations of students to apply for study overseas. These studies typically concentrate on identifying the push and pull factors underlying international student mobility. Where push factors identify the reasons to leave their countries of origin, pull factors explain why international students are attracted towards host countries and institutions. This field of research is well developed and demonstrates that international students are attracted to studies overseas for a variety of reasons, such as university rankings and reputations, location, the presence of students from a similar nationality, teaching facilities, financial advantages, and future employment prospects. The survey of students supports this.

International degree mobility appears to be concentrated in certain geographical areas, where English-speaking countries, namely the USA, UK and Australia, remain at the forefront of international education providers. However, an IPDConnect⁹ survey in 2023 suggested that first choice countries for study in English were: Australia, Canada, UK, USA and New Zealand. Despite these dominant poles in the markets, new providers are entering the field. Small countries like Finland, Estonia and the Baltics have substantially increased their educational provisions in recent years, although the top three European destinations (the UK, Germany, and France) still account for almost 80% of the mobile student population. A consistent number of degree mobile students come, as Eurostat official statistics show, from outside the EU. Also, the USA and Australia have a long history and strong capacity to recruit international students, especially from Asia.

Recently published work by Kolster and Westerheijden (2020) points to multiple changes in the development of global aspects which, through similarities in approaches to internationalization that lead to convergence across higher education systems, actual practices and governance arrangements, also show continued divergence in the rationales and practices underpinning the internationalization of higher education. This is true of the models of recruitment and visa and residency issues for international students which have become essential requirements, even prerequisites, in the growing competitive markets.

For the purpose of this report, international students are positioned and constructed in Georgia predominantly from an economic policy discourse. However, a smaller but growing body of literature elaborates several key critical perspectives on international student mobility: identifying the racist and colonial perspectives inherent in international student recruitment practices; the ways in which international mobility features in processes of social reproduction; and inequality both between and within nation states. As Nastase (2020) reports: “Georgian academics and policy-makers see that the benefits brought by internationalization far outweigh the potential disadvantages” (2020:103).

⁹ [Understanding Student Preferences for First-Choice Study Destinations \(idp-connect.com\)](https://www.idp-connect.com)

Methodology

Three studies are included in this report. The first and main content of the report is based on available literature, secondary data from the National Statistics Office of Georgia Statistical Agency (Geostats) for at least 10 years, finishing with the last recorded academic year. Where data was not available for that length the longest period available was used. The process extends from October 2023 to January 2024. Preliminary data for 2023/24 was asked for to test trends but was not made available.

The second study, conducted by Kakhaber Uriadmkopeli, was based on an extensive review of existing official information and statements, legal documents, government regulations, and previous studies relevant to the higher education framework in Georgia. This method provided a baseline understanding of the current situation and historical context. Also undertaken was thorough examination of Georgia's current laws, regulations, and policies that govern the admission and stay of international students. This included a review of visa requirements, the admission process, and the legal rights and responsibilities of international students during their study.

A third study on privatisation of higher education is based solely on available literature and much shorter second part considers the based on the literature available, discussion of the existing visa system in Georgia taken from documents and informed by expertise in the universities and in ministry departments. This led to a working model which is Part One of the report.

The primary data collection was based on a mixed method consecutive design and took place in three batches:

- The questionnaires were sent to stakeholders in October 2023 and further sent to attendees of the students' workshop in January.
- Interviews with international managers who responded to that survey at the end of October 2023 and the MoES, NCEQE and MFA were conducted in December 2023.
- Workshops in January 2024.

A secondary data analysis of the available data on international students in Georgia was undertaken and supported by data request from the Education Management Information System (EMIS) and other ministries. Many of these requests for information that was in the public domain were provided although some data requested early in the process MoES has not yet been submitted. This was followed by further secondary research into the models of enrolment and visas and residency process in Georgia and across a number of other international arenas.

A major part of the research consisted of questionnaires to the primary stakeholders: students, universities and agents; plus focus groups and interviews with international managers and representatives of NCEQE, MoES and Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA).

The short questionnaires were dispatched to rectors of 34 universities offering programs in English, international managers in those universities (plus 6 interviews), students (19) and agents (4) that the institutions identified. Individual interviews were conducted with international managers. The workshops¹⁰ involved both student leaders (8 universities, 22 participants) and international managers (18 institutions, 22 participants). All of the agents suggested by the Georgian universities were contacted electronically (only four engaged in the project, three through interviews and one used the questionnaire provided). The usefulness of the contacts was poor as no experiential evidence was provided that augmented information available on their own website or on the nationally supported international recruitments t websites for students such as the 'Study in Estonia' site. All participants

¹⁰ They were held at UN House, 9 R. Eristavi St., 0179 Tbilisi, Georgia. We are grateful for the use of space and resources.

were invited on a voluntary basis and were made aware of the purpose of the study. Anonymity was assured for all.

Limitation on the use of the data

The number of responses from students and agents, in particular the questionnaire, does limit the confidence of claims based on that data. However, the workshops (see Appendix 1) were well attended by universities who are the lynch pin of the recruitment process and the student workshop was attended by representatives of the student bodies of the universities they represented, although all were from Tbilisi universities.

Data critical to the economic contribution to drive and fund changes in the enrolment and visa issue processes could not be substantiated although evidence from two alternative sources one from the State Commission on Migration Issues (SCMI, 2022) and an earlier report by the 2016 researched by the International School of Economics at Tbilisi State University. The sudden increase in student numbers in the last two years of the data caused by the transferring of students from Ukraine, due to the war, could not be projected as an increasing trend in overall student numbers. Data for enrolments in the first semester of 2023-2024 would have helped, was requested but did not become available. Also not provided was longitudinal data on student suspending their study, information on geographical location of students across. Finally, data which would have reveal the capacity based on actual enrolments and quits was not provided.

The gaps in available information and literature provided through and for this project does argue both internationally and within Georgia, for more comprehensive research, but this is outside the resource of this specific project.

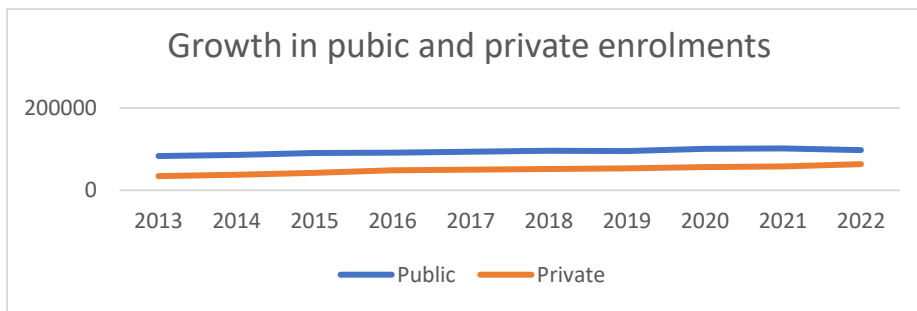
Trends in Georgian international student data¹¹

Numbers of Student and institutional numbers plus geographic distribution

Georgia has a growing higher education sector in both State and private institutions. Broadly speaking, the growth in state institution enrolments has been domestic students and international students in private institutions, although this may be changing as both forms of institution have developed their strategies for growth, which has created some blurring in attracting diverse student bodies. In her recent paper, Natase (2020) identified a number of drivers for the internationalization of Georgian higher education: as a tool for a pro-European political agendas as an export product - This has two major components: “the desire to attract EU funding for projects and mobilities and the income brought by foreign students paying high fees), to improve quality enhancement and the restoration of past traditions” (ibid; 95-100). The study was unable to test its work but anecdotal evidence from workshops supported this position.

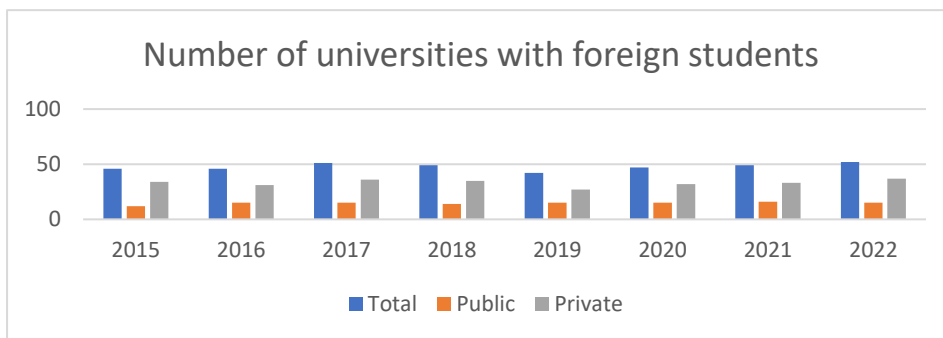
¹¹ Due to the regional situation, especially the wars in Ukraine and in Israel, long term trends are disrupted. It is difficult therefore to predict a level of sustainable long-term growth above an underlying positive trend if enrolments and transfers between 2019-2022 are not sustained.

Figure 1: Growth in public and private enrolments (Source: Geostat.)



This is seen in the growing number of private institutions and also in the growing numbers in their student bodies. However, the research indicates an under-used capacity of existing suppliers which could take up slack if enrolments should stabilise or growth return.

Figure 2: Number of universities with international students (Source: NCEQE.)



Regional distribution of International students

Without the requested detailed and trend numbers of international students per region, this section is therefore only indicative and based on universities offering international programs through the medium of English, not on actual international student numbers. Given that, there are seven university cities in Georgia:

- Tbilisi
- Batumi (Adjara Region)
- Kutaisi (Imereti Region)
- Gori (Shida Kartli Region)
- Zugdidi (Samegrelo Region)
- Telavi (Kakheti Region)
- Akhaltsikhe (Samtskhe-Javakheti Region)

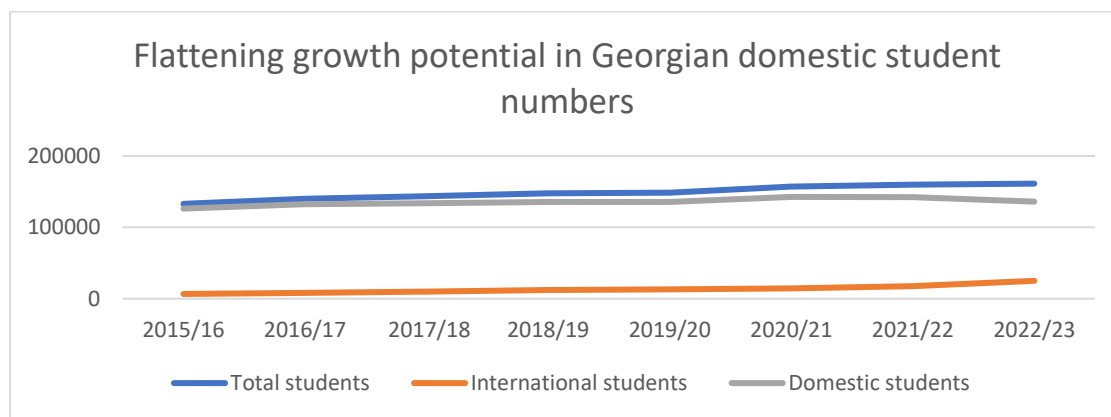
Used as a proxy (as no data was provided by EMIS), the number of universities offering international programmes, the following indicates the extent of spread of international students and, by extension, the educational and economic benefits they bring.

Only Tbilisi, Batumi, Kutaisi and Gori have foreign programmes. Of the 33 universities offering programs: Tbilisi has 23, Batumi has 4, Kutaisi 3 and Gori 1. With 75% of all universities offering international program, the overwhelming location is the capital. More precise information was not made available to the author.

Trend in student numbers

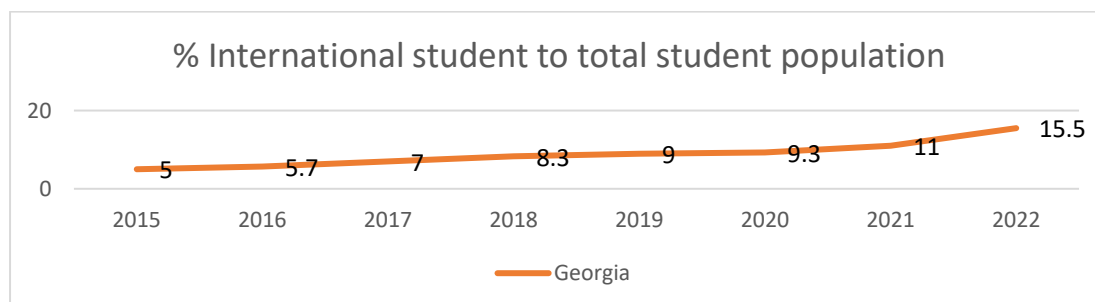
The chart below illustrates the flatlining of Georgia domestic student numbers, which indicates a saturated market. The World Bank suggests that, in 2016, Georgia had “50 percent of 20-year-olds enrolling in higher education, Georgia has a participation rate above the OECD average of 38 percent” (2018:20). The limit growth in domestic enrolments may be problematic for investors as the home market is usually less volatile and more certain and requirement that investors are sensitive to and facilitates a consistency in demand (Schwarzman, 2023)¹². If this market is at near capacity this stream of income will be more thinly spread, suggesting a direct impact on existing market participant

Figure 3: Flattening potential in Georgian domestic student numbers (Source Geostat)



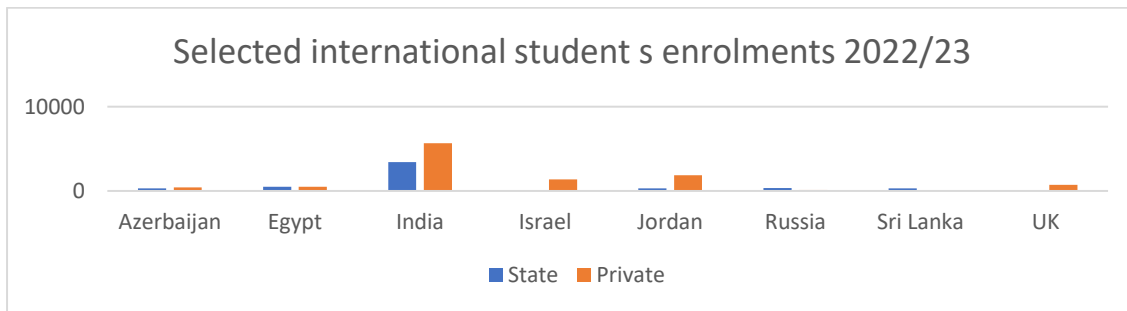
This flatten comes at a time when international students (Figure 4) are making up a larger perception of the total number of student population in Georgia. This is not an unusual position internationally but the major recruiting nationals are finding such numbers a strain on their resources and strategically problematic due to the financial reliance on the higher fees from international students.

Figure 4: Percentage international students to total student population



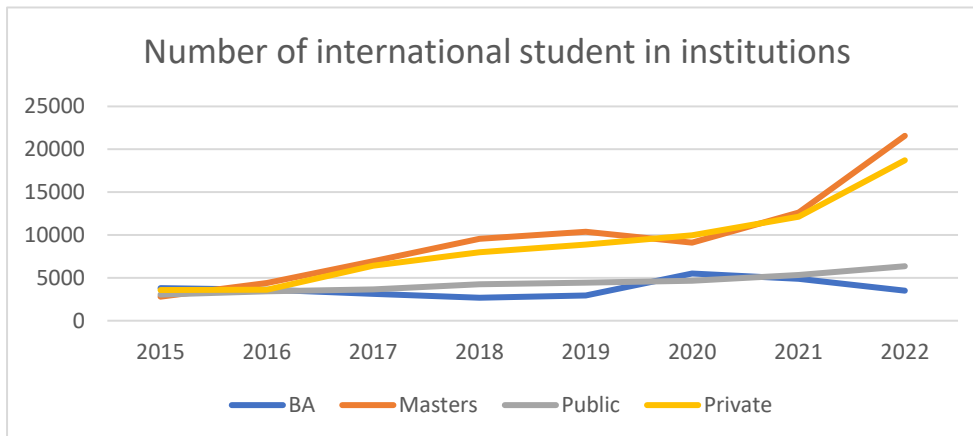
¹² Stephen Allen Schwarzman is an American billionaire businessman. He is the chairman and CEO of the Blackstone Group, a global private equity firm he established in 1985 and his comments were reported in HEPI, [Rethinking the Limit on International Students: Lessons from Dutch and Danish Experiences – HEPI](#)

Figure 5: Nationality of international student enrolments 2022-23 (Source: Geostat)



The above chart for enrolments in 2022/23 shows that the predominant home country was India, and the chart below indicates the higher percentage rate for Indian student applications. This prominence of international students from one country onto one course is a strength and a risk especially as students who select Medicine in Georgia not only receive their medical degree but also seek residency and to pass the Foreign Medical Graduate Screening Exam (FMGE) to be able to practise in their home country. Indian students who complete their programmes in Georgia typically return home without undertaking residency here. They take the FMGE in India and continue their careers there. However, they do have the option to pursue residency in Georgia, just like Georgian students, since the legislation allows them to continue their postgraduate education here¹³. Given this, it is important that Georgia prepares its Indian students well for the FMGE¹⁴

Figure 6: Number of international students by institution type and academic level¹⁵ (Source: Geostat)



The annual growth rate of all international students in Georgia has been impressive. Its annual growth rate, beginning with enrolment 2016 over 2015 academic years, has been 21.3% per year.

¹³ In the recent issue (November 2022) of the Higher Medical Education Sectoral Benchmark, there is a call to establish separate quotas for MD programme students based on human and infrastructure resources. This is a change from the previous policy, where it was part of the overall university quota and not differentiated. This new rule will impact the total number of MD students, both Georgian and international. They are also asking to have university or affiliated hospitals as an obligatory condition for accreditation. This was confirmed by the NCEQE, 27/11/2023)

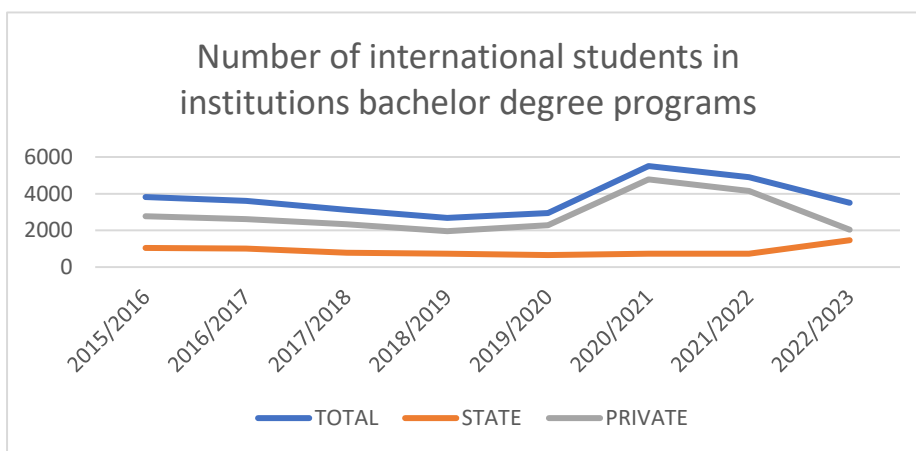
¹⁴ This prominence of international student from one country onto one course is a strength and a risk, especially as students who select Medicine in Georgia not only receive their medical degree but also seek residency and to pass the FMGE to be able to practise in their home country. Indian students who complete their programmes in Georgia typically return home without undertaking residency here. They take the FMGE in India and continue their careers there. In 2021, a Georgian trained student had a 24.00% pass rate compared to Armenia, 9.09%, Bulgaria, 25% ad China 24.69%.

¹⁵ Medical degrees are designated as master's degrees.

However, if the trend is assumed for the final year 2022-2023 rather than actual this drops to 14.5%. To better understand the growth trend, 2023/2024 figures should be consulted but these were not made available. The next chart illustrates the growth in international students in terms of master's and bachelor's degrees and private and public universities, clearly showing that the increase in student numbers are in private universities and on master courses they provide. Moreover, the increase in student numbers has predominately been in master programmes and in private provision driven by medicine. This has direct impact on higher education in both private and public provision. The MoES has already acted to balance initial training with the availability of medical residencies, and it is too early to judge the impact on international student recruitment.

The chart shows bachelor education has been in decline and although there has been growth in both public and private education the most significant growth has been in private education.

Figure 7: Trends in enrolments in Bachelor Programs (Source: Geostat)



The chart shows an increase over the Covid-19 pandemic period which may have been caused by the use of online learning or decline by the shift to medical students in the universities' overall quota numbers. In more detail Figure 8 illustrates the changes in international student choices way from Bachelor degree in business degrees (still the next most attractive sector to medicine) in favour of Master level medicine. The Figure 9 shows that this increase in international students has occurred mainly in private universities.

Figure 8: Trend in international students and their prime subject area – medicine (Source: Geostat)

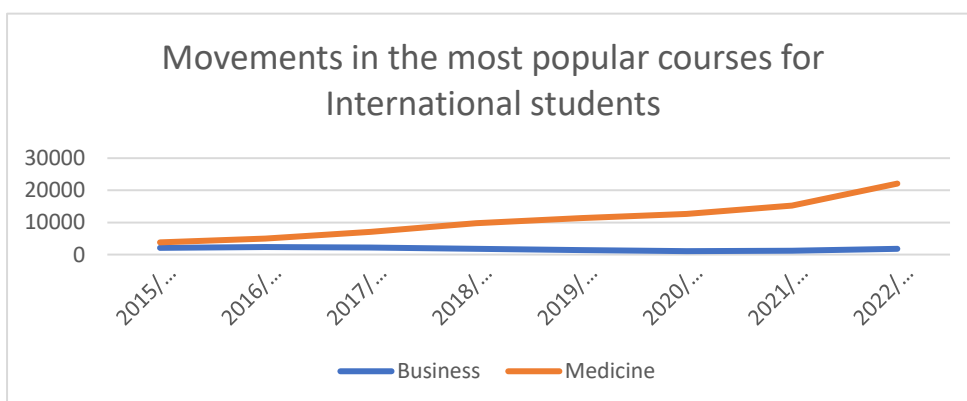
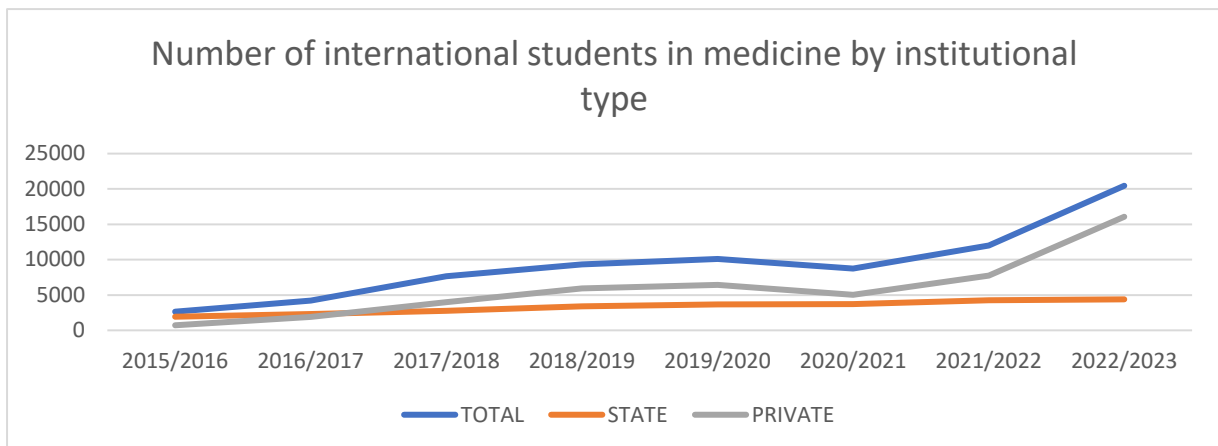
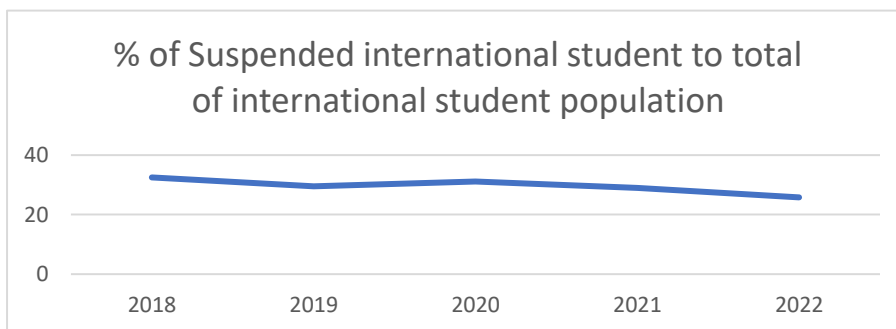


Figure 9: Number of international students in medicine by institutional type (Source: Goestat)



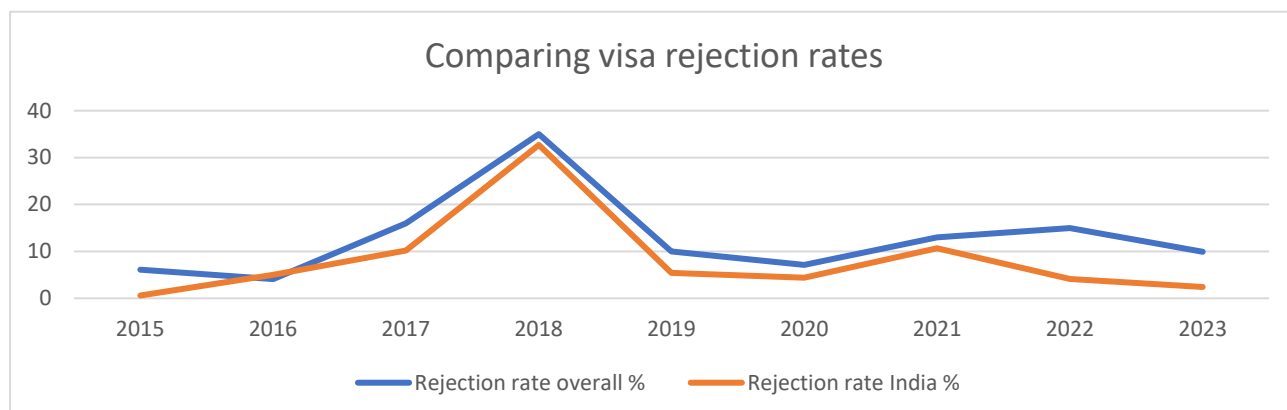
Below: the resilience of these students in their studies, according to data provided in the Galt and Taggart Report (2023) (based on data provided to them by the MoES), shows suspension rates declining which is indicative of higher quality students. This attrition, should it remain at this level (and more detailed analysis would be helpful but was not provided), would indicate graduation rates of around 70% which is in line with USA reported levels (Fass-Holme, 2026). More current data would be helpful to see if increase in transfer students from Ukraine has change these percentages.

Figure 10: Percentage of suspended international students to total international student population (Sources: PSDA)



The following two charts show the data on visa and residency rejection. They show higher rates of visa rejection for countries other than India and generally low residency rejections. A chart showing reject rate per country is enclosed in the appendix.

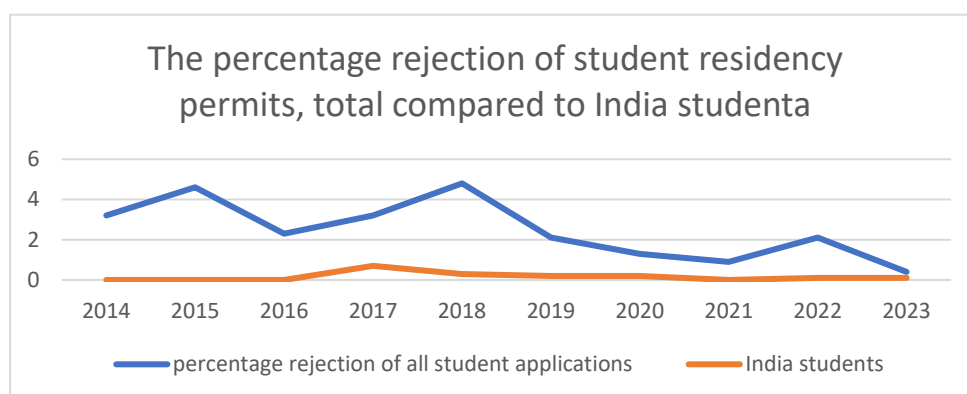
Figure 4: Comparing visa rejection rates over time for total students and Indian Students¹⁶ (Source: MFA)



For countries with over 100 visa applications in 2023¹⁷, the visa rejection rates were Nigeria, 65% (30.8%); Pakistan, 33.5%; (33.3%) Sudan, 28.8%, (50%) and Egypt 12.7% (20.%) while India was 2.4%. (5.4%) (see Appendix 2).

The levels of residency permit rejections trends down over time for the total of students applying and are very low for Indian students. The percentage of issue and rejection of permits is shown in the Figure 12 and shows that percentage of rejection to total remains in 2-3% range other than in 2018 when it reached nearly 5%. That year does relate to vis data, but no reason evident.

Figure 12: Comparing residency permit rejects for all students and Indian student rejection rates over time. (Sources: PSDA)



Preliminary conclusions based on the data

Whether the percentage of inward mobility for Georgia has radically or temporarily changed is not possible to determine. Resolution of that issue will determine the sustainability of the level of growth in the sector. Georgia, up until 2020 (OECD, 2023), had about the same percentage of international students entering for study as Europe. The unexpected increase due to transfer students

¹⁶ According to a representative of the MFA, in addition to the usual issues, shortcomings and incomplete documentation, one of the specific reasons for the high rejection in 2018 was non-availability in Indian submissions of NEET exam papers. Passing the NEET exam is mandatory for all the citizens of the Republic of India who applied to the medical faculty in order to be able to get a job in the Republic of India in their field of work at a later stage. Since the said exam was introduced in 2017-2018, it happened that many applicants had either falsified the exam mark sheet or did not submit it at all.

¹⁷ The figures in brackets are for 2019. Sudan and Pakistan had very small number in that year.

studying in Ukraine significantly raised the level of students entering Georgia, and also the percentage of international students to domestic. There is a growing literature on the impact of Ukrainian student transfers as international students and the impact of the war there in how will affect internationalization mobility in the region (for example, Oleksiyenko, Shchepetylnykova and Furiv, 2023)

Taken from the survey to Universities, Middle East, Asia and India are the most quoted, although some are looking specifically at visa-free countries, where the UK is a target country. Other countries frequently mentioned are Turkey, Israel, Egypt and others in North Africa, and Kazakhstan, although all the regions abutting Georgia (although not exclusively) were mentioned as competitors. From various sources, the countries considered the most likely competitors for Georgian recruitment are Armenia, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. It is reported by the few agents in the survey and international managers that they have more affordable tuition fees and living costs and their application procedures are easier and quicker, but this could not be substantiated from the data collected.

Table 1 Indication of living and study cost for medicine, 2022-23.

Criteria	Country			
	Armenia	Kazakhstan	Uzbekistan	Georgia
Student fees	\$3,530 ¹⁸	\$3,600 ¹⁹	\$3,300 ²⁰	\$4,300
Monthly Cost of living	\$680 ²¹	\$400 ²²	\$400 ²³	\$415 ²⁴
Indictive annual cost	\$11,690	\$8,400	\$8,100	\$9,280

The growth in the number of students is focused on Indians studying medicine. This certainly increases revenues and ought to increase profitability, but it is a risky strategy which is perhaps unsustainable if pursued without developing contingency strategies alongside it.

To support sustainability as well as maintaining a focus on medicine and India, a strategy of diversifying from this one nation one product strategy, supported by the government, seems a more coherent long term national and institutional proposition as it could increase the flow of students from less risky geo-political developing countries. Moreover, a wider spread of nationalities, studying a wider range of subjects is a more reliable and sustainable base for the development of a sector which is more likely to attract inward investment.

¹⁸ Used for both Armenia and Georgia with exchange rate from Sterling to US Dollar of 1.26 [Study Medicine In Georgia In English 2022/2023 - Study Medicine In Europe](#)

¹⁹ [MBBS in Kazakhstan 2023: Eligibility, Fees and Admission \(ucsworld.com\)](#)

²⁰ [Impuls Medical Institute in Uzbekistan - Medlink Students](#)

²¹ [Study in Armenia | Universities, Colleges, Cost & Visa Process \(jeduka.com\)](#)

²² [Cost of living in Kazakhstan - Apply & Study in | Universities \(rocapply.com\)](#)

²³ [Cost of living in Uzbekistan - Apply & Study in | Universities \(rocapply.com\)](#)

²⁴ [Study in Georgia: Housing & Living Costs \(educations.com\)](#)

Legal Analysis of the Regulatory Framework

In an evolving global educational landscape, Georgia seeks to optimize its legal frameworks to attract international students, fostering an environment of academic excellence and cultural exchange. This chapter aims to dissect the current legal barriers within the admission process and propose specific reforms, enhancing the nation's appeal as an educational destination.

Analysis of the Current Legal Framework

Georgia's legal framework for international student admissions is anchored in various statutes and regulations, aiming to provide a structured and supportive environment for global academic exchange. The cornerstone of this framework includes the Georgian Law on Higher Education, which outlines the standards for higher education institutions in admitting students, including those from abroad. Additionally, the Law on the Legal Status of Aliens and Stateless Persons establishes the visa and residency requirements for international students, setting the groundwork for their legal entry and stay in the country.

Despite these comprehensive laws, the practical application reveals complexities that can deter potential students. The visa application process, governed by these laws, necessitates a multitude of documents and evidentiary requirements that can be daunting for applicants. Furthermore, the decentralized nature of admission criteria across universities, while offering flexibility, often results in a lack of standardization, causing confusion among prospective students about the qualifications needed for admission.

Moreover, the process for the recognition of foreign educational credentials, crucial for the admission of international students, is characterized by procedural rigidity and a lack of transparency. This not only prolongs the admission process but also imposes additional financial burdens on applicants, undermining Georgia's attractiveness as a destination for higher education.

The current legal framework, while robust in its intentions, requires refinement and adaptation to better align with international best practices and the realities of global student mobility. Enhancing legal clarity, simplifying procedural requirements, and ensuring a more harmonious and streamlined approach across different regulations and standards are imperative steps towards creating a more welcoming and accessible environment for international students.

Identified Legal Gaps

Visa Application Process: A critical gap is the intricate and often opaque visa application process, which necessitates a multitude of documents, financial proofs, and health insurance verifications. The complexity and time required for these applications can deter potential students, making Georgia a less attractive option.

Admission Procedures: The lack of a unified and transparent admissions procedure across Georgian universities creates confusion among prospective international students. Varied requirements, coupled with decentralized information dissemination, complicate the application process.

Recognition of Foreign Credentials: The current process for recognizing and validating foreign academic qualifications is cumbersome, lengthy, and costly. This not only delays the admission process but also places a financial burden on applicants, potentially discouraging them from pursuing their studies in Georgia.

Targeted Legal Recommendations

Considering the analysis conducted on the current regulatory framework related to international students' visa applications, admission, and study processes in Georgia, the following recommendations are proposed to improve the efficacy, fairness, and attractiveness of the system:

Streamlining Visa Application Procedures

- **Introduction of an Online Visa Application Portal:** Establish a dedicated online portal for student visa applications to simplify the submission process and reduce processing times.
- **Clear and Detailed Visa Guidelines:** Provide comprehensive and easily accessible guidelines that clearly outline the visa application process, required documents, and processing times.
- **Multi-Year Student Visas:** Introduce multi-year visas for the entire duration of the study program to avoid the need for annual renewals.

Standardising Admission Requirements

- **Unified Admission Platform:** Develop a centralised platform where international students can apply to multiple institutions and programs, which would standardise the application process and deadlines.
- **Recognition of International Standards:** Legally recognize international standardised tests and qualifications to simplify the admission process for students from various educational backgrounds.
- **Pre-Arrival Information Packages:** Mandate educational institutions to provide pre-arrival information packages, including legal requirements, cultural orientation, and language support services.

Improving Recognition of Foreign Credentials

- **International Agreements for Recognition:** Pursue bilateral agreements with countries that are primary sources of international students to facilitate the automatic recognition of certain educational credentials.

The extra legal suggestions that could improve Georgia's market might include:

Enhancing the Study Process

- **Mentorship Programs:** Encourage universities to establish mentorship programs pairing international students with local students to assist with cultural integration and academic support.
- **Language Support:** Offer legally mandated language support classes for international students, particularly in Georgian, to facilitate their integration and improve their study experience.
- **Health Insurance Regulations:** Implement clear guidelines and support for international students to obtain health insurance, which is often a legal requirement for residency.

Additional Support Structures

- **Legal Advisory Services:** Offer state-supported legal advisory services for international students to help navigate the complexities of the Georgian legal system regarding their stay and studies.
- **Integration Programs:** Develop government-funded integration programs that provide legal, cultural, and social support to international students.

Strengthening Regulatory Oversight

- Regular Monitoring and Assessment: Implement regular assessments of educational institutions' compliance with the legal framework for international students and establish penalties for non-compliance.
- Feedback Mechanism: Create a formal mechanism for international students to provide feedback on their experiences, which would inform ongoing legal reforms and enhance student satisfaction.

Recruitment, visa and residency permit issues in Georgia

The next section of the report considers the options open to the security, verification and quality of welcoming international students to Georgia. At outset the report shows that exempting the major international recruitment nations Georgia's processes are similarly organized to all the systems investigated in this report. They involve a first phase where academic decisions are taken and approval is given by both the university and the government for a place at the university to be offered. There is divergence here, however, in the ways in which confirmation of a place is given and the process of engagement with governing bodies and students. The second phase concerns visas and their issue which in all cases is done by the government authority responsible for visas. In a number of cases this may be done without interview, although it is the norm for many nations. In addition, the application process is moving to online although it may retain a physical completion of documents and their physical delivery. Finally, all require some notification of residency which may be contingent upon the visa issuance and produced through the visa process while others require country attendance and registration once in the actual country. These processes are represented in the charts that follow, after which the Georgian process is presented.

Georgia's Approach

Georgia's recruitment process is outlined below, and the pinch points and issues perceived by institutional uses are highlighted. In addition, comments from academic institutions are offered to critique the process.

Application Submission: Applicants intending to join a Georgian university submit specific documents, such as passport copies, high school certificates for undergraduate programs, bachelor's degrees for master's programs, and English language certificates, if applicable. For Indian citizens applying to the healthcare faculty, National Eligibility Entrance Test (NEET) test results are also required. The application process can be carried out in person or through an agent or through someone given power of attorney. Universities can offer conditional places to students who are waiting for formal results or other documents. In our case, students need to prove English language proficiency. However, it is not until the student fulfils all prerequisites that the document processing in MoES through NCEQE can begin.

Initial Assessment: The University assesses the qualifications, primarily checking whether the student fulfils the requirements for the chosen study cycle based on previous education and English language proficiency.

Provisional Acceptance: Upon meeting these requirements, the student receives a registration letter and usually an invoice.

NCEQE Recognition: Translated and notarized documents (by student, agent or university), are prepared for the NCEQE²⁵. A pre-booked appointment is scheduled to submit them for verification and recognition of education obtained abroad. This is a paper-based system and is labour intensive for the agency and for the student and their representatives. NCEQE is positioned pivotally in the application process and the number of sub-processes in the role: verifying qualification, translating the documents, passing on student documents onto MoES verification and informing universities of this is recognized

²⁵ An application addressed to the National Center for Educational Quality Enhancement (authenticity and recognition of an educational document issued in a foreign country) may need to be made to confirm the status of the certificated learning if this is not done by the university.

by the NCEQE as not optimal. This is done only with fully accredited qualifications not anticipated results. Universities can offer conditional places, but the NCEQE will only verify a full package of qualification, not piecemeal. Should the decision be passed to the universities then such a system could be in place with the student qualification approved waiting for final confirmation and thus re swiftly displace a formal offer of a place.

To this end they have begun thinking about developing an online system which is hoped to be signed off in 2024 but will still need further consultations donor support. Its cost is estimated to be 0.6 million GEL (NCEQE, 28/11/2023) as an idea in development and strategic objective for 2024. It is based on internal research which found the majority of European and potential competitor countries for Georgia used some form of electronic qualification submission and verification process²⁶. Dealing with increases in volume whilst the online system linking universities, NCEQE and the MoES (or an alternative) are planned to be handled by increasing the resources using the same process model. This approach may reinforce the same strains on the system. However, given feedback from other sources, focus needs to be on improving the current efficiency. A more detailed business case for the project is expected in 2024.

MoES: After NCEQE recognizes the education, they forward the documents to the Ministry of Education (MoES). A copy of this recognition is sent to the university/contact person. After this step, MoES issues a ministry order granting the student the right to study at the university, sending it directly to the university.

Enrolment: Upon receipt of the ministry order, the University Rector issues an enrolment order. The student is then informed and provided with an invitation letter, acceptance letter, and a notice confirming their student status, along with copies of both the ministry and rector's orders. These documents enable the student to proceed with their visa application.

Visa application process

Students needing visas make an online application through the E-Application System with the Embassy or Consulate for a type D3 (Long Term Visa/Immigration Visa). This is issued for 90 days duration and is the precondition for obtaining relevant residency permit for international students who then submit the application form, documents, and proof of payment in person or via mail to a Georgian diplomatic mission and attend an interview.

International students can work part-time in Georgia for 20 hours per week.

Even though a visa has been issued, admittance to Georgia – as in all other countries – is decided at the border crossing.

Temporary Residency Permit

Once the visa application has been processed and approved, the Georgian Consulate or Embassy will affix the visa to the applicant's passport. This can be either picked up in person from the Consulate or Embassy or can be sent by post.

In order to apply for Georgian Temporary Residency Permit – issued by the Public Service Development Agency (PSDA) – those entering Georgia on the basis of a student visa should refer to

²⁶ Research from NCEQE suggests that applications can be made via electronic systems in: Australia, Austria, Germany, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Kazakhstan, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Switzerland, Turkey, Ukraine, Belgium, Bulgaria, Canada, Czech Republic, Estonia, Iceland, Latvia, Denmark, Sweden (for EU citizens). Applications are accepted in physical form in: Albania, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Serbia, Georgia.

the PSDA within the first 45 days of their visa validity to complete their student residency permit application. The first permit will be valid for 6 to 12 months, and can be extended for up to 11 years, depending on the student's study programme. The permits should be issued within 30 days after the initial submission and is valid for one year and is renewable.

Assessment of the Georgian system by stakeholders²⁷

The following discussion is based on data collected from students within Georgia, international managers and to a much lesser extent agents and ministries. The approach is outlined in the methodology section 3.

Students' questionnaire (Appendix 3)

At the beginning of the project, the questionnaire was developed and shared with the international students currently taking the courses in Georgia. The students who completed the questionnaire (see appendix 2) and expressed a view indicated had no concern with the visa or residency processes or, indeed, any other part of the recruitment process. However, this might be a self-fulfilling philosophy as they had successfully arrived in Georgia. Comments on visas issue were restricted to speed of delivery. There was naturally a clear distinction amongst those who could study in Georgia visa free and those who could not). This divide was also evident in the workshops, visa, non-visa, but visa and unexplained issues at the borders were more often expressed by participants in the workshops discussed below.

The majority of students (over 80%) stated that Georgia was their first destination, although there was a number of other countries (Russia, Bangladesh, Kazakhstan, Poland, Germany and Finland, Romania, Turkey Hungary, Canada, Pakistan, UAE amongst them) that were considered as alternatives countries for study.

The students were asked to list, in terms of importance to them, the considerations which they felt were important in selecting Georgia. These fell into two main groups. The majority considered safety, quality and reputation to be their core requirements whilst a significant group considered the economics of study, of fees, accommodation and living costs to be their highest priority. It is difficult to fully separate these groups. Although not part of the study, there were very positive comments made about the quality of the education in Georgia compared to say Ukraine and although there were very good lecturers there were some who were perceived to be disinterested in the students. The report does not develop these comments further as they are outside its remit.

Student Workshops

The workshops gave richer data which explored the role of agents, the recruitment, visa and residency processes. The content of the discussions ranged over their personal experience. Those groups that expressed a view on the reasons they selected Georgia put security and cost at the top. There were particular cases of individual experience expressed such as poor agent service, which resulted in wrong advice or none at all, students having to visit other countries to obtain visas, and unexplained visa rejection based on security reasons which were not explained. There was concern about the overall bureaucracy of engagement with authority in Georgia and this can cause delays for some months when compared to other countries (document recognition was mentioned as an example). In this respect, the development of officials' language skills in English was advocated, as a number of students consider the English language proficiency of their tutors to teach in that language

²⁷ The following is derived from a small number of responses to the project survey and can be only indicative.

was lower than the students had expected. This would be ameliorated if English native speakers were employed but add significantly to the costs of tuition for the university.

More importantly, there were concerns over the uncertainties of entry post and visa issues, into Georgia. There was a call for a unified system which would be easier to negotiate and perhaps improve the relationship with agents where this was seen to be problematic²⁸. Individuals raised a number of cultural issues which the students felt were against them. Particular issues mentioned were accommodation and rent. There was a feeling amongst some that rents were raised when the students began their negotiations, and the landlords support was sometimes missing when residency permits were being requested. To perhaps counter this, there was a suggestion that more dormitory provision would be welcome.

Some also felt universities could be more proactive in collaboration with agents and in providing support for students concerned about their legal rights in the country. Problems with language (English being the main language) and support for students when they arrive to help with legal issues were also spoken of. They also felt more exposure of Georgia in the marketplace would be helpful with more fairs and that an overall review of the 'Study in Georgia' website ([Home - Studyinggeorgia](#)) would be helpful.

The students' views were wide ranging and interesting and could contribute to the development of a more conducive environment for students while they are within Georgia, but these are not taken further as outside the remit of the report. These views included the promotion of Georgia as a compelling educational destination, the need for more overseas professors at universities whose English is good, "you need more English programme if you want more international student", the role of international students as ambassadors of Georgia when they return to their home country and the role of agents, who one described as "terrible and we have all experienced scams".

Institutional International Manager/Director Manager Questionnaires (see Appendix 4)

From our survey, it is clear that international student recruitment is a clear objective of institutional strategic planning. The gap between capacity and enrolment can be accurately estimated from the strategic documents lodged with the NCEQE and the EMIS where the quotas and the shortfalls would be visible. Access to this commercially sensitive information has not yet been obtained. As a proxy for this, a small-scale survey of six private and two state universities provides the following estimates of the capacity available from more enrolments. These figures were contingent upon changes in the system which includes the recruitment process and the visa and residency requirements which are discussed later in much more detail in the report. The chart below summarises the finding of the survey:

Table 2: Summary of projected growth from survey return of universities

Status	% Foreign Student	% Project growth capacity	Needs
Private	45	0-20	Flexibility in enrolment and visa
State	4	40-50	Marketing and streamline enrolment and visa

²⁸ In the UK there is something called the Agent Quality Framework Pledge which is a digital marker displaying an institution's commitment to the checks and balances contained in the Agent Quality Framework. This marker provides clarity to both prospective students and agents on the expectations and responsibilities of agents operating on behalf of that institution. (See, [UK Agent Quality Framework Universities' Pledge | BUILA](#))

State	36	10	Simplify enrolment and visa
Private	87	30-40	Clarity in enrolment and visa
Private	3	40-50	Enrolment and visa
Private	60	20-30	Enrolment and visa
Private	46	20-30	Enrolment and visa
State	1	40-50	Marketing support

Strong growth is anticipated if changes in the recruitment and visa issue processes can be resolved through government engagement in the recruitment process. This will be discussed in the next section.

Regarding investment potential, there was unanimity on the positive impact of increased international student recruitment, provided it maintains high academic standards, both for the economy and for the attractiveness of the sector to new investment. The education sector in its entirety contributes 4% to the GDP of Georgia (4.18 in 2021 and 4.915 in 2020). Moreover, Galt and Taggart's (2023) presentation indicates that revenues to higher education institutions, from all students, in each of 2021 and 2022 was 0.8 billion which is verified by the SCMI Report (2022:20).

It is reasonable to assume that an increase in numbers of international students would make an economic, positive benefit for the country. This would be in the higher tuition fees, monthly rental fees, and fees spent on food, goods, and transportation stimulating local businesses. However, it is important to note that the economic impact of international students can vary, depending on factors such as the number of students, the duration of their studies, and the policies in place to support their integration and well-being. The SCMI (2022) report suggests the following and is quoted fully:

“The total amount of tuition fees paid by foreign students and their share of the value added in the education sector has been steadily increasing since the 2017-2018 academic year. In the academic year 2017-2018, the amount paid for education by foreign students was 63 million GEL, and in the 2020-2021 academic year, compared to the 2017-2018 academic year, this figure has doubled and amounted to 136 million GEL. In the academic year 2017-2018, the share of tuition fees paid by foreign students in the added value created in the education sector was 3.9%, by the academic year 2020-2021, the figure reached 6.8%.” (2022:16).

Well-managed, an increase in international student numbers can have a positive and lasting impact on the Georgian economy, contributing to economic growth, job creation, and cultural enrichment. Indicatively, these benefits can accrue economic value from the following (which are itemised in the SCMI report (2022:18-20):

1. **Tuition Revenue:** International students often pay higher tuition fees compared to domestic students, and this can be a significant source of revenue for educational institutions. The revenue generated from tuition fees can help support the financial sustainability of colleges and universities.
2. **Living Expenses:** International students typically spend money on housing, food, transportation, and other goods and services in the local economy. This spending contributes to the local business community and stimulates economic growth.
3. **Job Creation:** The presence of international students can lead to the creation of jobs in various sectors, including housing, hospitality, retail, and education. Professors, administrative staff and support services may also see increased demand.
4. **Cultural Exchanges:** The presence of international students fosters cultural exchange and can attract tourists and business partners interested in the country's diverse community. This can lead to increased tourism and international collaborations.

5. **Improved Reputation:** Hosting a diverse group of international students can enhance the global reputation of the country. It can attract foreign investments, partnerships, and research opportunities, which, in turn, can boost the country's economic growth.

Investment ought to follow, or indeed lead, the economic benefit and so increase the benefits identified above and, given that for international students the tuition fees are up to two times higher than for the local students (and if it is feasible to continue this differential) then investors should be attracted to the market, although, as Galt and Taggart suggest, a net profit margin for private universities in 2021 was 29.3%.

However, for this to happen it will be important for governments and educational institutions to create an environment that is conducive to investment, ensuring that regulations, policies, and incentives support the growth of the education sector. The market needs to have limited barriers to entry consistent with the idea of education, as well as a regulatory framework that encourages educational entrepreneurship but does not disrupt the market which seeks to offer quality international provision. Moreover, responsible and sustainable growth in the sector, along with clear strategies for attracting international students and investors, is essential to harness the full potential of this economic opportunity.

Such inward investment will have positive effects economically but may also impact on the higher education sector in the following ways:

1. Increased Funding
2. Improving Infrastructure
3. Faculty Development
4. Research Opportunities
5. Scholarships and Financial Aid
6. Global Recognition
7. Entrepreneurship and Innovation

Managers Interviews

The institutions that took part in the interviews and questionnaires were generally positive about the development of the higher education sector and the importance of international students in that through the “offering international, high quality academic programs with multicultural and safe environment, Georgia will become an interesting place for investors” (A). The trend in the increased number of students is supported by the commentaries of international managers, and increases in this year continue to be reported. The over focus on Indian students was also recognized as a reason for wider diversification. Institutions did feel that addressing the issues about the slowness of the whole recruitment process would assist in student recruitment.

They commented on the action undertaken by MOES in supporting international recruitment. These ranged from comments like the negative “Not helpful at all” (B); to the perhaps more balanced “While some government policies have supported university recruitment activities in recent years, there are some areas where further steps are needed” (H); to the more constructive: “A joint effort supported by high education institutions (H) in Georgia and government would be useful. supporting HEIs in participation in international educational events and fairs, working with Recruitment Agents, active promotion of Georgia as an interesting new study destination” (A).

The dominant theme from the interviews is the length of time and efficiency of the registration of students with the MoES through the NCEQE, although the time taken to issue visas is also problematic. This may be attributed to the increased workload of recent years but is seen as contributing to the competitive disadvantage of Georgia and loss of time on course for students. There

are also issues related to the priority system at NCEQE for speedy decisions but then subsequent delay in the MOES. The following extended quote is a good example of the feelings expressed:

“To achieve this, the entire process needs to be modernized and digitalized. Since the demand for these services is seasonal, government authorities often do not hire sufficient personnel during peak periods. Furthermore, as the procedures are not yet digitalized, universities encounter numerous errors and delays at each step of the process during high-demand periods.” (D)

Visas were a main concern along with residency permits. Visa issue itself came under criticism: “Visa procedures are another significant challenge. Students from many countries either struggle to obtain a visa even when their documents are in order, or they face such long delays in visa processing that they end up missing entire semesters” (E). Further comments included “Entry to Georgia – It is tough to get visas and the process of filing documents is being delayed” (F). The issue of residency permits was also criticised. For instance, one institution commented “There are quite a lot of cases when students could not receive residence permits and could not stay in Georgia after a very long visa process” (G) and another wrote “Visa Issuing process must be easier but the Ministry of Justice must control residence permit issuing dates and duration”(C).

The visa issue system is perceived as slow, and students from many countries either struggle to obtain a visa even when their documents are in order, or they face such long delays in visa processing that they end up missing entire semesters. The system is seen to be inflexible and changes in the process are too frequent.

The final issue is the residency permit, where students with visas can arrive in Georgia and fail to receive a residency permit and are then rejected from the system. This creates personal and reputational damage.

Managers Workshop

Following much that was explored above, the key issue for international managers is to make the process of recruitment easier and faster. Within this, the use of VFS was considered an important contribution to the flow of students from India and recommended that it was used more extensively, for instance in Africa, and more widely so student documentation could be checked just once and used in all the required processes. This was supporting a discussion on a clear strategy from the MoES to support the institutions in recruitment by helping them prioritise where they might best seek students to avoid visa rejections due to security risks. It was recognized that the MoES could not direct institutions as to which countries are more likely than others to have students who might be considered security risks, but this could perhaps be deducted in the promotional messages that MoES skilfully uses when talking about supporting recruitment fairs and VFS alignment, for instance. The group was very happy about the offerings that they can make to students and explicitly were not concerned about foreign competition and that Georgia should be marketed on what they considered was the strongest marketing proposition – that Georgia was a safe place to study and work.

The managers were concerned, like the students, at the level and extent of resources at their disposal to offer high quality and international quality standards teaching. As the charts show, the growth over the Covid-19 pandemic period of online enrolment and study was recognized as something which would enhance the students’ experience and perhaps assist in the diversity of provision offered by the universities whilst supporting the traditional models of teaching – even including medicine.

When discussing student recruitment for 2023/24, it was stated that the recruitment numbers were down on the previous year, but some of those who offered a view (not all) commented that their levels of recruitment had fallen from the previous year but were still strong historically. Finally, the need for communication and collaboration was seen to be significant in enabling institutions to recruit well.

Agents

The agents confirmed that main competitor countries in this market for Georgia are confirmed as: Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Armenia which have easier processes for admission, have low living expenses and less visa waiting time. Russia, for instance, has fast visa approval and low tuition fees and low living costs.

The agents' ranking of the reasons why student select Georgia has much in common with the students themselves and with the international managers when ranking (but this may be unreliable given the very small sample size). Greater attention to the agents' role in signalling Georgian institutions to student is worthy of further research. Their role was not upheld by the students being entirely positive and some form of mentoring of their activities and the engagement of universities with agents may be appropriate.

Ministry of Education and Science (MoES)

The view of the Ministry was one of expressed willingness to changes from a grounding of significant change already achieved in their internationalization process. They believe that the coordination between ministries regarding international students is flexible and works well. This internationalization process, however, only appears in the 2022-30 strategic objectives relating to form institutional collaboration and Erasmus+ programmes. There is not, however, any explicit objective relating to international student recruitment in that document. This is explained as a consequence of the enhanced autonomy which universities experience that requires no interference from government. The NCEQE does, however, have a remit to ensure international student teaching and learning is adequately shaped for international students as mentioned previously in the report. There is in development of an e-tool to assist Consular in visa decision making in India.

There are incentives offered to students in approved international mobility exchanges. The grant the student receives are maintained and non-Georgian residents are eligible for grants if they pass (in the Georgia language and) at the appropriate level the Unified National Examinations; only then they can qualify for grants based on that route of entry to universities.

Regarding the role of the NCEQE, the MoES's position is (this is not the position of the Report) that it is critical to and essential to the recognition of qualification and this service could not be provided by another agent, for example by the universities, with the argument that this process should be led by the state authority (see Order N 98/N of the Minister of Education and Science of Georgia 1 October 2010). However, there is at least one foreign university campus in Georgia, such as San Diego State University, that enrolls students directly. Since it's not a Georgian university, students are registered directly with that institution, and therefore, the Georgian enrollment systems do not apply to them.

Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA)

The process is considered to be straightforward and clear. The process involves submissions of required details electronically and in hard copies. The electronic system that could be found on the

Ministry’s website (<https://www.geoconsul.gov.ge/>)-is listed under E-Application system. For all applicants outside Georgia the applicant’s passport has to be submitted and the visa stamped into it. A Study visa (D3 visa) is issued for duration of 90 days and is the precondition of obtaining relevant residency permit for international students. For application within Georgia (visa extension, for instance) an electronic visa can be issued. The electronic copies are sent via the Ministry’s website and could form the basis of a wider digitization process.

India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal and Georgia use the VFS²⁹ to support student applications. All are served by the Embassy of Georgia in India, therefore the representative of all four countries should apply for a visa at the Embassy of Georgia in the Republic of India. In India a system of VFS Centres {30 in total), has been set up to receive and help process the required documentation, which includes an application order from the MoES and a formal letter from the university Rector offering places, together with financial support information and health assurances, plus the actual visa. Students also need to show National Eligibility-cum-Entrance Test (NEET) success if intending to study medically related courses. The centres then send the application to the Consulate. This prevents the students having to travel significant distances to deposit the documentation. In addition, it is estimated that only 15-20% of students are subsequently called for interview, and this is mainly due to irregularities in their documentation.

The logistics are adjusted to try and accommodate different national contest where, for instance, consulates do not exist, but the electronic and physical provision is not changed. This is attributed to the need to stamp the visa with the actual visa and not to issue electronic confirmation of visas. Countries not needing visas are listed under Ordnance 256.³⁰ Further logistics problems caused by rapid change in demand flows is currently handled by increasing staff and delays were attributed to lack of staff in the past.

International review of other national systems

The countries selected are batched into three groups. The first group are three of the main anglophile destination countries, then the post-soviet Baltic countries which are members of the European Union plus Bulgaria (mentioned by students as a destination for medicine), union countries and finally two Eurasian countries mentioned by students and international managers as potential competitor countries. The final group are potential competitors revealed in interviews and focus group discussions. The number of students hosted is dependent on the numbers collected by UNESCO Institute of statistics ([Global Flow of Tertiary-Level Students | UNESCO UIS](#)) and are provided so the economic resource they provide for the country can be considered when discussing forms of enhanced digitalization evident in the first three nations.

Table 1: numbers of international student in reviewed countries

National	Number of international students hosted in 2022
USA	833,204
UK	600,589
Australia	378,439

²⁹ VFS Global is the world's largest visa outsourcing and technology services specialist for governments and diplomatic missions worldwide. The company manages the administrative and non-judgmental tasks related to visa, passport and consular services for its client governments. VFS Global is majority-owned by funds managed by Blackstone, the world's largest alternative asset manager. Blackstone seeks to create positive economic impact and long-term value for their investors, the companies in which they invest, and the communities in which they work

³⁰ [Preview \(matsne.gov.ge\)](#)

Bulgaria	18,250
Estonia	5,224
Latvia	10,025
Lithuania	7688
Kazakhstan	40,742
Uzbekistan	5,503
Russia	282,922
Georgia	25,069

The data in the following chart is from published details. It is possible that adjustments are made in practice, especially by the emerging state where anecdotal evidence suggests faster, easier service than that outlined. Should this be tried and there is a reduction in rigour, then the consequences for their higher education sectors may be substantially negative. The remit of the Report did not stretch to in-depth investigation of the reality of how the process actually works. Such a study is recommended.

Table 2: International comparison of applications procedures

Application

This table assumes different document requirements for each country and faculty. However, all academic subjects and claims of English language proficiency need verification. There are also various stages of payment which are not considered here.

National system	Academic assessment	Confirmation of place
Major worldwide recruiting nations		
USA	Contact University with or without additional external tests (e.g. SAT) and possibly an interview. No central regulatory body. Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP) - certified university input into a central SEVIS system which processes the information to produce a Form I-20.	The university will send the Form I-20 (a certificate of eligibility for non-immigrant student status) Signed by a designated person to the student.
Australia	Universities have to be registered with the Ministry of Education, which assesses the appropriateness of verified qualifications. Student accepts offer and pays deposit.	University issues electronic confirmation of enrolment in the form of a CoE (Confirmation of Enrolment). The CoE will be sent after acceptance of the Letter of Offer and paid fees.
UK	University (or universities) receive applications and assess documents, an online interview may be required and can offer a conditional offer based on their requirements.	Once an unconditional offer is made (all requirements met) the university issues a Certificate of Acceptance of Studies (or CAS) which confirms status.
Main European competitors		
Armenia	Once the student gets admission into an institution by direct application, the institution will apply to the consular section of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) for entry permission for the student. The application requirements may vary by institution, and, for most state universities, students need to apply to the Minister of Education and Science and include an admission statement. addressing the applicant's field of study and an application form (this form is given in Ministry of Education and Science) verified qualifications (confirmed by Armenian Embassy or Consulate representative).	The institution will inform the Ministry of Foreign Affairs who will issue an entry permission

Bulgaria	Apply directly to the university or through Study in Bulgaria portal. University approves the documents of each applicant and then submit the students' application files to the Ministry of Education and Science.	The Ministry of Education and Science issues a Certificate of Admittance testifying to the acceptance or rejection of the applicant. Once the University receives the Certificate, issued by the Ministry of Education and Science, the applicant will be then notified (by e-mail/phone) to collect the Ministry Certificate personally from the University or by an authorized representative
Estonia	Apply directly to university or through Study in Estonia website and the online, DreamApply. The university also requires printed online application with certified copies of the required documents to university. (<u>Estonian ENIC/NARIC</u> centre for evaluation and their decision on your qualification need to be known and evidenced at time of application). English courses are only allowed where there is a mirror Estonian language course.	After accepting a university place, and paying the tuition fee, a final accepted official acceptance letter from chosen institution is sent.
Latvia	Apply online to the university with certified documents, an interview may be required. The university will submit the applicant's documents to the <u>Academic Information Centre</u> for diploma recognition (The Ministry of Education and Science and University of Latvia)	The University issues a conditional offer letter, dependent on payment of fees. The invitation is also filed at the Office of Citizen and Migrations (OCMA) by the University.
Lithuania	Qualifications verification falls under the jurisdiction of the Lithuanian Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education and must be checked by them. Then student apply to a university who when stratified and fees are paid seen then an acceptance letter sent. Some universities like Vilnius University have the right to carry out the academic recognition of foreign qualifications related to higher education. Online applications for instance are made (<u>Apply online! - Vilnius University (vu.lt)</u>)	After the issue of an acceptance letter, a contract between student and university is required.
Developing competitive nations		

Kazakhstan	Applicants can apply through National Centre for Higher Education Register on the university portal and submit verified document directly to the university, online or in person. Pass the interview and then provide the originals of documents, translations and notarised documents to sign an agreement with the university. Verification of documents can be done by the national body, an extension of the Ministry of education, or in the home country of the applicant, provided all communications are in Kazakh.	Obtain a certificate on the facts of crossing the State Border of the Republic of Kazakhstan. Within two days from the date of entry, you must come to the university.
Uzbekistan	Application for enrolment goes directly to the university by sending physical documents or online. Many universities require subject as well as language tests of competency. The university is required to provide Ministry of Health of the Republic of Uzbekistan.	An official "Invitation to Study" from the university applied to is required. The Ministry of Health of the Republic of Uzbekistan sets the standard for the invitation letter. The letter must be accepted before the document can be used for a visa application.

Table 3: International comparison of visa and residency permit processes

Visa and residency

This table assumes different document requirements and fees for each country are similar but there are differences in detail. These are not discussed in the list, only the process of application as they are available on the websites, and it is the process at issue here. The process discussed here are for students from countries that do require visa to enter the country to study. Many countries do not and vary by hosting state. Resident permits, however, are required for all students studying in a host country.

Country	Visa process	Residency process
Major worldwide recruiting nations		
USA	Online Non-immigrant Visa Application, Form DS-160. Applicants for students to complete the online DS-260 form and then print the summary of the application to bring to an interview. A	On arrival in the USA and at the Customs and Border Protection, permission to stay is confirm by the issue of a Form I-94 which notes the length of stay permitted (length of course plus 60 days). It also allows student to work.

	scheduled appointment for a visa interview is at the U.S. Embassy or Consulate s in the country of residency.	
Australia	<p>Student applies for a visa by creating a personal account online with the immigration service. Student may be interviewed but online and may need to provide biometric details at a designated place in person (advised once visa submitted).</p> <p>The visa application via an online ImmiAccount. Assessed subject to particular assessment levels, based on both provider risk. (private college applications receive more scrutiny than universities, for example) and country risk (students from India receive more scrutiny than those from Singapore, for example). The application seeks to show that there is genuine temporary entrant (GTE) requirement. The department of home affairs issues the visa which acts as a residency permit. The visa is issued for length of study plus two years for certain subjects.</p> <p>Student can work 48 hours per fortnight.</p> <p>There are no caps on total numbers of student visas issued.</p>	Not additional requirement than visa and option after study to upgrade to permanent residency.
UK	<p>Applications for student visa up to six months before the course starts. Requires payment of an application fee and showing a current passport and conducted online.</p> <p>Biometric evidence and submission of this at a visa application centre in person unless an EU passport holder where the biometrics are read from the passport. An interview request may not necessarily be made.</p> <p>Successful applicant will be issued with a 90-day entry vignette in their passport, which will enable travel to the UK.</p>	The actual visa, in the form of a Biometric Residence Permit (BRP), will need to be collected after arriving in the UK. The BRP is the documentary evidence of UK immigration permission. It can also be used as a form of identification (for example, if they wish to open a bank account in the UK). The visa is for the length of the course plus 4 months.
Main European competitors		
Armenia	<p>After getting the entry permission from the MFA, students must apply for a visa in the Armenian embassy nearest to them.</p> <p>Normally students only need to obtain this on a visitor or tourist visa.</p>	Students apply for a temporary residency permit after formalising admissions. It is obtained from <u>the</u> Migration and Citizenship Service of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. This can be renewed for the duration of the study program

Bulgaria	<p>Once admittance to an educational institution or programme, has been confirmed a visa type D for students must be obtained. After receiving the acceptance letters the applicant has to apply for Bulgarian Student Visa (D-type Visa) valid from 3 to 6 months. Once the verified documents are collected an interview with the embassy or consulate is required.</p> <p>Bulgarian student Visa can be obtained from any Bulgarian Diplomatic Mission abroad. There is a requirement to attend to an embassy for an interview (if required) and to submit supporting documents.</p>	<p>(D-type Visa) is issued or a denial is received. The issuance of this document takes up to a month.</p> <p>After entering Bulgaria, a residence permit from the Migration Directorate must be obtained.</p> <p>The duration of the residence permit is aligned with the duration of study programme.</p>
Estonia	<p>Student must make an application for a long-term visa (D-type) and attend an interview. In a country where Estonia does not have a foreign mission, another Schengen Member State may represent Estonia when issuing visas. Only applications for Schengen visas can be submitted to the representation of the Member State representing Estonia.</p>	<p>After the issue of a visa, a temporary residence permit for studying is required. Submission of the document and an interview is required with either the Police and Border Guard Board service offices in Estonia. The process can last two months from the acceptance of the application and within a month after the residence permit is granted, you are obliged to register your place of residence at the population register. The permit can be issued for the length of study.</p>
Latvia	<p>Complete the application form online.</p> <p>Schedule an appointment with the Latvian embassy through the “Electronic Visa Application” service or by contacting the embassy directly.</p> <p>Submit the application. And arrange to visit an embassy/consulate or visa office representing Latvia in your country to submit your application and attend the visa interview.</p>	<p>After arrival in Latvia, you need to receive your temporary residence permit. Your initial student visa (D-long stay visa) is valid only for the settling-in period – usually up to six months. To receive a permit, you need to register the place of residence at the nearest OMCA (Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs) centre.</p> <p>The residence permit is granted for a period which exceeds the study period by four months. The card is renewed annually.</p> <p>Students can apply for residence permit at the <u>Embassy of Latvia</u> in their country of origin or at the Embassy of other country who has territorial competence on giving visas for going to Latvia.</p>

Lithuania	<p>Schedule a visa appointment with a Lithuanian embassy and make a reservation for submitting a long-term visa (D-type) application. Download, print, and complete the visa application form. Gather supporting documents:</p> <p>Attendance at a visa appointment: where application form, supporting documents are submitted, and payment the fee in before the application can be processed.</p>	<p>Electronically register for a temporary residence permit. Submit an initial residence permit application through the Lithuanian Migration Information System (MIGRIS). The permit can be taken from the Lithuanian embassy/consulate in the student's home country. This permit may be issued for a maximum period of 2 years (3 years for doctoral students) and can be renewed for the remaining study period. It can be extended for 12 months after graduation.</p>
Developing competitive nations		
Kazakhstan	<p>The visa application is submitted in hard copy with the appropriate documents which include proof of health and a letter of invitation from the Kazakhstan government. The visa requirement vary dependant on the country of entry. The visa, if successful, is mailed to the applicant or can be picked up at the embassy. An interview is mandatory but does not always need to be booked and can occur when documents are delivered. The visa is renewed every year. Migration Service need to be notified of arrives within 3 day of arrival</p>	<p>The holder of a student visa can study and does not require another permit.</p>
Uzbekistan	<p>Care is required, as there are a number of pre-study and multi entry visas available. It is renewable every year. A visa application is obtained from embassy/ consulate and documents including an invitation letter from the university need to be taken or mailed to the embassy or consulate. need to be submitted. Requests for an interview may be made</p>	<p>Registration with the Department of Foreign Travel & Exit is required within three days of arrival. Residence permit can be applied for before entry to the country from an embassy or consulate.</p>

Synthesis of international experience

Enrolment

The research revealed considerable support for student enrolments via institutional or national portals. The following synthesis tries to aggregate the main findings from the table above.

➤ *Major worldwide recruiting nations*

The driving force for this group of universities is the financial dependency on international systems and delegation of responsibilities to the universities. In all cases the university solely offered a student a place and inform the authorities but do not seek permission prior to doing so. This process is monitored, and sanctions can be provided by removal of this delegated status. Indeed, inappropriate behaviour on the part of one traditional UK university has recently been reported but only one university has had its licence to operate within this system suspended.

Once the university accepts the enrolment, the student applies for a visa; all this is conducted online, allowing the student to track progress. All three retain the option for an interview (the USA insisting upon it) and require biometric details. The visa also acts as a residency permit for the student.

➤ *Main European competitors*

This batch of countries offers resemblances to Georgia as they have similar international student numbers and are emerging as post-soviet nations. In general, they are not as digitised as the first group and receive online applications whilst also still requiring actual documentation. Nearly all the examples given require the intervention of an authorising body for the appropriateness of the academic worth of the student and this body is under the control of their Ministry of Education. Estonia is different in that the letter of acceptance comes directly from the University. Further, at least one university in Lithuania has delegated acceptance status for online verification of qualifications along the line of the top three. Overall, the processes are similar to Georgia, but university acceptance is evident on **Estonia** and **Lithuania**. For all countries except Armenia the 'study in xxx' website is a central feature of attracting students and enabling them to find universities and to begin the application process.

➤ *Emerging competitors*

The two nations reviewed have systems which ease the duration of application and the decision-making process for students. This does give greater power to the university and is a digitised enrolment system. The enrolment processes are reported, by the agents, as being less rigorous and more amenable to student recruitment needs than other systems which may highlight the desire of the country to expand their growth of international students. (This was not possible to verify). Furthermore, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan offer scholarships which are attractive to students and promote these as well as the higher education structure of their country widely and at ministerial level.

Summary

Overall, there is a growing trend in digitisation and allowing universities to make final assessments on student acceptance. Such trends will make digitisation the norm for Georgia's competitors and acceptance of the verification of student documentation at the university level is emerging but at a slower rate. This is recognised in part by the NCEQE in their proposal for a digitised verification of qualifications and offer confirmation of an offer of a place for the student in Georgia. However, they

do not seem to be preparing to change the process by retaining their centrality to the process, not absenting itself from it.

Change is likely to be required in the Georgian system if the enrolment process is to enable the country, and its universities, to be more efficient, remain competitive and to seek increases in their international student enrolments

Visa and residency permits

The process for the issue of visa and residency permit are related to security issues, not academic. It is an important element in student choice as highlighted in a recent AMBER³¹ survey where it stated “the ease of obtaining a student visa and the length of time it takes can influence the decision of international students to study in a particular country” (2023).

➤ *Major worldwide recruiting nations*

The three world-leading recruitment countries have digitised their systems, which enables students to apply from anywhere in the world. The USA, however, requires interviews in person, the UK retains the right to do this, and Australia has moved to online interviews, thus being the first nation where the students can complete their full admission requirement online.

➤ *Main European competitors*

In those nations designated as competitors the process for visa application on-line plus physical documentation - at the visit to an appropriate centre are similar to the requirements of Georgia. The position in **Armenia** looks more flexible, with the tourist visa being the entry requirement and residency permit has to be applied for using documents, as the other countries require which have already been submitted to various ministries. Competitive advantage comes from speed of processing and issue of visa. More efficient planning with the universities as to which countries they will recruit and clearly security guidelines might increase the efficiency of the existing process. The Georgian use of VFS in India seems to have assisted, giving wider geographical opportunities for students to submit visa applications and documents and this model may be worthy of wider expansion³².

Residency permits also have similarities but given the small number of rejections for Georgia shown in figure 12 do not seem to be a negative part of the recruitment process

➤ *Emerging competitors*

In the countries listed the visa system is not fully digitised and follows the process of submission requirements. In Kazakhstan the permit is the visa, in Uzbekistan registering at another for a residency permit.

Summary

Other than the more digitised system of the major players for international student visas, much of how the visa and residency permits issuance are structured have similarities. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan seem more restrictive, less responsive and more traditionally Soviet. For Georgia, this presents an opportunity to put students at the centre of the process by radical reviewing the form of

³¹ International Student Enrolment : Recent Trends & Statistics, [International Student Enrolment : Recent Trends & Statistics | Amber News \(amberstudent.com\)](#). Amber is a long-term accommodation booking platform for students

³² Attempt to benchmark the Georgia process through the expertise of VFS have been attempted but a request for an interview has not been responded to. A request from the MFA might be more successful.

engagement with the student by rationalising the use of a single collection of student documents and speeding up the whole process. This requires proactive collaboration within Government ministries, not to better coordinate visa and residency permit issuance with enrolment but to redesign around the separate processes as one, around the needs of the students.

Recommendations - Student at the Centre of the process³³

The recommendations from the Report are clustered into two sectors. These are based on the trend analysis and the desk and primary research undertaken for the Report, then subsequently applied under three scenarios, after discussing the potential for the increases in the private sector, where recommendations are also made. The need for these changes are not just contingent on the need for an increased growth rate of enrolment, but to maintain the current trends. They are challenges which if not dealt with could negatively affect the current flow and stability of students, as other countries more readily put the needs of international students at the core of their enrolment strategies. The process is even more important if Georgia intends to seek to increase the number of international students and expand the range of its offering to them from medicine for Indian students.

The suggestions are based on all the research data collected in the report from international sources and from the stakeholders in the Georgia process.

Suggested Changes to enhance the recruitment process.

1. The process should become student centred and documentary evidence of their nationality and verification of their documents should be done once.
2. The verification process could be changed, placing more responsibility onto the university which might be delegated by the MOES under licence to the university. These changes to the system would certainly ease the enrolment process by speeding it up and removing the requirement for the NCEQE to be involved directly, although they may monitor the licencing agreements. To reduce risk, the Ministry could add additional verification standards or criteria to the license requirements. The government might require protective mechanisms to avoid any problematic cases or misunderstanding and these would have to be discussed. As suggested legal reforms to expedite and economize the credential recognition process recognising the student not the process as the priority can be implemented.
3. The university would then deal with the MFAs and be the owners of the students' documents, thus reducing any need for the student to present documentation again. The role of VSF would be in offering advice on the process of application to Universities and could be extended beyond India.
4. Visas should be issued electronically to international students without the need to enter them in their passports; the communication to register the student with the MOES and the MFAs should be digitised to facilitate speed and student should not need to evidence their documentations when applying for a visa as they have previous done to the University, which now acts with only one ministry, the MFA on behalf of the student. This is in line with the legal recommendations Legislative amendments are recommended to streamline the visa application process, advocating for the introduction of an online application system to enhance efficiency and transparency.

³³ These are made without sight of the process recommendations, or the policy recommendation undertaken by the national consultant appointed to this project.

5. Residency permits should be issued as part of the visa, with the university verifying the address of the student and reporting to the ministry of justice. This would remove the requirement for landlords to be involved directly in the process. For those not requiring visas, the existing process would pertain. This would need greater cooperation between the MFA, the Ministry of Justice and the university.
6. Student recruitment plans could be shared with the MFA so they can anticipate recruitment numbers and locations and so prepare to build resources for the expected flow of this request. This would require close communication between the ministries and universities, so that planning could be more accurate. This would require working with the universities to suggest other sustainable target recruitment countries.

Suggested General recommendations

The recommendations below are based on the challenges identified in the Report to increase the number of international quality students in Georgia to enhance both educationally and economically. The recommendations assume a dynamic open system including educational, social, economic and political forces, both within and external to, Georgia.

The key policy recommendations are to strengthen the processes of students' entrance into Georgian higher education institutions in ways which are clear, transparent and flexible.

The core recommendation is that the Government should set a clear objective regarding making Georgia a sustainable hub for international students (given its attractiveness to Ukraine students³⁴) as an important priority for the country's economic development. The following recommendations are subsidiary to that and reflect the Government's role in the change and funding support for the sector.

1. Visibility enhancement

- a) Develop an action plan and activities to promote Georgia as a desirable study destination (global engagement) revitalise the 'Study in Georgia' website;
- b) Establish an action plan and activities to market Georgian universities effectively in the international education market (marketing and outreach).

The Government's "Study in Georgia" program has led, according to one respondent to our survey, to the increase in the number of international students. The programme supports marketing activities and raises awareness of Georgia as a study destination.

2. Diversify its higher education provision

Develop ways to support new and existing higher education institutions, in order to increase their range of educational products, targeted at a wider geographical base of students. Support such as recruitment fairs in countries which are likely to not offer a security risk, but from where students can be recruited, or the provision of further arrangements to help ease applications. Also, there could be support for non-medical courses such as business and IT. Here allowance on equipment, allowing faculty to be permanent without a-Ph.D. but with professional degrees at the highest level of their profession, supporting an international faculty to come to Georgia to offer courses, or greater support for joint degrees with other nations, could all help.

³⁴ Kazakhstan is actively seeking such a hub with the Education Ministry, promoting such an international position.

3. Structural

With a number of Ministries involved in enabling international students to study in Georgia, a more accountable, integrated and coherent system would bring efficiencies, enhance quality and emphasise security. The World Bank stated that “There is no structured approach to exploit the Georgian potential to attract foreign students” (2018:38), and this might now be considered. This lack of focus seems pertinent as there seem no specific reference to international student recruitment and experience as a strategic imperative in the Unified National Strategy 2022-2030 or in its first monitoring Report. For example, such an agency has been recommended in Australia where the new Tertiary Education Commission (TEC) will coordinate universities as a system to meet national goals, especially around labour market needs and ‘equity group’ enrolment shares. The UK also has an overriding international student strategy set by government. Both these initiatives are aware of the implication for institutional autonomy within their higher education sectors.

This centre could be more responsive to data request from investors and help ensure efficient and ethical practice from universities and their agents. It would be able to harmoniously link the practices of universities with the global strategy of Government, resulting in consistency and coherence. This is evident in the reduction of the proposed medical schools and their current dependency on international students. A central international student centre might achieve this and would signal to stakeholders the importance Government places on this sector. The initial priorities of such a centre would be to address and coordinate a national strategy and especially:

- **Digital Document Submission for Qualification Verification:** Implementing an online portal for document submission should be the next immediate step. This reduces the administrative burden and speeds up the qualification verification process.
- **Fast-Track Visa Processing:** This should be a top priority to address immediately. Streamlining visa processing will attract more international students quickly, as it directly impacts their ability to travel and study. The UK has recently introduced a two-year graduate visa to allow for full-time employment in the UK. According to the leading university association, this has increased international student applicants. Although on a different scale, such a plan for Georgia might be worth consideration.

PART TWO

Private universities and Georgia’s higher education market

Government and markets are inextricably linked. Government sets the legal and institutional frameworks within which markets operate. If Government wants to encourage the market to deliver particular products and services for wider social benefit, it has a number of options at its disposal: indirect participation in private markets through regulation, taxation, subsidy or other influences such as authorisation of institutions, the rights this confers and the support it provides. Significantly, these can also be restricted, so as to make market entry onerous, through regulations that can produce constraints on the growth. One such example might be in the recruitment, visa and residency regulations which, through *de jure* legislation could act as a facilitator to market entry and subsequent growth but *de facto* delivery embedded in bureaucratic process can make participation difficult. Importantly, however, a government’s stance on the entry of private higher education into its education market must respect the quality and educational reputation of its existing market so as not

to disrupt maintain the flow of students and to ensure that market exists, is proportionate to the responsibilities of the private supply of education to their students.

Private higher education and its financing

In many countries private universities sit outside of state direct funding and raise the majority of their running costs through tuition fees (which may be provided all or in part by the State), endowments, and competitive research grants, State or private. Private universities are clustered as Non-profit and For-profit providers. The basic difference is that the Non-profit providers circulate the surplus they make after costs for the benefit of the university, while For-profit distribute their profits among the institution's owners, investors, and shareholders. Non-profits are run either by charities or limited liability companies and have a public rather than public interest. However, such clearly cut distinctions between all forms of institutions are now, under a neo-liberal political agenda, blurred as is the consequential governance structure, as each seeks the maximum return to support their mission. Private and public are regulated for the most part by the same degree-awarding powers and are bound by many of the same standards that apply to public universities. They may (and often do) receive from governments: tax breaks, public student loans, fees and research grants. Not all private higher education has the same aim. In many parts of the world, the purpose is focused on vocational specialisations, particularly in business and economics. In some countries, the focus of private higher education is non-secular.

The idea that private universities should exist based on the attraction of international student as its main aim clearly influences their recruitment, quality, governance and financial strategies and may neglect any contribution to domestic provision which may be more stable. The rationale for this is that international students will pay higher fees than in their home country as their domestic supply does not meet the demand, or that there is reputational benefit in receiving an education in another educational and prestigious environment³⁵. It may be problematic for government and the existing stability of the market to consider encouraging universities to enter the market sole to capitalise, or exploit, the positive pricing differential in favour of international students.

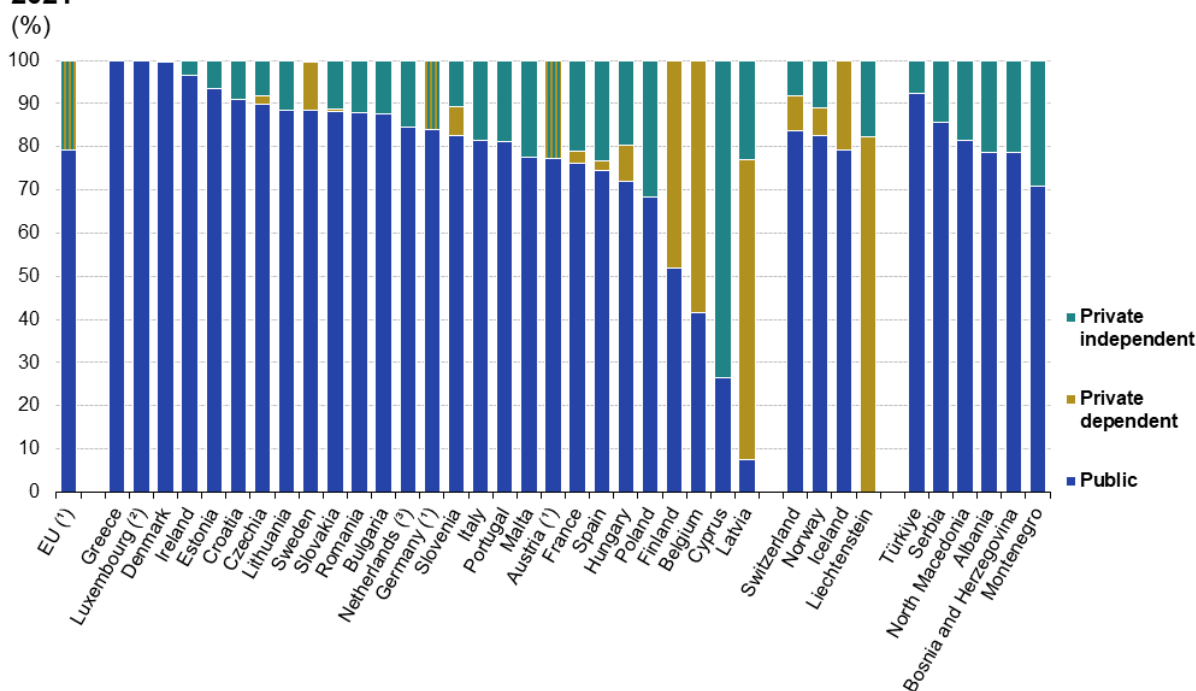
Private Higher education in Europe

According to Eurostat in the EU, the vast majority (79.2%) of tertiary education students in 2021 were taught in public institutions. In three Member States, a minority of tertiary education students were studying in public institutions in 2021: in Belgium, the share was just over two-fifths, with students in private institutions almost exclusively in government-dependent private institutions³⁶; in Cyprus, the share was around one-quarter, with students in private institutions exclusively in independent private institutions; in Latvia, the share was less than one-tenth, with students in private institutions mainly in government-dependent private institutions, although independent private institutions did account for nearly one-quarter of all tertiary students.

³⁵ An alternative is something called transnational higher education centre where an established supplier from a foreign country (Nottingham University for instance) sets up a campus in a host country bringing it reputation and often staff with it. Higher education centres may consist of a number of universities from different countries and can prove very attractive, as the Dubai International Academic City proves.

³⁶ Independent institutions have no government support such as students qualifying for loans to study.

Distribution of students in tertiary education by type of institution, 2021



(1) Enrolments in independent private institutions are negligible and reported with value zero.

(2) Estimate.

(3) Data for private dependent and private independent are combined.

Source: Eurostat (online data code: educ_uoe_enr01)

eurostat

Financing of higher education

The financing of higher education today is broadly divided into two groups of countries. Countries in Western Europe are predominately public in provision and account for the majority of students (although this is changing in the UK) and countries in North America, Eastern Europe, Central Asia, Latin America, and Africa maintain public and private sectors in higher education. The key difference between these two systems is that in the former category of countries, efficiency is thought to be accomplished by instilling competition within the public system, and in the latter category of countries, efficiency is thought to be accomplished by an open competition between public and private institutions.

The literature indicates that there is a growing plurality, where an increasing realisation has occurred that there is room for reforms to improve efficiency of whole higher education systems irrespective of the ownership and management of the institutions within it. However, this would assume a homogeneous concept of control over the system which might be anathema to private with-profit ownership based on a free market model. Compromise is then needed by Government when it wants to protect the quality of higher education it nationally provides and is prepared to support all accredited institutions through certain levels of funding. In doing so, it sees the higher sector not as a free market, but one which, through its mixed natures, is able cost effectively to serve the educational and economic needs of the nation. This seems to be the approach of Georgia. It has embraced a significant number of systematic changes across all institutions in the sector. To do this with the whole system of salary and other incentives need to be competitive; the system of authorisation needs to be compatible with from public authorities and the system of curriculum (*Internationalisation at Home* as advocated in the Ministry's strategic plan 2022-2030) the setting of standards needs to be

developed to the level of international standards. For example, where rigid regulations and regulations exist, there is private higher education in name only, where “the institutions remain constrained by public regulation” (Oketch, 2023:133). This is an issue to be explored in terms of the flexibility and responsiveness of the quality control of Georgian higher education and is not discussed here.

Four further elements are crucial to guiding the infrastructure of a conducive environment for private education. First, there must be wider sharing of information across institutional and geographic lines. Private investors need reliable information to make profitable investments (such as attrition rates of students), and higher education administrators must become more familiar with the intricacies of private finance. The second factor is legislative reform, to promote and regulate private finance. Many countries will have to address the tax treatment of philanthropy, the regulation of securitization, and the governance of public-private partnerships. Thirdly, what government can offer in terms of other incentives: e.g. land, tax mechanisms or research funding grants, access to State fees arrangements and information to facilitate student decision making such as metrics of teaching quality and employability in host and home markets. Fourth, the provision of a sustainable market which has potential to grow plus a reliable, robust infrastructure which supports the flow of students within a competitive marketplace.

The literature on private universities is very limited with regards to incentives being used to ensure ease of entry into higher education markets and is predicated on the need for new suppliers to supplement limited supply of provision for a nation’s domestic needs. This is not the case in Georgia. Using studies from UNESCO and the world bank reveals little if anything about the incentives that countries have offered to investors to locate private universities in their countries. There is plenty of literature on the governance of private universities (Bradford, 2001), description of international arrangements especially in Asia (Varghese and Panigrahi, 2023) and Africa (UNESCO, 2006) and Levy (2108), and some discussion on how incentives can change the structure of higher education (Varghese, 2004). Where there is evidence, it is dependent on tax regimes providing pecuniary benefits related to intervention to secure desired State shaping the market.

Georgia

The regulatory framework for higher education institutions, including private universities, is governed by the Law of Georgia on Higher Education and overseen by the National Centre for Educational Quality Enhancement (NCEQE) The scope and success of the private sector in Georgia has been analysed in a recent Galt and Taggart Report (2023). This Report indicates that private with-profit providers account for just over 70% of higher education institutions in Georgia (50% with profit non-profit 20 %) and 40 % of student enrolments. That private provider student numbers are, on average, considerably smaller than public institutions and fees are higher than State even with qualifying students benefiting from state subsidies and they are freer than State institutions to raise fee levels. Moreover, they have CAGR of 12.15% growth rate in revenues from 2010-2022 with net profit margins per year of the largest university of over 27.1%.³⁷. Such attractive returns should of course signal a

³⁷ These figures are for three years 2019, 2020 and 2021 are calculated by Galt & Taggart and show over 50% increases in net profit margins for the last two years. As is the shown earlier in this Report, these years are times of or exceptional growth and its continuance is yet to be confirm. Given the 2019 figure of 20.9% may be high, it has proven too difficult to bench mark these returns against other sources of information.

warning that the composition of the sector might change from private investors to equity fund investors³⁸).

The Law is structured to facilitate entry and the growth in the number of private higher education institutions is evidence of this. Investors are likely to be interested in not just the flow of international students, but from domestic ones whose numbers are more reliable and predictable. The Georgian Law on Higher Education Law (2004) especially deals with the existence and compliance of private legal entities which seek to be accredited as higher education and offer some or all levels of degree qualifications. Article 12 of the Law stipulates that the “status of a higher education institution may be acquired, and corresponding educational activities may be carried out only in the case of acquiring authorisation,” therefore in accordance with the processes determined by the authorisation. This clearly puts operational control within the Ministry and does not differentiate between private and public duties or institutions in terms of obligation. The requirements of such are contained within Article 58³⁹ setting out the documents to be submitted to MoES and a decision is required within three months. The documentation does in principle seem appropriate, prudent, and unlikely to defer a private entity from applying and there seem little or no barriers to entry for new providers entering the market, providing they justify due diligence. The same seems to be the case if licences are revoked or a suspension of the licence granted by the Ministry is outlined in detail, but the consequences of such action on students and their protections is not outlined.

As the critical issue of income is fees, then the Law which enables domestic students to receive the state education grant (Article 80:4) is important. There is considerable flexibility in how private institutions may set their price beyond the level of the agreed State grant and this mechanism is market controlled. These rights are enshrined in Article 81 of the Law of Georgia on Higher Education.

If a private institution wishes to exist the market, the Georgia law requires certain action to protect the students’ interests, the specifics of these arrangements depending on existing agreements between institutions and the policies set forth by NCEQE. These legal requirements and procedures must be adhered to, particularly concerning the provision of alternative study placements for existing students. It is typically required to ensure that its current students can continue and complete their education. This might involve arranging transfer agreements with other institutions where students can continue their studies without significant disruption. The university is usually responsible for facilitating this transfer process, including credit recognition and ensuring that students do not incur additional financial burdens due to the transfer. Such processes are covered by clarification of law such as the Minister of Education and Science of Georgia Order No10/5 (2010)

Suggested forms of incentives for new entries for the Georgian higher education market.

How governments choose to regulate private provision varies, depending upon the perspective of whether such providers are seen as partners in meeting the country’s overall demand for education or whether such providers are seen in more negative terms, requiring excessive

³⁸ There is a warning explored by Eaton et al. (2020), who discovered increased cost to students dependent on student fee subsidiaries from Government leading to higher profits but lower graduation rates and poorer quality.

³⁹ These requirements are as follows. Documents to Be Submitted to Obtain a License. To obtain a license, higher education institutions seeking the license shall submit to the Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia the following documents: (a) Charter of the higher education institution; (b) Educational programmes and curriculum; (c) Information about academic personnel indicating their number and documents certifying their qualifications; (d) Estimates of costs required to maintain the educational process; (e) Information on material and technical resources; (f) Information on workplace security and sanitary/hygienic conditions; (g) A statement issued by a banking institution regarding the actual amount of the funds (equity capital) in the account of a license seeker at the time of applying for the license.

restrictions. The underlying question is framed by issues of access and quality. Governments want to provide increased access to education opportunities, while at the same time ensuring such opportunities are of equal or higher quality than that found in the public sector⁴⁰.

Given a desire to increase private institutions in the higher education sector within a national strategy on higher education Government could act in the following ways:

- Use its tax system to first enable the setting up of new institutions through tax breaks on land purchases in designated development areas outside Tbilisi, gifting land or leasing land and in so doing take an interest in the profitability of the new university. This is a practice the Government has done previously but not, as far as I know, for education. Since 2016, (according to the world Bank), all private for-profit universities are exempted from paying profit taxes in cases where profits are invested in the university development. The government might also consider exempting student scholarship fee from tax.
- Giving tax breaks on the upgrading or the purchase of equipment to ensure high quality resources and teaching environment for priority sectors such as IT and science. It may also consider developing teacher training requirements for universities to improve the reputation of the sector. The Government is already able to, and gives, VAT exemption of certain category transactions without the right of deduction for educational services. Also, property tax exemptions under Article 206 of the Tax Code could be available to private institutions. These changes may require changes in the Code governing tax.
- Assist in the support given to all universities but, because of the distribution of international students in private universities, aiding recruitment of students through increasing efficiency in the application process by improving the registration, visa and residency issue to students which is Reported as a competitive advantage of other nations such as Russia and Kazakhstan students (see footnote below). Advertising and Promotion: Government support in advertising the country as an education destination to boost recruitment efforts and through coordinating collaborative campaigns and funding for marketing initiatives can help attract more international students. They may also offer financial support for institutions participating in educational fairs and exhibitions. Finally, by bringing a focus to all activities across Government, they can facilitate partnerships between educational institutions, government bodies, and local businesses to create a conducive environment for international students. This may be done through the 'Study in Georgia' initiative.
- Consider investigating transnational suppliers to set up campuses (although this may well disrupt the current market dynamics) as is the case with San Diego State University and the establishment of the International University of Kutaisi in cooperation with the Technical University of Munich, as a regional centre of excellence and the planned development of The French-Georgian University⁴¹.

Closing comment

The Report suggests that there is a need to upgrade the processes of enrolment and visa and residency permit issuance. These processes are the subject of a different Report. However, this recommendations made here are based on the need to sustain current business levels in a competitive environment and not based on a increased growth project of recruitment based on these changes. This is because data was not available to the project to fully understand the trends in recruitment in such volatile times. It is also very difficult to project the impact of positive efficiencies

⁴⁰ A slightly dated survey of government and private higher education provision is 'The entry and experience of private providers of higher education in six countries' (2016).

⁴¹ The government of Kazakhstan is reported to be actively pursuing a status of a regional hub for higher education (Kuzhabekova, 2023).

in the process of recruitment of international student when so many other variables not subject to the report will directly impact upon the process. In this respect the specific strategy for the development of international student recruitment is advocated. This strategy would aim at expanding international student populations on university campuses while maintaining the goals of cost, quality, and diversity is a complex optimization problem. It requires assessment of institutional goals, priorities, and capacities; investigation of student needs, profiles, and experiences; and, finally, mapping institutional and individual needs through a comprehensive strategy.

PART THREE

Strategic scenarios

The progress made in the expansion of provision for international students has been rapid. In presenting these three scenarios, it should not be ignored and as in most expansions of services, the initial stage occurs somewhat serendipitously, but at latter stages of the market development more cohesive and radical plans are required. To do this, more work is needed to increase confidence in the sector and in investors to engage in such a market expansion strategy, but should this be done well, the grounding already achieved offers reasons to be optimistic.

Based the previous content of the Report and the expanded workshop data three different and short scenario are discussed:

- Scenario – where the current situation is left unchanged;
- Scenario – make short term, painless/easy changes and how this might change the situation and what these changes might bring;
- Scenario – make long-term changes that might have affect the whole sector and how these changes might affect the internalization of higher education systems.

➤ Scenario 1

Under such a scenario there is poor communication between ministries, reactive rather than proactive engagement with capacity issues relating to recruitment and visa issues which will endanger Georgia's competitive position. Other countries seem to give greater and core support for their universities' efforts to recruit international students with recruitment campaigns and student sponsorship through scholarships. These approaches are clearest demonstrated in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Bulgaria. These countries match or are cheaper in terms of fees and cost of living than Georgia and promote themselves as safe countries. Agents, students and international managers' report easier, smoother and faster recruitment processes. Some have international student strategic priorities.

Given Georgia's current reliance on one core discipline of medicine and one core recruitment, these together make them vulnerable to change in student perception of quality, increased cost to provider, better high-quality resources and other facilities such as accommodation (perhaps dormitories). The poor supply of relevant data which could influence new institutional investors entrance into the market is also problematic. There is also a significant geopolitical risk of being so dependent on one nation as a source of students.

The consequences of doing nothing may be minimal but are likely to risk the current market as students return home with concerns about recommending students in their home markets, especially if their student experience once they arrive in Georgia does not match their expectation. This may extend to perceived cultural differences regarding their assimilation into society, concerns over accommodation and treatment which may seem unfair.

➤ Scenario 2

The external context remains the same in this scenario as in the above, but the internal changes ameliorate some of the application system by being more student centred, rationalising existing processes, the worst short-term impacts on recruitment could be ameliorated. These changes are those made in the recommendations and deal with the verification of qualifications, visa and residency permit issues. They make the process smoother and avoid expensive duplication (for

students and ministries) and create a more responsive attitude toward the universities involved in recruitment. Enhancements to the 'Study Georgia' website would be important .

Strategic changes which recognise the importance of the sector and its contribution to the economy can be enhanced by the provision of more compelling and timely data on the sector and an investor focus ought to encourage greater interest in the sector. These changes would include the approval of the digitisation of communication between universities, students and ministries and a review and potential reengineering of the current processes which makes up the recruitment system.

How critical this will be is an understanding of the growth potential of the market which is currently unsustainable but without which, the risk to Georgian education for medical students remains. Should the Government encourage universities with help in finding resources to diversify their offering to students, then greater stability will come to the market and increased potential for student growth over the base level assumed in Scenario 1.

➤ **Scenario 3**

This scenario is predicated on a belief that Georgia can become an educational hub on the belt and road pathway. If Georgia could secure such a position for a range of services of which higher education could be one, then expansion of student numbers would exceed current capacity and more investors would be attracted to the market. This would require an ambitious plan to proactively attract students from many nations into a wider range of subjects. It would require investment from Government to improve its infrastructure and its support of higher education. The platform for such expansion needs to be built now on the strategic vision developed, not based on opportunistic benefits of higher fees students, but on a viable, coherent educational offering which is sustainable, of high quality and has wide appeal (that is not to deny that niche market development is possible but in the case of medicine and the geo-politic concerns of a dominant student source from India, it is prudent to build a wider base.

If Georgia can build an imaginative education sector which has originality and synergies by bringing the cultures and knowledges of the East and West together, then a massive increase in potential is possible, like that of higher education hubs such as those in United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Malaysia, Singapore, and Hong Kong This approach creates a dedicated space for “international higher education and mobility of students” (Wang, 2023). The hub status might, bring new international partnerships, new binational universities, and new modes of program delivery. This requires adequate “frameworks for regulation and localisation of transnational higher education need to be introduced and further developed. Too permeable systems can attract dubious providers and create incongruity with local higher education systems, negatively impacting branch campuses’ quality and their effects on the economy” (Rottleb et al, 2022). This long-term challenge which involves vision, investment in infrastructure and other resources might be possible for Georgia, but the competition will be formidable.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 - Participants who attended discussion or workshops grateful.

Appendix 2 - Rejection rates of visa per country-of-origin 2023.

Appendix 3 - Students Survey.

Appendix 4 - International Mangers Survey.

Appendix 1:

Participants who attended discussion or workshops grateful

NCEQE:

- Lasha Margishvili - Deputy Director;
- Nikoloz Pardjanadze - Head of Higher Education Quality Development Service;
- Lasha Zivzivadze - head of planning, research and international relations department;

MoES:

- Nino Tsereteli - Head of the Department of Higher Education and Science Development.

MFA:

- Giorgi Kavtaradze – Consular

Participants of the Workshops

International Directors/Managers representing the Universities with international programmes

#	Name	University
1	Ketevan Boiko	Ilia State University
2	Tako Laghidze	Caucasus International University
3	Ketevan Bibilashvili	Ken Walker International University
4	Tea Imedadze	East European University (EEU)
5	Ani Amiranashvili	Alte University
6	Nana Kurshubadze	Batumi Shota Rustaveli State University
7	Lasha Chakhvadze	European University
8	Eka Zarginava	European University
9	Nino Urushadze	Georgian National University SEU
10	Kira Kitsmarishvili	New Vision
11	Ivanna Machitidze	New Vision
12	Nino Aptsiauri	Tbilisi State Medical University
13	Tinatin Kilasonia	Tbilisi State Medical University
14	Anano Tsitaishvili	Georgian-American University
15	Tatia Rusia	Georgian-American University
16	Tamta Tskitishvili	Black Sea University
17	Mariam Revazishvili	University of Georgia
18	Mariam Murachashvili	Caucasus University
19	Shorena Gogiashvili	Sulkhan-Saba Orbeliani University
20	Giorgi Svanidze	David Tvildiani Medical University
21	Data Tvildiani	David Tvildiani Medical University
22	Giorgi Nizharadze	BAU International University

International Students

#	Name	University
1	Abhishek Sinah	Alte University
2	Chitransh Gupta	Alte University
3	Rushikesh Patil	Alte University
4	Yash Pradeep Dhage	Alte University

5	Disha Pankaj Gujarathi	East European University
6	Shukur Walid Rashad	Caucasus International University
7	Teh Micheil	Caucasus International University
8	Mohammed Abdullah	Ilia state University
9	Razan Osman	Ilia state University
10	Sanya Singh	GAU
11	Mostafa Neouchi	GAU
12	Ivan Pitra	IBSU
13	Anna Busse	IBSU
14	Niranjana Veenak	Caucasus University
15	Dilshana Akavalappil	Caucasus University
16	Eva Voldochinskaya	Caucasus University
17	Mohith Boppana	SEU
18	Charvi Bhatnagar	SEU
19	Tala Sakran	Ken Walker International University
20	Abdul Aziz Khaleelullah	Ken Walker International University
21	Muhammad Umar Zia	Tbilisi State Medical University
22	Amina Gihiazuddin Shair	Tbilisi State Medical University
23	Mostafa Yassin	New Vision University
24	Neel Chavda	New Vision University
25	Geovany Bernardo	IBSU
26	Alvaro Jaao	IBSU

Appendix 2:

Rejection rates of visa per country-of-origin 2023

Citizenship	Successfully completed	Rejected
Afghanistan	3	4
Algeria	9	0
Angola	2	1
United Arab Emirates	5	0
in Bangladesh	43	11
Benin	1	0
Bhutan	1	0
Egypt	282	41
Iraq	16	6
Zambia	2	0
Zimbabwe	6	13
Turkmenistan	1	0
Jamaica	5	0
Japan	1	0
Yemen	44	20
India	6027	143
Indonesia	1	1
Jordan	3	3
Iran	47	10
Cambodia	1	0
Catarrh	1	0
Kenya	2	3
Ivory Coast	1	1
Comoros Islands	2	0
Cuba	1	0
Lebanon	3	1
Liberia	2	0
Libya	2	4
Mauritania	4	0
Malawi	2	0
Maldives	6	0
Morocco	11	0
Myanmar	10	1
Mozambique	0	3
Namibia	1	4
Nepal	7	3
Nigeria	130	242
Senegal	1	0
Saudi Arabia	2	1
Sierra Leone	2	1

Syria	1	17
Somalia	7	9
Sudan	223	90
Kingdom of Eswatini	2	4
Pakistan	232	117
Rwanda	0	1
Tanzania	3	4
Trinidad and Tobago	1	0
Tunisia	18	2
Sri Lanka	44	1
go down	1	0
China	8	2
Ghana	2	9
Commonwealth of Dominica	4	0
Eritrea	3	2
Saint Kitts and Nevis		
Saint Lucia	1	0
Djibouti	2	1
A stateless person	20	18
Refugee status	7	10
	7,269	804

Appendix 3:

Students Survey questions:

1. Was Georgia your first choice destination?

Yes		No	
-----	--	----	--

If no which other countries did you consider?

--

2. Please rank the following (where 1 is the most important) as the reasons you selected your institution

FEATURE	RANK
The safety of the country	
The reputation of the university sector	
The reputation of the specific institutions	
Course fees	
Availability of accommodation	
The cost of living in the country	
The ease of the process and regulations	
The language of instruction	
The quality of the course	
The reputation of the country's educational system	

Please expand your ranking here

--

3. What were the most difficult issues you faced in gaining a place at your university?

4. How satisfied were you with the process to gaining entry to the Country (Visa etc)?

5. What were the most difficult issues you faced in this process and how did you overcome them?

6. Has your experience of learning in Georgia matched your expectations? Please state how it has been met and how it has failed to meet your expectations.

MY DETAILS

I am studying in a Private/State University

In what region of Georgia:

--

I am studying:

--

What year are you in your course:

Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5

Appendix 4:

International Mangers Survey

1. How important are international students to your growth target? Please indicate which is closest to your view

Critical	Significant	Neutral	Not significant	Not important

2. In you marketing strategy how important are each of these marking activities

Local Agents

Critical	Significant	Neutral	Not significant	Not important

3. Exhibitions

Critical	Significant	Neutral	Not significant	Not important

4. Website

Critical	Significant	Neutral	Not significant	Not important

5. School or other local visits:

Critical	Significant	Neutral	Not significant	Not important

6. How do you select and monitor your agents?

7. How do you incentivise and motivate your agents?

8. Do you get any Government support or incentives in any of these activities? If so, which are the most help, if not what would be the most helpful.

9. From your knowledge of the processing of students; qualification verification, visas and language competence, how could this process be improved to make it easier for the students and for the university.

10. How would you, prioritise any changes you have suggested to support higher international recruitment both immediately and in the future.

11. Do you think your institution has the capacity, or could create the capacity, to increase international student numbers by the following? Please tick the box closest to your view:

0-10%	10-20%	20-30%	30-40%	40-50%	More

ANNEX 2:

**Desk Research Report of Legal Framework for the Accessibility of Higher
Education in Georgia for International Students**

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Executive Summary

This report provides a comprehensive desk research analysis and legal examination of the current regulatory framework governing international students' visa applications, admission processes, and study progression within Georgian higher education institutions. The overarching goal is to identify key areas within these processes that may benefit from legal amendments to streamline and enhance the experience for international students, while also aligning with international educational standards and best practices.

Key Findings:

- **Visa Application Process:** The visa application process is found to be complex and may present barriers to potential international students, which could impact the attractiveness of Georgia as an educational hub.
- **Admission Procedures:** While the admission procedures for international students are clearly defined, there is a lack of centralised information which can lead to confusion and inefficiency.
- **Study Process:** The academic structure is in line with the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), promoting mobility and recognition within the European Higher Education Area. However, the support for international students during their study period requires enhancement.
- **Recognition of Foreign Credentials:** The current system for the recognition of foreign education is rigorous, yet the procedures can be lengthy and costly, particularly under the accelerated options, potentially deterring applicants.

Recommendations:

- **Streamline Visa Application:** Simplify the visa application process for international students by introducing a digital platform that consolidates all necessary steps and documentation.
- **Centralised Admission Portal:** Develop a centralised admission portal for international students, providing clear guidelines, support, and transparency throughout the application process.
- **Support Services Enhancement:** Establish a robust support system for international students, including mentorship programs, cultural integration services, and language assistance.
- **Recognition Process Efficiency:** Reevaluate the fee structure and timescale for the recognition of foreign credentials, aiming to make it more accessible and less time-consuming, without compromising the rigorous standards of verification.
- **By implementing these recommendations, Georgia can significantly improve its competitive stance in the international education market, attract a larger cohort of international students, and ensure that the educational experiences provided are enriching and globally recognized.**

1. Introduction

Context and Importance of the Topic

In an increasingly globalised world, the movement of students across borders for higher education is a significant aspect of international educational exchange. This flow of academic talent not only enriches the educational environment but also contributes to the cultural and economic dynamism of the host country. Georgia, situated at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, has the potential to become

a significant player in the international education sector. The nation's academic institutions offer a unique blend of Eastern and Western educational traditions, appealing to a diverse international student body. However, the effectiveness of its regulatory framework pertaining to international students is crucial for facilitating and nurturing this potential. The processes of visa application, admission, and the study trajectory for international students are fundamental areas that directly influence Georgia's attractiveness as an educational destination.

Objectives of the Report

The objectives of this report are multifield:

- **Assessment:** To assess the current legal and regulatory framework of Georgia regarding visa applications, admission procedures, and the study process for international students.
- **Identification:** To identify challenges and bottlenecks that international students might face under the existing regulations and procedures.
- **Recommendations:** To propose legal amendments and policy recommendations aimed at streamlining procedures, removing unnecessary hurdles, and enhancing the overall experience for international students.
- **Alignment:** To align Georgia's educational framework with international best practices, thereby increasing its global educational competitiveness.

The fulfilment of these objectives is intended to contribute to the development of a more accessible, efficient, and student-centred higher education system in Georgia that can attract and retain international talent.

2. Methodology

The methodology section outlines the systematic approach taken to gather and analyse information for the purposes of this report. It delineates the research methods employed and the sources from which information was obtained.

Research Methods

The following research methods were employed to ensure a comprehensive analysis:

- **Desk Research:** An extensive review of existing official information and statements, legal documents, government regulations, and previous studies relevant to the higher education framework in Georgia. This method provided a baseline understanding of the current situation and historical context.
- **Legislative Analysis:** A thorough examination of Georgia's current laws, regulations, and policies that govern the admission and stay of international students. This included a review of visa requirements, the admission process, and the legal rights and responsibilities of international students during their study.
- **Comparative Analysis:** An evaluation of international benchmarks and best practices by examining the regulatory frameworks of countries known for their effective management of international student programs.
- **Stakeholder Engagement:** Informal interviews and discussions with key stakeholders, including university admissions officers and staff from the National Center for Educational Quality Enhancement. This helped in understanding the practical implications and operational challenges of the current framework.

- **Case Studies:** Analysis of a select number of case studies involving international students' experiences in Georgia. This provided insights into the real-world application of policies and identified areas needing improvement.

Sources of Information

To ensure the accuracy and relevance of information, the following sources were consulted:

- **Primary Legal Documents:** Examination of Georgian legislation, including the Law on Higher Education, immigration laws, and other regulatory documents issued by the Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia and the National Center for Educational Quality Enhancement.
- **Government Publications:** Analysis of reports, guidelines, and other publications from the Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.
- **Academic Institutions' Resources:** Review of admission guidelines, program structures, and international student handbooks provided by Georgian higher education institutions.
- **International Resources:** Consultation of documents and guidelines from international education standards and best practices (the mentioned method is used in the whole project, which also contributes to the creation of this report, despite the fact that this report refers to the analysis of existing national legislation).
- **Data Analysis:** Compilation and examination of statistical data regarding visa applications, acceptance rates, and international student demographics in Georgia (the mentioned method is used in the whole project, which also contributes to the creation of this report, despite the fact that this report refers to the analysis of existing national legislation).
- **Digital Platforms:** Use of online government portals and e-service websites.

The methodology employed ensures a balanced approach, combining theoretical analysis with practical insights, thereby providing a solid foundation for the recommendations made in this report.

3. Regulatory Framework Overview

This section provides an overview of the current legal and regulatory provisions that affect international students studying in Georgia, outlining the structure of the higher education system, visa application procedures, admission requirements, and conditions for the study process.

Higher Education System in Georgia

The higher education system in Georgia is comprised of three stages: bachelor's, master's, and doctoral programs. The system emphasises the alignment of educational outcomes with global cultural values, democratic principles, and the needs of the labour market.

- **Bachelor's Program:** Requires a state certificate confirming full general education or equivalent for admission and consists of at least 240 credits.
- **Master's Program:** Requires a bachelor's degree or equivalent for admission and consists of at least 120 credits.
- **Doctoral Program:** Requires a master's degree or equivalent for admission and has a duration of 3 years with a maximum study component of 60 credits.

The medical education system in Georgia follows a similar tiered structure but has some specific pathways and duration details that are often distinct from other fields of study due to the nature of medical training.

- **Medical Doctor Program (MD):** This is an integrated Bachelor's and Master's program that typically lasts for six years (360 credits). It leads to the qualification of a Medical Doctor. This program usually includes preclinical and clinical studies and it is designed to provide a comprehensive medical education.
- **Residency Programs:** After obtaining an MD degree, graduates can enter residency programs, which are considered postgraduate training. The length of residency programs in Georgia can vary depending on the specialty, usually ranging from three to six years. This is equivalent to specialty training and is where medical graduates become licensed physicians in their chosen field of specialty. However, it should be noted that recognition of postgraduate medical training (residency) obtained abroad is not under the scope of the National Center for Educational Quality Enhancement in Georgia.
- **Doctoral Programs (PhD):** Those who wish to pursue further academic or research-oriented careers in medicine may go on to doctoral studies. This requires a Master's degree or equivalent for admission and is often comprised of three years of study, with a focus on research leading to a dissertation.

Legal Basis for International Students

The legal basis for the admission of international students in Georgia is primarily underpinned by:

- The Georgian Law on Higher Education.
- The Georgian Law on Legal Status of Aliens and Stateless Persons.
- Regulations by the Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia.
- Standards set by the National Center for Educational Quality Enhancement.

Visa and Residence Permit Requirements

Citizens from countries that have a visa-free agreement with Georgia can enter and stay in the country for a short period without a visa. For longer stays, such as pursuing a full course of study, these students must apply for a residence permit once they are in Georgia.

Students from countries that do not have a visa exemption must apply for a 'D' category long-term study visa prior to arrival, which allows them to stay for the duration of their studies.

The application for a residence permit or study visa requires submission of various documents, including a valid passport, proof of admission from a recognized Georgian educational institution, evidence of financial means, and health insurance coverage.

Admission to Universities

The Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia sets the admission criteria for educational programs. Generally, international students are not required to take the Unified National Exams, which are intended for Georgian nationals.

Admission requirements for international students may include previous academic records, language proficiency evidence, and possibly specific entrance examinations or interviews as determined by the educational institutions.

Study Process Regulations

Once admitted, international students are subject to regulations concerning their studies and stay in Georgia, which include:

Student Rights and Responsibilities: These are detailed in the institutional policies of higher education providers and are in line with national educational standards.

Work Regulations: International students' ability to work while studying is often subject to restrictions outlined in their visa conditions.

Cultural Integration: Policies aimed at promoting the integration of international students into Georgian society and culture while also respecting their diversity.

Recognition of Foreign Education

The National Center for Educational Quality Enhancement is responsible for the recognition of foreign education credentials, which is a crucial process for international students who wish to continue their education in Georgia.

Summary

The regulatory framework in Georgia for international students is designed to integrate global educational standards while protecting national interests. It emphasises quality education, cultural values, and the preparation of individuals for the modern workforce. Challenges remain in terms of streamlining visa processes, aligning educational standards, and ensuring the successful cultural integration of international students.

3.1. Visa Application Process

This section presents a detailed analysis of the current visa application process for international students intending to study in Georgia.

Background

The visa application process for international students is a critical initial step in the journey to study in Georgia. It is regulated by the Georgian Law on the Legal Status of Aliens and Stateless Persons and managed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and its diplomatic missions abroad.

Current Visa Regulations for International Students

Georgia provides several types of visas, with the most relevant for international students being the 'D' category long-term visa, which is necessary for those intending to stay in the country for more than 90 days within any 180-day period. Students must apply for this visa after gaining admission to an authorised educational institution in Georgia.

The application process typically involves the following:

- **Invitation Letter:** Students need an official invitation from the educational institution.
- **Proof of Admission:** Evidence of acceptance into a Georgian higher education program.
- **Evidence of Financial Means:** Proof that the student can financially support themselves during their studies.
- **Accommodation Details:** Information about where the student will live while in Georgia.
- **Travel Insurance:** Valid insurance for the duration of the student's stay.

- Health Check: A document certifying the student's health status may be required.

Once granted, the 'D' visa usually allows students to apply for a residence permit, which is required for longer stays.

Application Procedure

- Submission of Application: Applicants must submit their visa applications to the Georgian embassy or consulate in their home country or via the e-VISA portal if available.
- Review and Decision: Once an application is submitted, it undergoes a review process. The decision to grant or deny a visa is made based on the provided documents and the compliance with the visa requirements.
- Issuance of Visa: If the application is approved, the visa is stamped or affixed to the applicant's passport.
- Entry into Georgia: With a valid visa, students can travel to Georgia. Upon arrival, they must apply for a residence permit to legalise their long-term stay for study purposes.

Processing Time

The standard processing time for Georgian visas can vary. Expedited processing options are available but entail additional fees. Students are advised to apply well in advance of their intended travel date to account for any delays.

Fees

Visa application fees are subject to change and may vary based on nationality, visa type, and processing time. Fees are payable in the local currency where the application is made or as directed by the Georgian embassy or consulate.

Challenges and Considerations

- Documentation: Students must ensure that all documents are translated into Georgian and notarized, which can be time-consuming and may require additional resources.
- Financial Proof: Demonstrating sufficient financial means can be a barrier for some students, and the criteria for what is considered 'sufficient' can sometimes be unclear.
- Consular Availability: In some regions, Georgian consular services may be limited or not easily accessible, complicating the application process.
- Cultural and Language Barriers: The application process and requirements may not be clearly communicated in the applicant's native language, leading to potential misunderstandings.
- Health Insurance: Obtaining health insurance that is recognized and accepted in Georgia may pose difficulties for some international applicants.

Impact on International Students

The visa regulations impose both enabling and restrictive impacts on international students:

Enabling Impacts

- Clear Pathway: The process is straightforward, offering a clear pathway to legal residence in Georgia for the duration of their studies.

- **Post-Study Opportunity:** The ability to transition to a residence permit provides opportunities for employment or further studies post-graduation.
- **Security:** Having a visa and subsequent residence permit ensures that students have the right to stay, access services, and are protected under Georgian law.

Restrictive Impacts

- **Financial Proof:** The requirement to demonstrate financial sustainability may be a hurdle for students from lower socio-economic backgrounds.
- **Health Insurance Requirement:** Mandatory health insurance can add financial strain and complexity to the application process.
- **Complex Documentation:** The requirement for various documents, including notarized translations, can be daunting and time-consuming.

Comparison with International Best Practices

When compared to international standards, Georgia's visa regulations for students are relatively aligned. They include necessary safeguards such as financial and health insurance requirements, which are common in many countries to ensure that international students can sustain themselves and are not a burden on the host country's resources.

However, there are areas for improvement to make Georgia more competitive and attractive to international students:

- **Streamlining Processes:** Adopting more streamlined processes with less bureaucratic paperwork could enhance the attractiveness of the country's educational offerings.
- **Assistance Programs:** Offering programs to assist with financial proof and insurance could make the process more accessible.
- **Online Platforms:** Expanding and enhancing online platforms for visa applications and document submission can simplify the process.

Summary

The visa application process for international students in Georgia is comprehensive and requires careful attention to detail. While the framework is in place to facilitate the entry of international students, there are challenges related to documentation, financial proofs, and consular accessibility that can affect the ease and efficiency of the process.

3.2. Admission Procedures

This section examines the admission requirements and procedures for international students applying to higher education institutions in Georgia.

Admission Requirements

International students seeking admission into Georgian educational institutions must meet several requirements:

- **Educational Credentials:** Possession of a high school diploma or its equivalent is a prerequisite for undergraduate programs. For master's programs, a bachelor's degree or its equivalent is required, and doctoral programs require a master's degree or equivalent.

- Language Proficiency: Proficiency in the language of instruction (often Georgian or English) is necessary. This may require passing a language proficiency test or providing results from standardised exams like TOEFL or IELTS for English.
- Unified National Exams: For certain programs, especially at the undergraduate level, passing the Unified National Exams may be required.
- Academic Fitness: Admission often depends on the student's grades and academic record.
- Health Requirements: Some institutions may require a medical examination to ensure the student meets health standards.

Procedures

The admission process generally involves the following steps:

- Application Submission: Students must fill out an application form provided by the educational institution. This may be done online or through physical paperwork.
- Documentation: Submission of all necessary documents, including educational certificates, transcripts, proof of language proficiency, a copy of the passport, and personal statements or letters of motivation.
- Review Process: The institution reviews the application and documents to assess the candidate's eligibility and fit for the program.
- Admission Tests: If required, students may have to sit for admission tests or interviews.
- Offer of Admission: Successful applicants receive an offer of admission, which is necessary for the student visa application.
- Acceptance by the Student: To finalise their spot, students typically must pay a deposit or the first semester's tuition fees.
- Enrollment: Once the visa is obtained, students can enrol in their courses and commence their studies.

The enrolment process for international students in Georgian educational institutions is typically contingent on meeting the admission requirements set by the specific institution. The steps may vary depending on whether a student needs a visa to enter Georgia.

- For students from countries that do not require a visa for entry into Georgia, the process is as follows:
 - ✓ Once admitted to a Georgian educational institution, the student can travel to Georgia under the visa-free regime.
 - ✓ Upon arrival, these students should initiate the process to obtain a residence permit, especially if they plan to stay for a period longer than allowed under visa-free entry rules.
 - ✓ With the admission confirmation and subsequent registration with the institution, students can then enrol in their courses and begin their studies.
- For students who require a visa to enter Georgia:

- ✓ After receiving admission from the institution, students should apply for a 'D' category long-term study visa.
- ✓ Once the visa is granted, the student can travel to Georgia.
- ✓ After arrival and compliance with any registration requirements mandated by the institution and local authorities, students may enroll in their courses and commence their academic program.

Timeframe

The application and admission process has set deadlines that vary by institution and program. Students should be aware of these deadlines and the timeframe for each step of the process to avoid any delays that could impact their studies.

Special Considerations for International Students

- Recognition of Foreign Education: Credentials obtained outside of Georgia need to be recognized by the National Center for Educational Quality Enhancement.
- Quotas and Limits: Some programs may have quotas or limits on the number of international students admitted.
- Scholarships and Financial Aid: International students should investigate available scholarships or financial aid options that may affect their admission.

Summary

Admission procedures for international students in Georgian higher education institutions require careful planning and attention to detail. Students must ensure their foreign qualifications are recognized, meet language proficiency standards, and adhere to specific program requirements. The admissions process can be competitive and involves a series of steps that must be completed within prescribed timelines to secure a place in the desired institution.

3.3. Study Process

This section outlines the academic structure, credit system, and student support mechanisms available to international students studying in higher education institutions in Georgia.

Academic Structure

The Georgian higher education system is structured into three stages:

- Bachelor's Program: Usually a 4-year program comprising a minimum of 240 ECTS credits.
- Master's Program: Typically a 2-year program following the bachelor's degree, requiring at least 120 ECTS credits.
- Doctorate Program: A 3-year program pursued after obtaining a master's degree, with the study component including a maximum of 60 ECTS credits.

For specialised fields such as medicine and dentistry, there are one-cycle programs equivalent to the master's level, requiring 360 credits for medicine and 300 credits for dentistry.

Credit System

Georgia has adopted the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), making it compatible with European standards. An academic year is typically composed of 60 ECTS credits,

reflecting the workload of a full-time student. Each credit corresponds to 25-30 hours of workload, including classroom time, independent study, examinations, and other assessment activities.

Student Support Mechanisms (non-regulatory practices)

To facilitate the success of international students, higher education institutions in Georgia offer various support mechanisms:

- Orientation Programs: These programs help students acclimate to the new environment, understand the academic policies, and integrate into campus life.
- Language Support: For students needing to improve proficiency in the language of instruction, language courses and tutorials are often available.
- Academic Advising: Personal academic advisors may be assigned to assist with course selection, career advice, and to navigate the complexities of the academic system.
- Counselling Services: Many institutions provide counselling services to address personal, academic, or cultural adjustment issues.
- Peer-Mentoring Programs: Senior students or fellow international students often act as mentors to new arrivals, providing guidance and support.
- International Student Offices: These dedicated offices deal with the specific needs of international students, including visa issues, accommodation, and integration into the student community.
- Health Services: Access to health services and insurance is typically available to ensure student well-being.
- Cultural Activities: Programs designed to expose international students to Georgian culture and facilitate cultural exchange are common.

These services are typically developed and provided at the discretion of individual universities based on their resources, commitment to student welfare, and educational philosophy. These are examples of how institutions go beyond the legal requirements to foster an inclusive and supportive environment for international students.

Adaptability to Changes

Higher education institutions in Georgia are increasingly flexible, offering part-time, distance, and blended learning options to cater to the diverse needs of international students.

Quality Assurance

The National Center for Educational Quality Enhancement ensures that institutions adhere to quality standards. This body is responsible for the authorization and accreditation of higher education institutions in Georgia.

Summary

The Georgian higher education system offers a structured and supportive environment for international students. With its adherence to the ECTS credit system, it allows for transparent and flexible study programs. Comprehensive student support services further ensure that international students can navigate academic requirements effectively and enjoy their study experience in Georgia.

3.4. Recognition of Foreign Credentials

This section delves into the procedures that Georgia follows to recognize international qualifications for higher education.

Purpose and Scope

The recognition of foreign educational credentials in Georgia is essential to:

- Admission to Educational Programs: It allows holders of foreign qualifications to pursue further education within Georgian institutions.
- Employment: It facilitates the employment of individuals with foreign qualifications in the Georgian job market.

Recognition pertains to general education, vocational education, and higher education but excludes preschool education, medical residency postgraduate training, and education acquired through certain exchange programs.

Procedures

The National Center for Educational Quality Enhancement (NCEQE) is responsible for the recognition of foreign educational qualifications. The process includes:

- Verification of Authenticity: Confirming the legitimacy of the foreign educational document.
- Assessment of Compatibility: Evaluating whether the foreign qualification aligns with the Georgian educational system's standards and outcomes.

Required Documentation

Applicants seeking recognition of their foreign qualifications must submit:

- An application form.
- A notarized translation of the applicant's identity card or passport.
- A power of attorney, if applicable.
- A notarized copy of the birth certificate, if the application is filed by a parent.
- A translated and notarized copy of the educational document(s).
- A receipt of the application fee payment.

Assessment Fees

The recognition process incurs various fees depending on the urgency:

- Regular procedure (1 month): 40 GEL
- Accelerated procedures ranging from 15 business days to 1 business day, with fees from 80 GEL to 250 GEL.

Exemptions

Certain individuals are exempt from the fee or eligible for a discount, including war veterans, displaced persons, and persons with disabilities.

Additional Considerations

- For distance learning qualifications, proof of residence abroad and contact hours may be required.
- An additional fee is added for postal service use.
- If the recognition requires payment to a foreign authority, proof of such payment is needed.
- The applicant has the right to appeal the decision, within one month from the notification, to the Administrative Affairs Board of the Tbilisi City Court.

e-Service

From February 6, 2020, applicants can apply electronically for recognition services via the portal www.my.gov.ge. While this portal is available only for citizens of Georgia and for those with a resident permit, international students should directly engage with the NCEQE for the evaluation of foreign educational credentials, as this specialised process is not facilitated through the general government services portal.

Summary

The recognition of foreign credentials in Georgia is a well-established process managed by the NCEQE, ensuring that international qualifications are appropriately evaluated for compatibility with Georgian standards. While efficient, there is always room for enhancements to make the process more applicant-friendly and aligned with international best practices. The current recommendation suggests the development of a dedicated online platform for international students.

4. Recommendations

In light of the analysis conducted on the current regulatory framework related to international students' visa applications, admission, and study processes in Georgia, the following recommendations are proposed to improve the efficacy, fairness, and attractiveness of the system:

Streamlining Visa Application Procedures

- Introduction of an Online Visa Application Portal: Establish a dedicated online portal for student visa applications to simplify the submission process and reduce processing times.
- Clear and Detailed Visa Guidelines: Provide comprehensive and easily accessible guidelines that clearly outline the visa application process, required documents, and processing times.
- Multi-Year Student Visas: Introduce multi-year visas for the entire duration of the study program to avoid the need for annual renewals.

Georgia's requirement for documents to be translated into Georgian ensures legal and administrative clarity within its jurisdiction. However, accepting English translations could streamline the process for international students, suggesting a balance between ease and regulatory compliance needs review.

For visa documentation, considering financial proof is crucial. The criteria for determining 'sufficient' financial means vary globally¹, often based on estimated living and tuition costs. Georgia could consider setting clear, published guidelines that reflect realistic student expenses.

¹ For example, Canada requires proof of funds to cover tuition and living expenses for the first year of study. As of recent guidelines, students must demonstrate they have at least CAD 10,000 (plus tuition) for a single student studying outside

Standardising Admission Requirements

- Unified Admission Platform: Develop a centralised platform where international students can apply to multiple institutions and programs, which would standardise the application process and deadlines.
- Recognition of International Standards: Legally recognize international standardised tests and qualifications (such as GMAT/ToEFL/SAT) to simplify the admission process for students from various educational backgrounds.
- Pre-Arrival Information Packages: Mandate educational institutions to provide pre-arrival information packages, including legal requirements, cultural orientation, and language support services.
- Establishing a regulatory framework for study agents: This could involve mandatory registration, adherence to ethical guidelines, and transparency in agreements with universities. Such measures align with international best practices², ensuring accountability and protecting students' interests.

Enhancing the Study Process

- Mentorship Programs: Encourage universities to establish mentorship programs pairing international students with local students to assist with cultural integration and academic support.
- Language Support: Offer legally mandated language support classes for international students, particularly in Georgian, to facilitate their integration and improve their study experience.
- Health Insurance Regulations: Implement clear guidelines and support for international students to obtain health insurance, which is often a legal requirement for residency.

Improving Recognition of Foreign Credentials

- International Agreements for Recognition: Pursue bilateral agreements with countries that are primary sources of international students to facilitate the automatic recognition of certain educational credentials.

Pursuing bilateral agreements for the recognition of educational credentials is a nuanced strategy involving negotiations between Georgia and countries that are significant sources of international students. These agreements, aimed at automatic recognition of qualifications, streamline the admission process, reducing barriers for students.

Common practice in several educational systems, the process involves diplomatic efforts and thorough compatibility assessments but comes with challenges, such as ensuring the maintenance of educational standards. An example of this practice is the Lisbon Recognition Convention³, where

Quebec. The United Kingdom specifies that international students must show they can pay their course fees and living costs. For living outside London, students need £9,207 per year in addition to their course fees, while in London, the requirement is £12,006.

² For example, countries like Australia have rigorous frameworks requiring agents to be registered, promoting ethical practices and accountability. Such regulation helps maintain the quality of student recruitment and safeguards students' interests.

³ <https://www.coe.int/en/web/higher-education-and-research/lisbon-recognition-convention>

countries across the European Higher Education Area agree to recognize each other's educational credentials automatically. This agreement facilitates student mobility by simplifying the admission process for students seeking education in member countries.

Countries known for their significant number of students studying in Georgia, such as India, could serve as key partners. But pursuing bilateral agreements for the automatic recognition of educational credentials with non-western countries does come with risks, including potential fraud. It's important for such agreements to include robust verification processes and quality assurance mechanisms to mitigate these risks. Establishing clear criteria and cooperation with trusted institutions in partner countries can help ensure that the recognition of credentials is both efficient and secure.

Additional Support Structures

- **Legal Advisory Services:** Offer state-supported legal advisory services for international students to help navigate the complexities of the Georgian legal system regarding their stay and studies.
- **Integration Programs:** Develop government-funded integration programs that provide legal, cultural, and social support to international students.

Strengthening Regulatory Oversight

- **Regular Monitoring and Assessment:** Implement regular assessments of educational institutions' compliance with the legal framework for international students and establish penalties for non-compliance.
- **Feedback Mechanism:** Create a formal mechanism for international students to provide feedback on their experiences, which would inform ongoing legal reforms and enhance student satisfaction.

By adopting these recommendations, Georgia can create a more welcoming and streamlined environment for international students, which will not only benefit the students but also the educational institutions and the broader society through increased cultural exchange and economic contributions.

5. Conclusion

The desk research report and legal analysis have provided a comprehensive examination of the existing regulatory framework concerning international students in Georgia. The findings have highlighted a structured educational system with defined pathways for bachelor, master, and doctorate programs, and a credit system aligned with international standards. The current legal provisions demonstrate Georgia's commitment to offering quality education and promoting its integration into the global educational community. However, the complexities of the visa application process, admission procedures, and the recognition of foreign qualifications present areas where enhancements are needed.

The recommendations outlined offer a strategic approach to refine and streamline these processes. Emphasising simplification, transparency, and support for international students, they address the procedural bottlenecks and legal ambiguities that currently impede the efficiency of the system. The proposed measures aim to align Georgia's educational framework with international best practices, thereby fostering an environment that is both welcoming and conducive to international students.

By enacting these changes, Georgia stands to reinforce its position as a desirable destination for international students. The legal amendments suggested would not only ease the administrative burden on students and institutions but would also contribute to a richer academic and cultural landscape within the country. In conclusion, the diligent implementation of the provided recommendations is expected to result in a more robust, attractive, and internationally competitive higher education sector in Georgia.

References of Legal Acts

- Law of Georgia on Higher Education, (2004) - <https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/32830?impose=translateEn&publication=56>
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Appendix: Step-by-Step Process

1. **Student Application:** The student applies to a Georgian Higher Education Institution (HEI), submitting required documents including academic records and proof of language proficiency.
2. **HEI Admission Decision:** Upon reviewing the application, the HEI issues an admission letter to the student, outlining any conditions that must be met.
3. **Provisional Acceptance & Fee Information:** The student receives information on tuition fees and payment deadlines, often alongside or shortly after the admission letter.
4. **Recognition of Foreign Credentials by EQE:** The student submits their educational credentials to the EQE for recognition and equivalency assessment, ensuring their qualifications meet Georgian standards. This step is crucial for finalizing admission eligibility.
5. **Document Translation and Notarization (if required):** Students must ensure that all necessary documents are translated into Georgian and notarized, complying with legal requirements.
6. **Tuition Fee Payment Confirmation:** The student confirms their spot by paying the tuition fee (or a deposit, as specified by the HEI). This step is critical and often required before proceeding with visa application processes.
7. **Visa Application (if applicable):** With the admission letter and proof of tuition fee payment, the student applies for a study visa ('D' category long-term visa).
8. **Visa Issuance & Travel Preparations:** Once the visa is granted, the student finalizes their travel arrangements to Georgia.
9. **Arrival and Registration at HEI:** After arriving in Georgia, the student completes any remaining registration processes at the HEI, including finalizing enrollment and attending orientation sessions.
10. **Residence Permit Application:** Students apply for a residence permit within Georgia, necessary for a longer stay.