

# Learning for Earning: Student Expectations and Perceptions of University

Sophia Gorgodze<sup>1</sup>, Lasha Macharashvili<sup>1</sup> & Anna Kamladze<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>School of Education, Ilia State University, Tbilisi, Georgia

Correspondence: Sophia Gorgodze, School of Education, Ilia State University, Tbilisi, 0162, Georgia.

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## Abstract

In the context of increasing numbers of students enrolling in higher education in the last decade, understanding student expectations of their universities becomes more important. Universities need to know what students expect if they want to keep them satisfied and continue attracting them. On the other hand, it is also important to know whether student expectations are in line with the purpose of the universities and the causes they serve. This research explores students' expectations and perceptions of the university in post-Soviet Georgia, as well as whether these expectations are in line with the perspectives of university administrators. For the purposes of this research, over 800 bachelor level students of different academic programs were surveyed at five big public universities across Georgia. Additionally, 10 in-depth interviews were conducted with university administrators to learn about the purpose that public universities try to serve and to understand their perspectives on what should be expected of university. After the analysis of the results, two focus groups were conducted with the students in Western and Eastern Georgia to make sense of the findings obtained through the student survey. Finally, 4 in-depth interviews were conducted with experts to understand their perspectives on the actual findings of this research. The results suggest that employment is the main expectation from a university education. Moreover, there is a mismatch between what students identify as their primary expectation and what administrators believe students should expect. Significance and implications of these results for universities are discussed.

**Keywords:** employment, student expectations, student perceptions, university function

## 1. Introduction

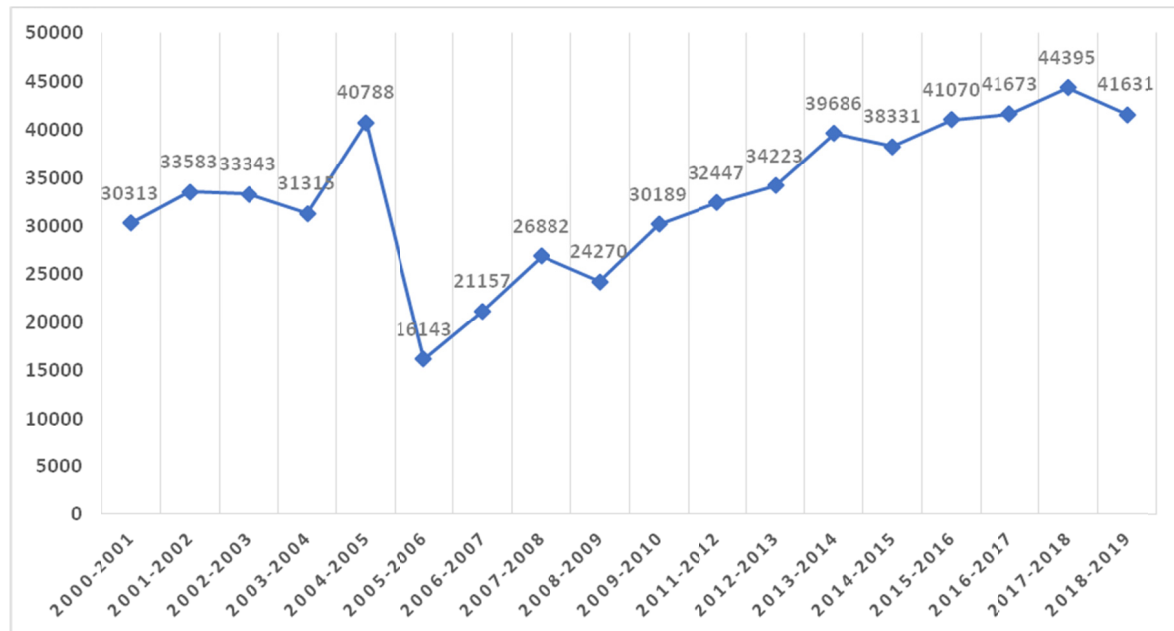
In post-Soviet Georgia, like other former members of the Soviet Union, higher education (HE) is greatly valued. Since gaining independence in 1991, there has been a dramatic expansion of higher education with enrollment rates surging from approximately 25% in 1990 up to 50% in 2004 (Chakhaia & Bregvadze, 2016). Among post-Soviet countries, Georgia had the highest percentage (32%) of its population aged 25-35 possessing tertiary education, followed by Armenia, Russia, Belarus, Ukraine and Moldova in 2001 (Smolentseva, 2012).

The massification of higher education in independent Georgia was largely due to the introduction of private Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and private fees in public education (Sharvashidze, 2005). By 2005 there were 227 HEIs with the majority of institutions privately operated (National Education Accreditation Centre, 2006), while in 1991 the total number of HEIs was 19 (Smolentseva, 2012).

Due to the absence of regulatory mechanisms, the increase in the number of HEIs was not followed by quality control/assurance (Gvaramadze, 2010). This was the primary reason why HE quality has become a serious concern and, in 2005, HE reform resulted in the closure of many HEIs. In the first round of accreditation carried out by the newly established National Education Accreditation Center, the number of HEIs were halved, and in the second round it was further reduced; by 2007-2008 there were only 43 higher education institutions out of the original 227 (National Education Accreditation Centre, 2006, 2007).

Ten years after this reform, HEIs have slowly multiplied again. In the 2018-19 academic year, Georgia had 63 HEIs, out of which there are 19 state institutions (National Center for Educational Quality Enhancement, 2019). On par with the increasing number of universities, enrollment rates have also been increasing since 2006, despite some minor fluctuations (Graph 1). However, a cause for concern is that students do not seem to be graduating with adequate skills that would be necessary for joining the workforce. According to the Global Competitiveness reports (World Economic Forum, 2013), which are based on feedback from the business community, one of the

most problematic factors for doing business in Georgia is an ‘inadequately educated workforce’ (World Economic Forum, 2013, p. 192). This finding is in line with the findings of other research which shows that half of the employers think that university graduates do not have the appropriate competencies necessary for a job relevant to their specialty (Bregvadze, 2013). According to the UNICEF (2014) report, the highest unemployment rate is among the youth (15-29 years old), specifically among those who have completed formal education and are looking for jobs. 31% percent of the young workforce, from all specialties, is unemployed, and out of that percentage 30% hold higher education degrees (UNICEF, 2014).



Graph 1. Yearly Enrollment Rates in Georgian HEIs 2000-2017 (Source: Graph made by authors based on the data of Geostat - National Statistics Office of Georgia, 2017)

### 1.1 The Problem of Research

During the Soviet era, when school graduates chose to enroll in higher education, they knew it was a prerequisite for a “good job” (Smolentseva, 2012) and a guarantee for securing a workplace (Sharvashidze, 2005). While similar perceptions seem to be prevalent in modern Georgia (Gvaramadze, 2010), they are not founded. Recent research that estimated the returns on higher education in Georgia found that compared to the mid-1990s, or in comparison to other transition countries, there were very low returns for prospective employees with higher education degrees and little evidence of an increasing trend in this regard (Khitarishvili, 2010). In 2007, degree holders in Georgia constituted the majority (42.4%) of the unemployed (Castel-Branco, 2008). In 2016, the number of unemployed workers with vocational education decreased by 16.5%, while the number of unemployed HE degree holders increased by 1.1% in comparison with previous year (Ministry of Economy and Sustainable Development, 2017). This statistic explains the common saying about taxi drivers in Georgia that *all taxi drivers hold several higher education diplomas*. It's important to note that most taxi drivers do not consider themselves employed because they hold higher education diplomas and driving a taxi is a form of self-employment when there are no other opportunities for work; however the National Statistics Office of Georgia considers them employed and they do not contribute to the unemployed category of population when making official calculations.

More than a decade ago, rising higher education enrollment levels without appropriate economic return for graduates was described as an “illogical situation” (Sharvashidze 2005, p. 57). Such an “illogical situation” was explained by the following factors: few employment opportunities, which made HE enrollment a means to postpone unemployment; a growing pool of HE graduates with diplomas and shrinking sectors of the economy that were unable to employ all degree holders, in spite of their relevant qualifications (Sharvashidze, 2005). An additional reason for the increased demand for higher education could have been the diminishing vocational sector, an after effect of the demise of Soviet manufacturing. Students with vocational qualifications designed for the

Soviet economy were often no longer necessary and potential students did not see these old qualifications as useful (Chakhaia & Bregvadze, 2016).

Today, Georgia has a situation where higher education is very popular, while vocational education is considered less attractive by stakeholders (Kitiashvili & Sumbadze, 2018). This is despite the fact that the employment rates of those with vocational education are increasing (Ministry of Economy and Sustainable Development, 2017) and higher education has unpromising returns in terms of employment.

### *1.2 Research Focus*

As higher education remains popular, it is interesting to see what students primarily expect from the university.

In order to understand this, the following research questions were formulated:

- What do students primarily expect from university education?
- How do students perceive the idea/function of the university?
- Are there differences in what students expect from university and how they understand its purpose, and what university administrators believe should be expected of the university?

The literature on student expectations may be categorized into two types. One type explores the processes at the university and expectations about those. This type of literature relates to problems of student engagement, student preparedness and expectations about teaching, faculty, assessment and other university services including extra-curricular areas. Such research is mostly undertaken to tackle the problem of student drop-out, transition difficulties from school to university, disengagement and frustration due to unmet expectations. These studies are mostly conducted in single universities and even in a single university department (Lobo & Gurney, 2013; Smith, 2017; Money, Tracy, Hennessy, Nixon, & Ball, 2016; Byrne & Flood, 2005; Brinkworth, McCann, Matthews, & Karin, 2009; Awang & Ismail, 2010; Borghi, Mainardes, & Silva, 2016).

Another type of literature focuses more attention on general expectations before entering the university and has to do with students' perceptions of the university's role and function (Al Fattal & Ayoubi, 2013; Peou, 2017). Often the issues of career-orientation and learning-orientation to university education are discussed here. When exploring student expectations, Alexitch (1994) found that the expectations of first year students were more career-related when compared to senior students (Alexitch, 1994). Improving career prospects was identified as the most important reason for attending university, according to psychology students in the UK university (Balloo, Paulie, & Warrell, 2015).

There is a scarcity of both types of literature for post-Soviet countries. Research undertaken to explore the motivation of students enrolling at university is rare. While what exists is valuable for the post-Soviet world (for example DeYoung, 2008; Maloshonok & Terentev, 2017), these research pieces covered a single university or faculty, not giving a full picture of the state of education on a national level.

Maloshonok and Terentev conducted research on student expectations in the School of Economics in Russia (2017). The research explored student expectations about learning activities, time allocation, grades received, difficulties in their studies and motivation. First year student expectations of university evolved during their year as they met challenges and discovered the time requirements of academic courses. This research found that, on the one hand, students thought they would be spending more time on curricular and extracurricular activities than they did and they overestimated what their academic performance would be. On the other hand, they underestimated the challenges at the first year of study. This study also found an unexpected decrease of interest during the second semester of study (Maloshonok & Terentev, 2017).

DeYoung (2008) explored how university is understood in post-socialist Kyrgyzstan. In a survey conducted in a private university in Kyrgyzstan, students were asked whether they thought that attending a university would help them get a good job after graduation and why they chose to come to the university. Many students believed that the university could help them find a job, but only indirectly. No direct relationship was discerned between the university and employment. DeYoung concludes that higher education in Kyrgyzstan "is not considered as an opportunity to collect some discrete set of occupational skills related to later employment. Higher education is considered as an opportunity to sit for and receive some collection of knowledge as delivered by teachers" (pp. 11-12). Higher education in Kyrgyzstan is quite popular and the parents consider it as their utmost responsibility to get their children into the university by any means, no matter their academic performance (DeYoung, 2008).

Although no research on expectations of students has been conducted in Georgia, research on the issues of internships found that 88% of students agreed with the statement that attending university "should help students find jobs" (Young Socialists, 2017, p. 34) and believed it should provide them with internships.

The present research is important for uncovering student expectations and perceptions of public university on a national scale in the post-Soviet country of Georgia. Moreover, it is important to find out whether these expectations align with the views of university administrators. Also, it will allow us to compare current trends in other post-Soviet countries.

## 2. Method

To answer the research questions posed in this research both qualitative and quantitative methods were used. Mixed methods research involved over 800 students surveyed across five major universities in Georgia (the public universities that enroll the highest number of students both in Eastern and Western Georgia). Qualitative research involved 10 in-depth interviews conducted with university administrators (rector/deputy rector/other top managers) to learn about the purpose of the university and to understand their perspectives on what should be expected of the university. After the analysis of the quantitative survey data, two focus groups were conducted with students in Eastern and Western Georgia to make sense of the findings obtained through the student survey. Finally, four in-depth interviews were conducted with higher education experts to understand their perspectives on the actual findings of the research.

The limitations of the research were: the retrospective view of student responses to the question regarding their expectations before entering the university. Also, the researchers did not have desegregated data according to the social background and academic specialization of the students.

### 2.1 Sample of Research

A quantitative component was comprised of a survey where 816 students from Bachelor's level were chosen using stratified random sampling. Since the goal in choosing universities was to get a nationwide sample, field work took place in the biggest public universities in Western and Eastern Georgia. The universities that participated in the research were: Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University; Batumi Shota Rustaveli State University; Akaki Tsereteli State University (Kutaisi); Telavi Iakob Gogebashvili State University; Samtskhe-Javakheti State University.

All respondents were students studying for their bachelor's degree. The year of the student was designed as the strata in the sample. A disproportionate stratified sample was used where the size of each stratum was not exactly proportional to the actual size of the population in each stratum (first, second, third and fourth year students). As there are more than 70,000 B.A. level students in abovementioned state universities (Geostat, 2017), the confidence level for the sample was 95% and the confidence interval was 4.

The students' faculties were not specified in the survey, but the diversity of the faculties was assured by geographically encompassing all of the buildings of the universities. For example, in Tbilisi State University, from which about 180 respondents took part in the research, the field work was done equally in the Humanities faculty building, in the Law faculty building, in the Business and Economics faculty building and in the Natural Sciences faculty building.

The survey was carried out in the spring semester of 2017. During data collection first year students had completed one semester of study and were in the middle of their second (spring) semester, as the new academic year starts in the fall. As the ethics committee does not function at Ilia State University, research protocol was agreed with the dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences in order to send an official letter to universities all over Georgia, informing their administration about the purpose and procedure of the research. The purpose of the research was communicated to every single respondent during the field work, in order to get their informed consent to participate in the research.

As for the qualitative part of the research, 10 university administrators (two from each university) were chosen from the five universities where we conducted the student survey. After analysis of the survey, two student focus groups were conducted in Eastern and Western Georgia to make sense of the survey findings. Finally, four HE experts were interviewed in order to gain a deeper understanding of the findings we got through this research.

### 2.2 Instruments and Procedures

The data were collected through a structured questionnaire which covered the two distinct areas mentioned above: student expectations of the university before starting their studies and student perceptions of the function of the university. *Student expectations* of the university and *student perceptions* of the university were distinctly defined not to confuse students and mix the meaning of these two concepts. For the purposes of this research, the term "expect" was defined as something that "will" be the case, as compared to the student perception which was defined as belief of what "should" be the case. While half of the items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale, "strongly agree-strongly disagree", the other half of the items was multiple choices. Students were also asked what

set of skills universities should primarily develop. This question was prompted by the results of a recent research that found that there are very few opportunities for students in Georgia to develop research skills (Tevzadze, Zaalishvili, Abelian, Khurtsidze, & Meskhi, 2017).

In addition to administering student questionnaires, two focus groups were conducted with the students. One in the West (Batumi) and another in the East Georgia (Tbilisi) to explore in greater depth the results of the quantitative survey and to triangulate the findings.

Another qualitative component of the research included in-depth interviews with university administrators (rector, deputy rector or other representative from top management) and later with education experts. A total of 14 in-depth interviews were conducted. The interviews were conducted to identify:

- 1) The views of the university administrators on student expectations;
- 2) The university's function from the perspective of the administrators;
- 3) Views and explanations of the field experts about current trends in university expectations in light of our findings.

### 2.3 Data Analysis

Descriptive research analysis was used in the quantitative study and the data analysis was conducted in IBM SPSS 22. Chi Square test was used to evaluate the statically significant differences in the distribution of different sets of variables. Differences in the distributions of various variables concerning the student expectations were analyzed according to the students' year of study, gender and the city/town of study.

To analyze the qualitative data, all interviews and focus groups were transcribed verbatim. An inductive approach was used to analyze the qualitative data gathered from the interviews and focus groups. An inductive approach was chosen as it allows us to develop summary themes that emerge from the raw data. A coding frame was developed and a set of codes were identified that were revised after each read. After reading the codes, categories was identified out of which broader themes emerged. After this the researchers engaged in deductive analysis, guided by the questions that they primarily wanted to answer using the focus groups and interviews. The deductive approach aided in deducing the themes suggested by broader research questions.

The challenge of integrating qualitative and quantitative was resolved using the strategies in qualitative data analysis literature. The research followed the common themes in the qualitative and quantitative data to link the information (Mason, 1994).

The validity of the qualitative research findings was ensured by involving all three researchers in the qualitative analysis process and through many discussions throughout the analysis.

## 3. Results

### 3.1 Employment as the Primary Expectation of University Students

In this research, 92% of the surveyed students agreed with the statement that, prior to entering the university; they expected their university education would help them get a job. In a follow-up question, students were asked to prioritize expectations (including improving socio-economic status, increasing one's knowledge, and broadening one's social circle). *Employment* turned out to be the primary expectation for 44.6% of the students, followed by *increasing one's knowledge* (30.4%) and *improving socio-economic status* (7%). These expectations do not differ widely according to the location of the university, place of origin (rural/urban), or the gender of the students.

Table 1. Primary expectation before entering the university

Expectations	Percentage
Employment	44.6
Increasing one's knowledge	30.4
Broadening the social circle	1.5
Improving socio-economic status	7
Other	10.9
No answer	2.9

In a focus group discussion, students reported that the majority of their peers enter university to attain a diploma for employment purposes. Students saw the B.A. diploma as a major prerequisite in a job search. "For the majority

of students the primary goal when entering the university is the prospect of employment,” said one student. The focus group discussions revealed other student expectations, such as “achieving success” and “realizing their potential.” It was also concluded from these discussions, that “achieving success” was connected to good job opportunities.

The interviews with university administrators and experts confirmed survey and focus group results. While all the interviewed university administrators acknowledged that the goal of attending university is not only about employment, they also said students come to the university with a very pragmatic purpose: to get employed. “Motivation for employment is sometimes so steady that even the area of specialty is not that important for students,” said a university administrator describing how students try to choose specialties that have higher potential for employability. Experts believe that student expectations are reasonable: “When you have a situation when so many people are unemployed, what other motivation should students have?” said one expert in the interview.

### 3.2 Dramatic Change in Employment Expectations after Entering the University

After becoming a student, the expectation that university would help students get employed decreases dramatically (from 92% to 27%). To the statement, “*University education will help me get employed,*” only 27% of first year students responded positively and the percentage decreased even further in later years.

Table 2. Employment expectations after entering the university

Year of Study	Percentage
First Year	27
Second Year	23
Third Year	20
Fourth Year	23

When students in the focus groups were asked their reasons for re-adjusting their expectations after entering the university, the following reasons were uncovered:

- Students were poorly informed about the specialties they were choosing and what it takes to be a good specialist to be employed. They realized that the choice of profession was wrong for his/her skills and personality. “If we had more information during school time about what it takes to be in each profession, maybe we would not make a mistake in choosing a profession,” said one student.
- Studying at the university level turned out to be harder than getting into the university. During their first year at university, students began to realize there is a competition amongst their peers for those specialties which were demanded on the market. Many began to lose hope they would stay competitive: “I was a wolf among my classmates at school, but at the university it appeared that I was a puppy among other wolves,” commented one student.
- Students felt they gained limited practical skills and limited practice at the university. They did not feel they would possess the necessary skills after graduation to be employed, as they lacked the type of knowledge that “the market requires.”

The qualitative data indicated that students prefer to stick with the university education even though they realized their expectations of employment may not be very realistic. One of the reasons why students stay enrolled could be that there are not many other choices where they would transfer to continue their education. When students were asked in focus groups, if they thought about changing the educational institution, students mentioned that if they had a choice they would go abroad, but locally they did not think it made sense to transfer to another institution.

### 3.3 Expectations of Practical Skill Development

The majority of students believed that university should primarily develop practical skills in students; only 11% believed that research skills take precedence. There is statistically important difference between the students from different cities when comparing these variables. More students from the capital studying in Tbilisi State University prioritized research skills compared to other locations. (The question offered following answers: practical skills, research skills, other skills, and do not know)

Table 3. Skills that university should primarily develop in the students

University	Practical Skills (%)	Research Skills (%)
Batumi State University	92	3
Kutaisi State University	81	10
Telavi State University	78	16
Tbilisi State University	69	19
Samtskhe-Javakheti University	85	9

\* $p < .001$ .

Students participating in focus groups explained that practical skills are what the market requires and thus the student preference. “The market does not require research and new knowledge,” said one student. Another student said that most people need practical skills and not research skills: “Both research and practical skills are important, but practical are needed for a vast majority.”

Students in focus groups were asked how they would define *practical skills*. The majority of the students understood it as the connection between workplace and the university. They considered internships in NGOs or public organizations and simulations of professional activities (like UN modelling) as major activities for practical skill development. “University should teach you how to work with your profession. If you are a teacher, you need to practice in school; if you are a doctor, you need to practice in a hospital,” said one student.

The university administration, as well as experts, acknowledged there is not much focus on research at the undergraduate level. Research focus starts on the M.A. level. One university administrator said: “Earlier it was believed we need no research component on the B.A. level and it should start on the M.A. level. This was a mistake. If you do not start developing the research skills on the B.A. level, it does not transfer on the M.A. level with the necessary dosage, and that’s the problem.”

#### 3.4 Student Perception of the Function of the University

44% of students indicated that knowledge transfer is the main function of the university, while 39% believed that creation of the new knowledge is the most important function of the university; 8% prioritized search for truth. A majority (60%) of students believed the university should provide them with a narrow, specialized education that is more focused and profession-oriented rather than more broad and general. Again, as the researchers found out in focus groups this preference is connected to the chances of employment: “I want a more specialized education. This will increase my chances of employment,” said one student in a focus group.

Employment turned out to be the key factor when discussing the university’s function. One student said that the university’s function was to be “employing its students with their relevant specialty.” Another student indicated that “the primary function of a university is to prepare a highly competitive workforce.” Participants of the focus groups said that most students prefer getting professional qualification and not research skills, so universities should be oriented toward practical skills. One of the students mentioned: “probably 80% of students won’t continue an academic career or research but rather choose practical, narrow professions.”

Most of the students who expected to get practical skills at the university also supported the idea that knowledge transfer is the main university function.

#### 3.5 Mismatch of Expectations/Perceptions Between Students and University Administrators

University administrators mentioned that “getting a high-quality education” and becoming “a responsible citizen” was what should be a primary expectation of the university. Almost all administrators said that a university should primarily cultivate the critical and analytical thinking skills that would encourage a generation of new knowledge and also help graduates succeed in the workplace. However, administrators also said they are aware students want employment. Some administrators said their universities are trying to respond to student employment expectations as well; they are expanding cooperation with the private sector to help graduates get employed. One university administrator regretted that they couldn’t include businesspeople in the University Board, which is problematic and wished this could be resolved.

A few respondents pointed out that many high school graduates became students because there were no other options for them. “It’s like a stereotype, when one graduates, one must enter the university. Many students do not know why they become students. Maybe because what else is there to do?” said one university administrator. Experts and university administrators were asked why students would not choose vocational education instead. It seems logical that if students wanted training for specific occupations and quicker employment, they would take

up vocational education programs. Experts shared following reasons as to why students still prefer B.A. programs:

- 1) Vocational education has a very low image. Expert opinion is backed by the research. As Kitiashvili and Sumbadze (2018) found in their study, 9th grade students and their parents considered vocational education appropriate for people from a low socio-economic background, who want to find employment immediately after graduation from high school; the research also found that employers held negative perceptions about those holding vocational education diplomas. The vocational sector is an unpopular choice for students (UNICEF, 2014).
- 2) Vocational education is not available on a large scale. HE is much more accessible than VET. This expert opinion can be backed up by the data, which shows that the vocational sector has four times fewer spaces for students than Higher Education programs (Statistical Bulletin of VET, 2016).

Respondents of this research (experts) mentioned that for the employability rate of vocational graduates, these programs do much better than university B.A. programs in employment. “Higher Education is weak exactly in getting people employed, while in existing vocational educational institutions, if they [vocational programs] are good, we have 100% employment of graduates,” said one expert.

Experts also shared that if there were so called “higher vocational education programs” at the university, rather than at vocational education center, this could make vocational programs more attractive because the name of the “university” has more prestige attached to it than a vocational institution. “Pairing up the university and vocational education would increase the attractiveness of the vocational programs. Students will more readily go to study at Tbilisi State University in a vocational program than at some vocational institution for the same program,” said an expert.

#### 4. Discussion

This research aimed to answer the following research questions: what do students primarily expect from a university education? How do students understand the idea/function of the university? Are there differences in what students expect from university and what university administrators believe should be expected?

The most important finding was that the primary expectation of most students before entering the university is employment. Another finding was that after entering the university, student optimism about finding a job faded away. The percentage of students who thought that university would meet their expectations with regard to helping them find job sharply declined. While employment expectations waned after entering the university, students still held more utilitarian perceptions about the university: they primarily wanted university to be focused on practical skills acquisition and knowledge transfer.

The perceptions of university administrators differed from the perceptions of the students. They ascribed more importance to the *intellectual* functions of the university that can be classified as the “traditional/classical” understanding of higher education. Administrators believed that the university should nurture responsible citizens and help students acquire important skills (analytical skills, critical thinking skills, etc.) that could help them generate new knowledge and would also help them in the workplace. Administrators also acknowledged they should do more to meet student expectations in terms of employment; however, they thought that getting graduates employed should not be primarily expected of any university.

Even back in the 1980s, McPherson argued that students had become very career oriented and that they did not attend university to reap the benefits of learning but rather to avert poor career prospects (McPherson, 1983 as cited by Alexitch, 1994). Even then, the research pointed to the “general climate of vocationalism” (Alexitch, 1994, p. 164) amongst students entering university and it was discussed whether a career-oriented approach to university was more beneficial than an intellectual/liberal arts approach. It is important to note that vocationalism is defined as “an educational philosophy or pedagogy, claiming that the content of the curriculum should be governed by its occupational or industrial utility, and marketability as human capital” (Marshall, 1998).

As literature indicates, the expectation of vocationalism in higher education is discerned elsewhere (Balloo, Pauli, & Worrell, 2015; Xu, 2011). While we do not have much data from other post-Soviet countries, present research confirms that the most important expectations of the university in post-Soviet Georgia are employment and training for specific occupations.

While this finding may not be very surprising, it is problematic because student expectations about employment could undermine both learning and employment outcomes for higher education. There is some evidence that when students are more career-oriented it lowers their achievement, and prevents the cultivation of the critical and creative thinking skills that are also necessary for being successful on the job market (Kroll, 1988). Plus, economists warn that a race for diplomas rather than learning leads to ineffective use of human capital, and a



decrease of the rate of return on education (Gimpelson & Kapelyushnikov, 2011).

Employment expectations and career-orientation of Georgian students can be explained by the following factors:

- a. Unemployment—as youth unemployment is quite high, students believe that university should primarily help them get employed.
- b. Lack of information—when making decisions about entering university, students are not fully informed about the university and its purpose, as the researchers learned from the data analysis.

Given the findings of the research, the authors came up with the following graphical representation:

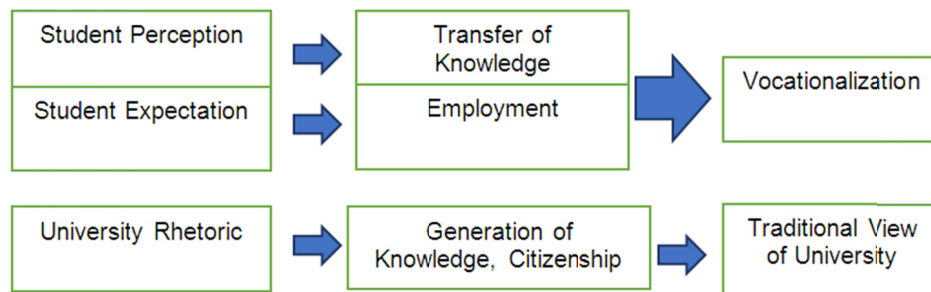


Figure 1. Representation of research findings

This graphical representation shows that what students expect of the university and what constitutes their understanding of university can make the case for the vocationalism of the university as perceived by the students.

Another point the researchers wanted to show in this representation is that university administrators have a different view of the university when compared to the students. This view is close to the classical understanding of the university—an institution which should raise responsible citizens, advance research and generate new knowledge.

On the other hand, administrators and experts agreed that universities also have to respond to student needs. Moreover, two public universities, out of the five that took part in the research, underline in their mission statement that they aim to raise competitive specialists on the market; however in the interviews the concrete steps taken by the university in this regard did not surface.

The present research shows that students want university to be market-oriented and prepare them for work. They also prioritize practical skills over research skills. On the other hand, according to recent research (Tevzadze, Zaalishvili, Khurtsidze, Abelian, & Meskhi, 2017), the chances that university students in Georgia are taught by a professor who is actively engaged in research are minimal. If this is so, one would expect the university to be prioritizing practical skills over research skills, which is contrary to our findings. It can be hypothesized that, in fact, teaching and knowledge transfer take precedence over both practical skills acquisition and research.

The qualitative data showed that students do not think about leaving the university, even if their expectations about employment fade away. This is unlike some other literature on expectations where students think of withdrawing already in first year (e.g. Thomas, 2012; Harrison, 2006). It would be logical for students to resort to vocational education, particularly because the jobs that are most demanded in Georgia belong to the vocational/professional sphere. A recent study organized by the Ministry of Labor, Health and Social Affairs of Georgia, found that the jobs in most demand nationwide were: export manager, sales manager, financier, accountant, food technologist, automation specialist, head of technical service etc. (Agenda.ge, 2016). However, as discussed above, the vocational sector is small, marked with stereotypes and remains unpopular (Kitiashvili & Sumbadze, 2018).

## 5. Conclusion

To conclude, it seems that student expectations and perceptions of university are very much employment focused and students prioritize practical skills over research skills. On the other hand, there is no alignment between student and administrator perceptions about which function universities should serve – traditional/classical or more vocational/employment oriented.

The present research contributes to the literature on student expectations in several ways: Firstly, it is the only

research in post-Soviet Georgia examining student expectations of university on a national scale. Secondly, it gives us an idea of how students understand the function of the university versus how university administrators understand it. Finally, it provides an avenue for comparative research that would include other post-Soviet countries.

Based on the research findings, the following recommendations have been formulated:

- Universities should make it clear through their mission statements what should be expected of them.
- Universities should reach out to prospective students in order to communicate the purpose of the university with them and explain what it is like to study at the university.
- Schools should incorporate career counseling and assist students in determining their future studies and career.
- The universities should launch so called higher vocational/professional education programs where students can still study at university but for a shorter period and with a more practical focus. It is noteworthy that the time of publishing this article, the government has started working on this initiative. If implemented, this would help universities diversify their services and offer education with different purposes and outcomes; this would also help students make informed decisions and decrease unmet expectations.

To get a full picture, it is appropriate to continue research on the related topics: what the alumni of the university think retrospectively (e.g. whether university has given them the skills they needed; what they think about the primary expectation of the university etc.). What are the perceptions of private university students to determine if there is a marked difference between what students in private and public universities primarily expect; analysis of student expectations according to their field of study.

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