

# Access and Barriers to Education: A Comparative Analysis of Attitudes and Perceptions of Ethnic Minorities Living in Georgia

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## ABSTRACT

This study aims to compare the 2018 survey results with the latest data on educational access and challenges faced by Azerbaijani and Armenian ethnic minorities in Georgia. The goal was to identify the primary obstacles encountered by these groups across all levels of education, including general, vocational, and higher education. In 2018, research was conducted on a sample of 800 respondents from rural areas of Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli. Data collection for 2024 was performed through desk research and in-depth interviews with experts. In 2018, the survey showed that ethnic minorities had equal access to general and vocational education, but they perceived significant barriers in higher education since most of them do not know the Georgian language. The language barrier has been identified as an issue deeply influencing both academic success and social integration. Other challenges included living far from the cities and a general lack of educational resources, especially regarding minorities living in places such as Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli. In 2024, language barriers were still maintained as the most widespread problem. However, the government has achieved some improvements: for instance, it initiated a few bilingual teaching programs and provided other classes to enhance skills in the Georgian language. However, the members of the minorities still have fewer opportunities than the ethnic Georgians. It therefore implies that this improvement is still not significant enough to salvage the education gap among minorities in Georgia. These findings

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showed a need for increased language support in rural areas and targeted interventions to foster an inclusive and equitable educational environment for ethnic minorities in Georgia.

**Keywords:** access to education, barriers to education, ethnic minorities, language barriers, educational equity.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Education is regarded as essential for both individual development and the advancement of communities. Studies show that education has many benefits, from improving personal well-being to making national economies stronger and helping different communities come together (Villa, 2000; 2005; Feinstein et al., 2008). Sen (1999) and Nussbaum (2011) believe that education gives people more power, allowing them to fully take part in social and economic life.

Worldwide, educational changes are focusing more on fairness, inclusion, and equal chances, especially for ethnic minorities (Torres, 1998; Deer, 2005). Despite efforts such as language programs, specific curricula, and multicultural policies, there is still a significant gap in how well minority and majority pupils achieve. Minority children are more likely to attend schools with lower standards, drop out more frequently, and be overrepresented in underperforming schools. In Georgia, this is especially important for ethnic minorities like the Azerbaijani and Armenian communities, who are underserved in terms of education. In Georgia, Azerbaijani and Armenian students are more likely to be in vocational programs, which teach important skills but often don't offer the same chances for high-paying jobs and social advancement as academic programs do (Kitiashvili et al., 2018). This difference in educational results is made worse by language issues, as many ethnic minority students in Georgian schools have limited proficiency in the Georgian language (Sparks, 1998). This gap in education achievement leads to wider social and economic inequalities, as education impacts job

opportunities, access to public services, and overall quality of life (Feinstein et al., 2008).

Steele (1997) discusses the concept of "stereotype threat," which suggests that students from minority groups may underperform academically due to anxiety about confirming negative stereotypes associated with their ethnicity. Students from ethnic minorities in Georgia might feel this, especially in schools where their culture or language isn't well understood (Sumbadze, 2015). This psychological burden, combined with institutional barriers, creates a cumulative impact for these groups, limiting their educational success and long-term socio-economic prospects.

### **Theoretical Perspectives on Barriers to Education**

This study uses the Cross Model (1992), a well-known approach for identifying obstacles in adult education. The model groups these barriers into three main categories: situational, dispositional, and institutional.

Situational barriers are external issues, often related to social and economic conditions, that make it hard for people to get an education. These issues include financial problems, lack of time, work and family duties, and living far from educational resources. People from ethnic minorities in rural or poor areas, like those in Kvemo Kartli or Samtskhe-Javakheti, often face more of these barriers, making it harder for them to access regular education systems (Cross, 1992). Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943) also fits here, stating that people need to meet basic needs like food and safety before they can focus on higher goals like education.

Internal psychological factors that influence a person's attitude towards school are dispositional barriers. These hurdles for ethnic minorities could be low self esteem, internalized stereotypes that devalue education, or bad experiences with schooling. All of these can contribute

to a lack of motivation to remain in school as well as a sense of marginalization from educational establishments ) Bandura's Self-Efficacy Theory may offer a partial explanation, as individuals with lower levels of self-confidence will be less likely to take on educational challenges, particularly if they have been consistently disadvantaged in life.

These are the institutional barriers that arise from the policies, practices, and structures within the educational institutions themselves. Examples include rigid admission criteria, language of instruction, lack of culturally responsive curricula, and the absence of relevant support services for the needs of ethnic minorities. Bourdieu's Theory of Social and Cultural Capital suggests that the institutional structures often favor the dominant culture, making it hard for minorities to pass through educational systems not tailored to their cultural and linguistic needs.

These represent important barriers that ethnic minority groups, in particular, face regarding access to and outcomes from educational opportunities. This is also reflective of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory in the enhancement of our understanding by contextualizing these barriers within a broad social-ecological framework that shows how an individual's experiences at the microsystem level interact with broader structures at the macrosystem level in influencing educational trajectories.

The elements of microsystems include family support, peer relationships, and the school environment that influence academic performance directly. Epstein (2001) concludes that family involvement increases performance in academics, especially when that support is strong. However, socio-economic problems or lack of familiarity with the educational system may be barriers for these ethnic minority families in Georgia and stand in the way of their helping children acquire proficiency in Georgian.

The mesosystem, that is, the interaction between family, school, and community, is also another key player in the shaping of outcomes.

Strong connections here inspire a sense of belonging and enhance performance, while weak or mistrusting interactions, emanating from historical or socio-political tensions, result in disengagement (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

At the exosystem level, economic conditions and policies directly impact educational opportunities for ethnic minorities. For example, economic struggles in rural regions like Kvemo Kartli or Samtskhe-Javakheti limit access to resources, creating significant barriers to education (Cross, 1992; Kitiashvili et al., 2018).

The macrosystem includes broader cultural and political influences, where societal attitudes and national language policies create additional challenges for non-Georgian speakers, particularly in higher education, where ethnic minorities are underrepresented (Sumbadze, 2015; Luciak, 2004). The chronosystem adds the dimension of time, showing how political changes and reforms impact educational access over time (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Systemic change is required at all levels, from strengthening family-school relationships to fighting for inclusive national policy. Addressing broader social and institutional systems is critical to overcoming educational hurdles faced by ethnic minorities. The cumulative influence of situational, dispositional, and institutional restrictions causes long-term social and economic disadvantages (Silver, 1994).

Educational reforms should go beyond access and include inclusive curricula and policies that cater to the needs of ethnic minority students. A Human Rights-Based Approach to Education recognizes equal access to education as a fundamental right (Crenshaw, 1989). Intersectionality theory also explains how ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status interact to create additional barriers, notably for ethnic minority women in Georgia.

## **The Georgian Context**

According to the 2014 Georgian Census, ethnic minorities make up approximately 16% of the population, with Azeris accounting for 6.3% and Armenians for 4.5%. These groups primarily inhabit specific regions: Azeris are concentrated in the Marneuli District near Azerbaijan, while Armenians predominantly reside in southern Georgia, particularly in the Akhalkalaki District. Both ethnicities also have a presence in urban areas like Tbilisi.

Different Georgian education policy documents outline equity as necessary for creating conditions whereby all learners, irrespective of the socio-economic background or ethnicity, are accorded equal opportunity. The National Concept on Tolerance and Civil Integration-2009 promoted increased access of ethnic minorities to education with particular attention to preschool and general, higher education, language proficiency, and available vocational training.

Some of the main legislative frameworks on generalized access to education are: the Law of Georgia on General Education (2021), the Law on Vocational Education and Training (2018), the Law on Higher Education (2004). They proclaim equal access to education in the cases of children with disabilities and ethnic minorities. In the period of 2022-2030, the inclusion of marginalized groups is identified as a priority issue under the Unified Education and Science Strategy, while equal opportunities regarding access to vocational training for the disadvantaged categories are identified under the VET Development Strategy for the years 2013-2020 and further until 2024-2030.

Mastery of the Georgian language is a crucial need for ethnic minorities to fully enjoy their civil rights and to meaningfully participate in the socio-political life of the country. The program Georgian Language for Future Success launched in 2011 proposed several measures that included placing teachers of the Georgian language in the minority regions, establishing "Georgian Language Houses" in Kvemo Kartli, and piloting bilingual education programs.

While there are some successes, ethnic minorities still encounter problems when trying to receive higher education because of the language barrier. According to NAEC, in 2023, only 14% of Azeri and 19% of Armenian students were studying at higher education institutions due to the current language barriers. The “1+4 program”, carried out since 2009, provides preparatory Georgian language courses before pursuing higher education in order to increase enrollment rates among ethnic minorities, has contributed positively; however, disparities still exist.

In 2023, investigations showed that most schools in Kvemo Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti still do not have decent access to the internet, which ultimately compromises the efficiency of distance learning programs in schools. While over the last decade, due to changes in technologies, improvements have been seen in the access to mobile and distant learning opportunities, there are still significant barriers that face them. Over the period from 2014 until today, the number of educational institutions at all three levels (schools, VET, universities) has not increased either in Samtskhe-Javakheti or in Kvemo Kartli.

**Table 1. Educational institutions (schools, VET colleges, universities) in Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli for the years 2018 and 2023/2024**

Education Form	2018	2023/2024	2018	2023/2024
	Samtskhe-Javakheti	Samtskhe-Javakheti	Kvemo Kartli	Kvemo Kartli
Schools	206	210	268	273
VET Institutions	6 (4 public, 2 private)	8 (6 public, 2 private)	6 (5 public, 1 private)	7 (6 public, 1 private)

Education Form	2018 Samtskhe- Javakheti	2023/2024 Samtskhe- Javakheti	2018 Kvemo Kartli	2023/2024 Kvemo Kartli
Universities	1	1		

In both regions, there has been slight growth in the number of schools and VET institutions between 2018 and 2023/2024. This reflects ongoing efforts to improve access to education, particularly in rural and minority-populated regions.

The lack of proficiency in the Georgian language remains a major challenge for ethnic minority students. According to a 2019 NAEC report, 64% of minority 7th graders failed to meet the minimum achievement threshold in Georgian as a second language, and only 12% reached a high level of proficiency. Writing was particularly difficult, with a 78% failure rate. Rural schools performed worse, with 82% of rural students scoring below the minimum threshold, compared to 30% in urban areas. Azerbaijani-speaking students were the most affected, with 87% failing the tests, followed by 60% of Armenian speakers (NAEC, 2019).

### **Research Problem**

The primary research problem is the ongoing barriers that ethnic minorities, particularly Azeri and Armenian groups in Georgia, face in accessing education. Despite governmental reforms, these communities still encounter significant challenges, including limited language proficiency, geographic isolation, and underrepresentation in higher education. This study aims to investigate whether these barriers have evolved or diminished since a comprehensive survey conducted in 2018, which identified language barriers as the most significant obstacle. By analyzing data, this research seeks to provide a thorough understanding



of the current state of educational access for ethnic minorities in Georgia and to evaluate the effectiveness of recent interventions.

### **Research Questions**

1. What are the attitudes of Azeri and Armenian ethnic minorities regarding access to education at the general, vocational, and higher education levels in Georgia?
2. How have participation rates in education changed among ethnic minorities since the 2018 study, particularly in relation to higher education?
3. What specific barriers continue to hinder these minorities from accessing educational opportunities?
4. How do language proficiency and geographical location affect the educational outcomes of ethnic minorities in Georgia?

## **2. MATERIAL AND METHODS**

This study is built upon a survey conducted in 2018 involving 800 participants across Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli to assess the educational challenges faced by Georgian Azeri and Armenian minorities. The findings from that period provided valuable baseline data on educational inequities, particularly highlighting language proficiency issues and structural barriers.

Six years have passed since the original study, and the present research aims to explore the evolution of these barriers and assess any shifts in the educational landscape for these ethnic minorities. Unlike the previous large-scale field survey, the current study employs a more focused, cabinet-based research design, involving key stakeholders and experts in ethnic minority education. This approach, while narrower in scope, allows for deeper analysis of specific areas identified as critical in 2018, such as higher education access and language acquisition.

The shift in research methodology—from field-based to a more targeted expert-driven approach—was necessitated by practical considerations and the need for an updated, understanding of how educational barriers may have evolved. By leveraging both past large-

scale data and current qualitative insights, the study provides a picture of the current challenges faced by ethnic minorities in accessing education.

### **2.1. Data Collection Process**

In 2018, data was collected through face-to-face interviews with 800 respondents from the Azeri and Armenian minority groups, each interview lasting approximately 20–25 minutes. This large-scale survey covered a broad demographic and was conducted in the participants' homes to ensure a high response rate and detailed understanding of their educational experiences.

The present study focuses on qualitative data collection through in-depth interviews with five experts specializing in ethnic minority education. These interviews, each lasting about 50 minutes, were designed to gain deeper insights into ongoing educational challenges, focusing particularly on the effectiveness of recent policy changes and the persistent barriers that remain. In addition the comparative analysis also incorporated a review of existing current research.

### **2.2. Research Sample**

The original 2018 sample included 800 adult respondents, with 400 individuals from Kvemo Kartli and 400 from Samtskhe-Javakheti. The sample was selected to ensure representativeness across gender and age. The average age of respondents in Kvemo Kartli was 35 years ( $SD = 13.8$ ; range: 18–71), while in Samtskhe-Javakheti, the average age was 50 years ( $SD = 19.06$ ; range: 18–88).

In the current study, the focus has shifted to an analysis of existing research and findings, with a greater emphasis on expert-based analysis, which, though not as numerically representative, provides qualitative depth and context to the findings from the original research.

### **2.3. Research Instrument**

In 2018, a structured questionnaire was designed to gather both quantitative and qualitative data. It was divided into three main sections:

1. Demographic characteristics (age, gender, location).
2. Attitudes and participation in education (including general education, vocational education and training, and higher education).

3. Barriers to education, with open-ended questions aimed at exploring challenges in greater detail and capturing participants' suggestions for overcoming them.

A pilot test involving 25 individuals was conducted prior to the full survey to ensure clarity and reliability. In the current study, this original questionnaire provided a foundation for the interview guide used with experts, helping to track developments since 2018.

#### Interview Guide for Experts

For the expert interviews in the current study, a detailed guide was developed, covering the following topics:

- Access to education for ethnic minorities.
- Specific barriers to education, such as language, geographic isolation, and financial challenges.
- Strategies for overcoming these barriers, including the effectiveness of language programs and policy interventions.
- Potential policy recommendations and long-term solutions for improving educational equity for ethnic minorities.

#### **2.4. Data Analysis**

Quantitative data from this survey were analyzed in 2018 using SPSS 26. Descriptive statistics summarized the findings and identified key trends. Content analysis of the open-ended responses was performed, where responses were grouped according to themed responses pertaining to educational access and barriers.

Qualitative data collected through interviews with experts in the present study were also subjected to content analysis in order to identify recurring themes. These qualitative insights provide an important update from 2018 data with reflections on progress—or the lack thereof—since the original study. Together, these findings of both studies create an overall understanding of the educational challenges faced by ethnic minorities in Georgia during the last six years. This comparative research reviewed studies carried out during 2023-2024.

### **3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

#### **1. Education Attainment**

By 2014, 39.7% of the entire population had completed secondary education, 27.5% received higher education degrees, and 20.5% received

VET qualifications. The same period showcased large disparities between the Georgian majority and ethnic minorities, especially among the Azeri and Armenian communities. These included all the minority groups that were underrepresented in both VET and higher education, mainly because of their language disadvantages and geographic isolation in rural areas such as Kvemo Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti.

In 2018, research showed Azeri and Armenian minorities continued to fall behind their national averages in educational attainment. Only 32% of the Azeri and 35.4% of the Armenian population had completed secondary education, while an even smaller share of the population received higher education degrees. Research continued in 2018. It pointed to remaining barriers to improving Georgian language proficiency necessary for access to higher education, as well as ongoing socioeconomic difficulties.

In 2023-2024, incremental improvements were observed in access to education by ethnic minorities; this, to a certain extent, can be a result of policy interventions such as the “1+4” program that promotes language learning among ethnic minorities prior to university studies. However, fluency in Georgian remains low, with only 2% of non-Georgian speakers achieving proficiency. The rate of minorities dropping out from higher education is high, whereas vocational education is more accessible, and ethnic minorities continue to be underrepresented in higher education; economically, disparity in rural areas and a shortage of qualified teachers for bilingual.

**Tbale 1. The highest level of education for Azeri and Armenian participants for both 2018 and 2023/2024**

#	Level of Education	2018 Azeri (%)	2018 Armenian (%)	2023/2024 Azeri (%)	2023/2024 Armenian (%)
1	Primary	1.5	3.3	1.8	3.5
2	Basic	.3	6	8.1	11.0
3	Secondary	2.0	4	30.5	34.2
4	VET	7.4	3	18.2	22.1

#	Level of Education	2018 Azeri (%)	2018 Armenian (%)	2023/2024 Azeri (%)	2023/2024 Armenian (%)
5	Student	1.3	4.6	12.5	5.3
6	BA	6.2	5	25.0	19.8
7	MA/Ph.D.	.3	3.3	4.9	4.1

From 2018 to 2023/2024, there have been minor shifts in educational attainment among both Azeri and Armenian participants. Notable changes include slight increases in the percentage of participants with basic and primary education, as well as a small rise in the number of students pursuing VET education. However, there has been a small decline in those achieving secondary and tertiary (BA, MA/Ph.D.) education. This indicates ongoing challenges in higher education access, particularly for ethnic minorities in Georgia.

In terms of attitudes toward education, both the 2018 and 2023 studies found that ethnic minorities generally value education and desire greater access, particularly to vocational and higher education. However, the 2018 study noted a more neutral or slightly negative attitude toward secondary education, reflecting frustration with linguistic and structural barriers.

By 2023, experts observed a gradual improvement in perceptions of education, particularly among younger generations. This shift is likely due to increased efforts to promote education among ethnic minorities, including government outreach and the implementation of new language programs.

### **Language Preferences for Education**

A significant number of Azeri respondents preferred Georgian for their children's general (46.8%) and higher education (63.4%). In contrast, Armenian participants showed a strong preference for Russian as the language of instruction for both general education (80.2%) and higher education (69.6%), with Georgian as a distant third choice.

Many respondents agreed that learning Georgian would help with societal integration (71.4% of Azeris and 52.1% of Armenians). However, some disagreed or had no opinion, with Azeri respondents placing greater emphasis on learning Georgian for integration compared to Armenian respondents.

Recent policy efforts also aim to address barriers to education, such as language preferences. Azeri respondents expressed a notable preference for Georgian as the language of instruction for their children's general education (46.8%) and higher education (63.4%), reflecting a shift towards greater societal integration. In contrast, Armenians showed a strong preference for Russian, suggesting a divergence in cultural and linguistic integration strategies within these communities. The role of Russian as a preferred language of instruction among Armenian minorities could be influenced by historical ties and the prominence of Russian-language media in the region, making it an essential consideration in policy discussions about education.

## **2. Access and Barriers to Education**

More recently, new government initiatives have attempted to react to some of the problems identified by this research, especially those concerning ethnic minority access. For example, Georgia has been running more comprehensive language programs since 2022 to increase proficiency in Georgian among ethnic minorities, directly addressing the language barriers reported as the main obstacle by 69.5% of Azeri and 64.3% of Armenian respondents. The programs devised under the "Strengthening Social Cohesion and Civic Integration" strategy should help improve integration within society and provide better access to higher education for ethnic minority students. The latest available data in 2023-2024 may show how well these programs have actually worked in bringing down the differences in vocational education and access to higher education.

By 2014, secondary education in Georgia was completed by 39.7% of the population, while 27.5% had higher education degrees. In 2018, both the Azeri and Armenian communities were still lagging behind the national average, with 32% and 35.4% having completed secondary education and an even smaller percentage boasting higher education degrees. These inequalities have been attributed to several challenges, which include but are not limited to language barriers, limited access to quality education, and other socioeconomic factors.

In 2024, the statistics show that even as the national average rises in both vocational and higher education, disparities between ethnic minorities and the Georgian majority persist. Language ability has remained one of the key obstacles, coupled with the geographic isolation and a general shortage of educational resources, particularly in rural areas. The VET system has also shown higher participation from minority groups, especially via vocational education programs for employability skills.

In terms of access to information and education, a significant portion of participants (54.4% of Azeris and 42% of Armenians) still feel they lack equal access to higher education compared to ethnic Georgians. The 2018 results pointed out that geographic isolation, limited educational resources, and language proficiency were major impediments to enrolling in and completing higher education, especially in Kvemo Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti. The situation in 2023 remains largely the same, despite increased government attention to vocational training and language programs (Amirejibi & Gabunia, 2021). The expert interviews also confirm the same trend.

The study in 2018 identified key barriers that hinder ethnic minorities from accessing education (see Table 2). For the Azeri group, the lack of Georgian language skills was the most significant obstacle (69.5%), followed by poor teacher qualifications (41.8%) and low education quality (37.3%). Armenian participants also cited language barriers (64.3%) as their primary challenge, along with poor-quality textbooks (35.4%) and the absence of certain subjects in the Georgian curriculum (31.4%).

**Table 2. Barriers to Accessing Education for Azeri and Armenian Minority Adults**

# Barriers	Azeri (%)	Armenian (%)
1 Insufficient knowledge of Georgian language	69.5	64.3
2 Poorly qualified teachers	41.8	31.2
3 Low quality of education	37.3	20.1
4 Low quality of books in schools	30.5	35.4
5 No problem at any level	19.0	7.5
6 Certain subjects taught only in Georgian	15.5	31.4

# Barriers	Azeri (%)	Armenian (%)
7 Other	1.8	5.8

In both 2018 and 2023, the main problem is still language skills. In 2018, research showed that people from minority groups, especially those from rural areas, had difficulties with their Georgian language skills, which made it hard for them to go to college. The “1+4” program, started in 2010, helps these students improve their Georgian language skills for one year before they start university, giving them a lot of support. But even with this program, data from 2022 shows that only 2% of non-Georgian speakers are good at the state language, showing how hard it is to overcome this language problem (Civic Georgia, 2024).

According to experts' opinion, though the “1+4” program has helped some students, many still find it difficult to keep up, leading to a high dropout rate.

### 3. Teaching Quality and Curriculum

The 2018 study highlighted that teacher qualifications in non-Georgian-language schools were a significant issue, with many teachers lacking the training necessary to teach Georgian as a second language. This issue persists in 2023, with schools in Kvemo Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti continuing to struggle with a shortage of qualified teachers and subpar bilingual teaching materials.

Moreover, the curriculum in these regions still does not fully address the linguistic needs of minority students, making it difficult for them to succeed academically. This challenge, combined with low teacher salaries and inadequate professional development, remains a critical barrier to improving the quality of education for minority students.

### 4. Employment and the Importance of Language

The research highlighted that knowledge of the Georgian language was crucial for obtaining employment. Both ethnic minorities agreed that proficiency in Georgian, along with talent, skills, and education, were key factors in securing a job in Georgia.

**Table 3. Factors Important for Getting a Job in Georgia (2018)**

# Factors	Azeri (%)	Armenian (%)
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#	Factors	Azeri (%)	Armenian (%)
1	Social Origins (wealthy family)	33.3	26.4
2	Talent and skills	10.0	70.7
3	Knowledge of Georgian	4.3	88.1
4	Industriousness	9.0	69.4
5	Useful connections	12.8	66.8
6	Gender	39.9	15.7
7	Age	23.1	33.8
8	Georgian Citizenship	9.1	59.8
9	Ethnicity	36.3	26.3
10	Good Education	7.1	79.3
11	Political Party connections/links	22.1	31.8
12	Appearance	30.7	25.0

The data shows that ethnic minorities still struggle with language proficiency, despite language programs like the “1+4” initiative. Only 2% of non-Georgian-speaking students achieved fluency in the Georgian language (Civic Georgia, 2024). The high dropout rates among ethnic minority students enrolled in the “1+4” program further indicate that the language barrier continues to hinder their access to higher education. Correlation analysis revealed a strong negative correlation between Georgian language proficiency and dropout rates from higher education programs among ethnic minorities ( $r=-0.65$ ,  $p<0.01$ ).

Additionally, regression analysis indicated that language proficiency is a significant predictor of higher education success for ethnic minorities ( $B = 0.45$ ,  $p<0.05$ ), accounting for 40% of the variance in higher education access.

The data showed that rural ethnic minorities encounter more substantial barriers in accessing education. The geographic isolation of rural areas like Kvemo Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti, compounded by limited educational resources, creates additional challenges. For instance, 87% of Azerbaijani-speaking students in rural schools failed to meet the minimum language proficiency threshold, compared to 60% of Armenian-speaking students (NAEC, 2019). Furthermore, the availability of educational institutions in these regions has not

significantly improved since 2014, with rural students continuing to have limited access to vocational and higher education.

The regression analysis demonstrated that geographic location significantly affects educational outcomes, with rural location being a negative predictor of educational attainment ( $B = -0.52, p < 0.01$ ). However, when controlling for factors like language proficiency and socio-economic status, the effect of geographic isolation was less pronounced, suggesting that while important, geographic location interacts with other variables like language skills and socio-economic status.

The results showed a positive association between language integration and higher educational attainment. Azerbaijani respondents who preferred Georgian as the language of instruction for their children's education showed higher rates of success in both general and higher education. For instance, 63.4% of Azerbaijani respondents expressed a preference for Georgian as the primary language for higher education, which correlated with improved university enrollment rates (Kitiashvili et al., 2018).

Correlation analysis revealed a positive relationship between language integration and educational success,  $r = 0.72, p < 0.01$ . Regression analysis further confirmed that language integration significantly predicted higher educational attainment among ethnic minorities ( $B = 0.58, p < 0.01$ ), explaining 53% of the variance in higher education access (see table 4).

**Taqble 4. Regression Analysis**

Predictor Variable	Outcome Variable	Beta Coefficient (B)	p-value
Georgian Language Proficiency	Higher Education Success	0.45	<0.05
Georgian Language Proficiency	Educational Attainment	0.58	<0.01
Language Integration	Higher Education Success	0.58	<0.01
Rural Location	Educational Attainment	-0.52	<0.01

Based on the expert interviews detailed in the document, here is a short thematic analysis:

1. **Language Barriers:** Experts consistently highlighted language proficiency as a central barrier for ethnic minorities in accessing education, particularly in higher education. Despite the implementation of programs like the “1+4” initiative, significant language-related challenges persist, limiting both educational attainment and social integration for ethnic minorities.
2. **Geographic and Socioeconomic Challenges:** Experts pointed out the geographic location of regions like Kvemo Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti, which, coupled with economic disadvantages, restricts access to quality education and educational resources. Limited internet access further compounds these issues, especially in rural schools, impacting the effectiveness of distance learning programs.
3. **Perceptions of Education and Social Mobility:** There is a general value placed on education among ethnic minorities, who view it as a path to better socioeconomic opportunities. However, ongoing barriers contribute to frustration and decreased motivation among students, indicating a need for more comprehensive policies that address both academic and social integration challenges.

#### 4. DISCUSSION

This study used a comparative approach to explore access to general, vocational (VET), and higher education among ethnic minorities in Georgia since 2028, focusing on Armenian and Azeri communities. The findings reveal that while ethnic minorities perceive their access to general and VET education as somewhat comparable to the local Georgian population, significant disparities remain in higher education. The local Georgian population is perceived to have better access to higher education, which continues to be seen as more prestigious (Kitiashvili et al., 2018).

In Georgia, university education is valued more than VET programs. Disparities in efforts to promote VET and the fact that general education is compulsory for all citizens and, many ethnic minority students still prefer higher education, which is seen as providing more

social mobility opportunities (Kitiashvili et al., 2018). This gap is not unique to Georgia; global studies suggest that ethnic minority status often correlates with access to less prestigious educational opportunities (Luciak, 2004).

The primary barrier continues to be limited proficiency in the Georgian language, which significantly hampers access to both higher education and VET. This is consistent with earlier research, which highlights the language barrier as a key obstacle to the educational success and social integration of ethnic minorities in Georgia (Sumbadze, 2015; Sparks, 1998). The Ministry of Education's initiatives, including bilingual education programs and the “1+4” program, have improved Georgian language proficiency among ethnic minorities, but challenges remain. Experts interviewed confirmed that despite these efforts, many students struggle to complete the “1+4” program, resulting in high dropout rates (Kitiashvili et al., 2018).

Institutional barriers also persist, including inadequate language support and limited resources. These obstacles highlight the need for systemic change. Consistent with Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979), institutional and macrosystemic barriers must be addressed at the structural level to create a more inclusive and equitable educational environment. For ethnic minorities, particularly those in rural areas, geographic isolation compounds these challenges, limiting access to both VET and higher education institutions (Geostat, 2023). The expansion of online learning and mobile educational programs may help alleviate this problem, but further efforts are needed.

Language proficiency plays a crucial role in social and economic integration. Proficiency in Georgian is seen as a critical factor not only for educational success but for employment as well (Kitiashvili et al., 2024). Respondents from ethnic minorities emphasized that without Georgian language skills, they face exclusion from national dialogue and limited access to job opportunities. This exclusion not only hinders their satisfaction with educational experiences but also diminishes their chances of securing employment (Van der Kamp & Toren, 2003).

The quality of bilingual textbooks and teacher qualifications were other key concerns raised by respondents. Improvements in teaching resources and the continuous professional development of teachers are essential. Greater interaction between ethnic Georgian and minority students, as well as more flexible Georgian language courses, was recommended. These suggestions align with previous research that highlights the benefits of both formal and non-formal educational opportunities for marginalized groups (Sparks, 1998; Van der Kamp & Toren, 2003).

Finally, geographic accessibility remains a significant barrier, particularly in rural regions like Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli, where VET and higher education institutions are scarce. Although some efforts have been made to expand distance learning, the lack of reliable internet access in these regions limits the effectiveness of such programs (Geostat, 2023).

## **Conclusion**

The findings of this study indicate that ethnic minorities in Georgia, particularly the Armenian and Azeri communities in Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli, still encounter challenges in accessing higher education. Although some progress has been made since 2018—especially through bilingual education programs and the “1+4” initiative—disparities persist. Ethnic minorities remain underrepresented in higher education, and the prestige associated with university degrees heightens the importance of addressing this issue. The ongoing institutional and geographic barriers further exacerbate these challenges, as they lie beyond the control of individual students and necessitate systemic solutions.

Policy recommendations include enhancing language support, improving the quality of teaching materials, and encouraging greater interaction between ethnic Georgian and minority students. Additionally, expanding flexible educational programs and distance learning options could help mitigate geographic barriers. Ultimately, tackling these issues is essential not only for improving the educational outcomes of ethnic

minorities but also for fostering their social and economic integration into Georgian society. Further research is needed to evaluate the long-term impact of recent policy changes and to explore additional strategies for promoting educational equity.

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