

International Student Mobility and Related Challenges in Georgia

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Abstract

Education is a source of personal and professional growth and social progress. The role of education in promoting sustainable development and the social well-being of the country is noteworthy. In 2005, Georgia's accession to the Bologna Process laid the foundation for the Europeanization of the country's higher education system. Since then, the importance and orientation of international student mobility, both the driving force and the result of the Bologna Process, have increased. International student mobility involves the movement of students abroad for academic development and international experience. It allows students to learn about new cultures, share their own culture, form a value system, and develop complex skills. International mobility offers students the opportunity to receive high-quality education and acquire skills that, in most cases, are not taught in a local higher education institution. It is also considered a way to access international career prospects, which improves employment opportunities in today's rapidly changing labor market.

Over the past two decades, reforms in the Georgian higher education system have focused on improving compliance with European standards, quality of education, international competitiveness, and sustainability. Strategically effective steps have been taken towards Georgia's integration into the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) as a full member. However, for a small and still developing country like Georgia, despite continuous efforts to meet European standards, there are still several challenges regarding international student mobility.

This paper aims to study international short-term student mobility and short-term mobility programs operating in Georgia and to identify barriers related to the mobility process.

Keywords: higher education, international student mobility, Bologna process, European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

Introduction

The value of academic achievements and global education is increasing daily in Georgia. In constantly changing conditions, partnerships between educational institutions worldwide have gained significant importance as a tool for facilitating the mobility of students across borders.

Authorized higher education institutions operating in Georgia strive to establish international partnerships to improve the quality of education, become competitive at the local level, increase the institution's visibility in the international arena, and strengthen their integration into the single European educational space. An integral part of the process as mentioned earlier is international short-term student mobility, which focuses on sharing transnational and global values in the national higher education

policy. Student mobility across borders significantly impacts the development of each individual, university, and society as a whole. International student mobility is a catalyst for academic advancement, cultural exchange, economic growth, and international understanding.

The Law of Georgia „On Higher Education” defines the promotion of student mobility among higher education goals.¹ The law also emphasizes the importance and need for educational programs to be exchanged between Georgian higher education institutions and academic institutions recognized by the legislation of a foreign country. That is why universities are focused on encouraging international mobility, which contributes to developing multicultural and intercultural skills among young people. This, in turn, leads to the creation of individual and social well-being. However, despite the reality mentioned above, the international mobility process is still associated with several challenges for students.

The relevance of the research issue stems from its state and public importance. The growing interest in international mobility ensures the integration of global standards into the Georgian higher education system, increasing the competitiveness of educational institutions and the quality of teaching. International student mobility and its results are a field of interest for researchers of various disciplines. Participation in exchange programs is the foundation of students' personal development and plays a significant role in their self-realization. As a result, the state receives competent young people for both the local and international labor markets.

This work has both theoretical and practical value, which emphasizes its uniqueness. From a theoretical point of view, the work analyzes both Georgian-language and English-language articles and studies on this topic. As for the practical value, it lies in the novelty of the issue, since there are almost no thorough studies on the international mobility of students and the challenges related to it at the local level in Georgian literature. This is precisely what determines the uniqueness of the issue.

The article reviews the existing literature on international student mobility, its benefits, and related challenges at both the international and local levels. At the initial stage, desk research of existing Georgian and English-language theoretical sources on international student mobility was carried out. Regarding the research methodology, it is worth noting that to study the issue in depth, a choice was made for the qualitative research in-depth interview method. The research interviewed six respondents, including education experts and representatives of the quality assurance and international relations departments of universities. In addition, the article includes an analysis of the research results, conclusions and recommendations.

1. International Student Mobility in Georgia - Current Reality

As mentioned, international student mobility is a driving force of the Bologna Process. In 2005, at the Bergen Summit, Georgia became a signatory to the Bologna Declaration, after which the Georgian educational space became part of the European educational space.¹ Since the official membership of the Bologna Process, all European standards and requirements have been applied to the Georgian higher education system, including encouraging international student mobility. Georgia's membership in the Bologna Process is also linked to the introduction of the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS). The ECTS system involves the transfer of credits accumulated by a student during mobility at the host university upon returning to their home university.²

The Bologna Process aimed to eliminate barriers and foster partnerships between signatory states by encouraging student mobility. According to the Leuven Communiqué of the Bologna Process, student

¹ Article 3, Law of Georgia “On Higher Education”. December 21, 2004.

¹ Sartania, V., “International Trends in the Higher Education System”, 2 “Globalization and Business”, 2016. p. 44.

² Erasmus+ National Office of Georgia, European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System, http://erasmusplus.org.ge/files/files/ECTS_Users'_Guide_ge.pdf / [L. s. 04.03.2025].

mobility increases the quality of higher education and strengthens the integration of students into the European academic and cultural space. Mobility creates an atmosphere oriented towards the development of personal potential and the formation of international cooperation between both students and educational institutions.³ In addition, mobility promotes respect for diversity and linguistic pluralism, which supports the multilingual tradition of European higher education. Student mobility also contributes to the increase in student employability, expanding knowledge dissemination and developing intellectual and linguistic competencies.⁴ Through mobility, direct contact is established between different cultures and European higher education systems.

There are two types of international student mobility: “vertical” and “horizontal”. The term “vertical mobility” is defined as a move from an economically less developed country to a country with a more economically developed and academically superior education system. In contrast, “horizontal mobility” refers to a move where the academic quality of the host country and educational institution is more or less equal to that of the home country and educational institution. Most experts agree that student mobility worldwide is more often vertical than horizontal.⁵ Vertical mobility is a source of development of higher academic qualifications, cross-cultural competencies, and “soft” skills necessary for employment. Soft skills include communication, problem-solving, adaptation, flexibility, and teamwork.⁶ Soft skills enable graduates to function effectively in a modern working environment, increasing their employability in local and international labor markets. In vertical mobility, students aim to develop competencies at a higher level through mobility than they would have achieved through studying in their home country. With this goal in mind, they are ready to adapt and adjust to the host country’s social and cultural environment and academic life to reach a higher level of development.

Student mobility has always been one of the central objectives of the European Higher Education Area. The most well-known and successful student mobility scheme is the European Union's Erasmus programme, which was officially launched in 1987.⁷ The Erasmus programme is part of the EU's Lifelong Learning Projects and is a means of multinational cooperation for universities. The programme initially focused on credit mobility within Europe. Credit mobility, also known as temporary or exchange mobility, is the most common form of international student mobility. This short-term period of study is based on exchange agreements between educational institutions. Over time, the Erasmus programme has expanded to encompass a variety of educational initiatives. In 2014, the EU merged several programmes (Erasmus, Leonardo da Vinci, Comenius) into a more comprehensive framework, Erasmus+. One of the main objectives of the Erasmus+ programme is to contribute to the achievement of the objectives of the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training, which includes promoting lifelong mobility and improving the quality and efficiency of education and training.⁸

The activities supported by the Erasmus+ programme are closely linked to the shared priorities of the third, i.e., non-associated/partner country cooperation policy. Georgia has been participating in the Erasmus programme since 1996. In 2015, the country officially joined the Erasmus+ programme as a

³ European Higher Education Area (EHEA), “Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Communiqué”, <https://eha.info/page-ministerial-conference-Leuven-Louvain-la-Neuve-2009/> [L. s. 05.03.2025].

⁴ European Higher Education Area (EHEA), „Rome Ministerial Communiqué“, https://eha.info/Upload/Rome_Ministerial_Communique.pdf / [L. s. 05.03.2025].

⁵ Teichler, U., „Internationalisation Trends in Higher Education and the Changing Role of International Student Mobility“, 5 „Journal of International Mobility“, 2017. p. 15.

⁶ Granja, C. D., Visentin, F., „International Student Mobility and Academic Performance: Does Timing Matter?“, 65 „Research in Higher Education“, 2025. p. 4.

⁷ López-Duarte, C., Maley, J. F., Vidal-Suárez, M. M., „Main challenges to international student mobility in the European arena“, 126 „Scientometrics“, 2021. p. 10.

⁸ Erdei, L. A., & Káplár-Kodácsy, K., "International Student Mobility at a Glance - Promising Potential and Limiting Barriers of Non-traditional Mobility", European University Foundation.

https://uni-foundation.eu/uploads/2020_International%20Student%20Mobility%20at%20a%20Glance_final.pdf / [L. s. 10.03.2025].

“partner country”. Within the Erasmus+ Credit Mobility programme framework, 37 Georgian higher education institutions cooperate with higher education institutions from 33 European countries. In addition, Georgia is one of the most prosperous countries in the same programme, ranking 6th among the 141 participating (Table 1). The Erasmus+ programme allows young people to study abroad for 2 to 12 months.⁹ Mobility is implemented based on a partnership agreement between Georgian and European universities.

Table 4

#	Country	Number of scholarships
1	Albania	4 062
2	Russia	3 907
3	Ukraine	3 904
4	Bosnia and Herzegovina	3 861
5	Israel	3 474
6	Georgia	2 888

Source: National Erasmus+ Office Georgia. 2025.

Erasmus+ international mobility is an essential tool for improving the teaching process at Georgian universities and for the organizational development of institutions. The progress of Georgia's participation in the Erasmus+ program is also evidenced by statistics, which show that the number of those involved in the program is increasing yearly. In particular, in 2019, Georgia obtained 1,144 scholarships within the framework of the ERASMUS+ ICM (International Credit Mobility) program, in 2020 - 1,134, in 2022 - 2,267, and in 2023 - 2,298 scholarships (Table 2).¹⁰ It is worth noting that there is no data on the exact number of participants in the ICM program in 2021, due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has significantly disrupted international mobility programs.

Table 5

Year	Outbound
2019	1 144
2020	1 134
2021	-
2022	2 267
2023	2 298

Source: European Commission, “Factsheets and statistics on Erasmus+” 2025.

Therefore, international student mobility is implemented through network/joint programs and exchange programs organized by two or more universities. The institutional policy of universities is oriented

⁹ Erasmus+ National Office of Georgia, “International Credit Mobility”.<http://erasmusplus.org.ge/ka/services/icm/> [L. s. 09.03.2025].

¹⁰ European Commission, “Factsheets and statistics on Erasmus+” <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/resources-and-tools/statistics-and-factsheets/> [L. s. 09.03.2025].

precisely on such cooperation to increase student mobility and strengthen international partnerships. Mobility is often based on exchanges between educational institutions, i.e., partnership agreements. Existing international studies on mobility show that when moving through exchange programs or based on a contract, students face difficulties in recognizing credits accumulated at the host university, which is caused by the inconsistency of the study courses of the host and home universities. Studies show that the recognition of credits is a topical issue both at the international level and in Georgia.

In addition to the above, joint programs are implemented based on an agreement between higher education institutions of Georgia and a foreign country. These programs are also a feature of the European Higher Education Area and contribute to the deepening of cooperation between educational institutions due to the implementation of joint programs. The goal of joint programs is to create opportunities for quality education and collaboration, thus expanding student mobility prospects.¹¹ Studying in a joint program is associated with fewer challenges than participating in an exchange program, as students do not face the difficulties of course compliance and credit recognition. However, despite this, the demand for joint educational programs is low, as students do not have the necessary language competence, the ability to operate independently, social skills, or cultural competencies required to adapt to a foreign country.

Thus, development is one of students' main goals when deciding to participate in mobility. Student mobility is beneficial not only in terms of academic progress but also in the subsequent employment of graduates. Through international mobility, a student's awareness of another country's social conditions and cultural environment increases, and social skills are developed to help them adapt to a different environment. Mobility positively impacts students' cultural awareness, intelligence, empathy, adaptability and helps them develop intercultural competencies, cross-cultural communication skills, and global thinking. International mobility is a socialization process that affects students' ability to live beyond national and cultural borders and to form their identity.

2. Student Mobility: International Experience and Practice

In order to realize the potential of international student mobility and improve the current situation in Georgia, it is important to familiarize with and share foreign practice. For this purpose, the experience of Estonia, Lithuania, the Czech Republic and Austria is presented.

Estonian higher education is regulated by the Estonian Higher Education Act. It is at the higher education level that Estonia has the greatest opportunities for international mobility. Of particular note is short-term international mobility, which is a key indicator of the internationalization of education. In this regard, the Erasmus+ program promotes the learning mobility of students at all three levels across Europe and the world.¹² The Estonian Education Strategy for 2021-2035 is an important document, as one of its main directions is to strengthen international cooperation. To achieve this goal, a strategic step has been defined as promoting learning mobility and increasing opportunities for international learning mobility for Estonian students. This is also confirmed by the increased participation in mobility projects; in particular, according to 2023, 6,930 Estonian students left the country for study purposes.¹³ Another program supporting international mobility of undergraduate students is Nordplus, which creates mobility and networking opportunities for students. The main beneficiaries of the Nordplus program are students from the Nordic and Baltic countries.

¹¹ National Center for Education Quality Development, "Joint Programs", <https://eqe.ge/ka/page/static/855/ertoblivi-programebi/> [L. s. 12.03.2025].

¹² European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA), Mobility and internationalisation, <https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-education-systems/estonia/mobility-and-internationalisation/> [L. s. 10.04.2025].

¹³ Erasmus+, Data on Erasmus+ in Estonia in 2023, <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/factsheets/2023/estonia/> [L. s. 10.04.2025].

The higher education system in Lithuania is regulated by the Law on Higher Education and Research. Strengthening outgoing academic mobility is one of the priorities of the Lithuanian Ministry of Education, Science and Sports. International mobility means the opportunity for Lithuanian students to study in another country participating in the Erasmus+ programme. Academic exchanges provide Lithuanian young people with the opportunity to deepen their academic studies, improve their language and cultural knowledge, transfer credits and have their studies recognised abroad on the basis of the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) and/or the Equivalent Credit System.¹⁴ The Erasmus+ programme allows students to spend a period of study abroad from 2 to 12 months. The main beneficiaries of the programme are students of Lithuanian higher education institutions. Participation in the exchange programme contributes to the integration of Lithuanian higher education institutions into the single European educational space.

International cooperation in the Czech Republic is making significant progress within and outside Europe. Higher education institutions offer their students study exchanges at foreign higher education institutions. International student mobility is implemented on the basis of cooperation between universities or faculties, international programs, intergovernmental or interagency agreements, research, scientific and other projects. Interuniversity cooperation is based on bilateral agreements to support student mobility, while interfaculty cooperation is based on agreements between a faculty of a higher education institution and a foreign university. Higher education institutions ensure international cooperation within the framework of programs such as Erasmus+ and CEEPUS.¹⁵ The Erasmus+ program is an important platform for cooperation between higher education institutions. The program creates opportunities for student mobility through academic exchanges. As for the international cooperation program CEEPUS, this is a Central European Exchange Program for University Studies, which aims to support regional cooperation in higher education through study visits.

Austria offers a wide range of international mobility and cooperation programs to students at all levels of education. It is worth noting that in 1995, the Central European Exchange and Scholarship Programme for University Studies - CEEPUS was established at the initiative of Austria, with the aim of bringing it closer to the European Higher Education Area. The aforementioned program creates opportunities for academic mobility for students from Central and Eastern Europe. The mobility period within CEEPUS covers a minimum of 3 and a maximum of 10 months. In addition, CEEPUS also offers students short-term exchanges (from 1 to 2 months).¹⁶ The recognition of the results of studies at the host institution is ensured by the home university, as both institutions are part of the CEEPUS network. The Education and Internationalization Agency is responsible for international mobility in Austrian higher education, one of whose functions is the administration and implementation of the Erasmus+ program. Under the Erasmus+ programme, students can apply to any university in a foreign country if their home institution has an inter-institutional agreement. On this basis, thousands of Austrian students benefit from international mobility every year. Ultimately, the learning outcomes achieved at the host institution are recognised by the home institution when compliance with the previously agreed Learning Agreement is established.

Therefore, it is important for Georgia to study the approaches of Estonia, Lithuania, the Czech Republic and Austria in terms of international student mobility, as the country strives to deepen its integration into the European higher education space. Of particular note is the internationalization policy of these countries, which considers academic exchanges not as a waste, but as a tool for the development of educational institutions. It is worth noting the practice of effective use of the Erasmus+ program, which deepens partnerships and provides for the expansion of opportunities for academic exchanges. For Georgia, as an Erasmus+ partner country, it should be clear that increasing involvement in international

¹⁴ European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA), Mobility and internationalisation, <https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/eurypedia/lithuania/mobility-higher-education/> [L. s. 12.04.2025].

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

mobility programs requires not only improved funding, but also institutional readiness. Of the practices considered, the issue of credit recognition is the most relevant for Georgia. Despite the fact that Georgia has introduced the ECTS system, challenges still exist at the practical level. Students often face difficulties in recognizing credits earned abroad. Therefore, it is desirable for Georgia to promote the convergence of learning outcomes and the harmonization of educational programs among universities.

3. Methodology and methods

Given the specificity of the research question, the qualitative research methodology was preferred. In-depth interviews and desk research were selected as research methods. The research was divided into two stages:

- At the first stage, desk research was conducted, during which the existing theoretical material on the international mobility of students was collected and analyzed.
- At the second stage of the research, in-depth interviews were conducted with six respondents, including education experts, and representatives of the quality assurance and international relations services of universities.

Respondents were selected purposefully based on their sectoral knowledge and experience on the international mobility of higher education students. Through the conducted interviews, it became possible to identify the challenges related to the international mobility of students.

A semi-structured in-depth interview was used as a research tool, for which the questions were formulated and defined in advance. The study was conducted by internationally recognized modern research ethical principles and the informed consent of participants, while maintaining anonymity and confidentiality. Adherence to ethical principles ensured honest and objective responses from respondents.

4. Research Results

According to the respondents participating in the study, promoting international mobility is a priority. The study participants focused on the main benefits of international mobility. As it turned out, the effectiveness of mobility is multifaceted: participation in mobility programs allows students to receive new information, make new contacts, and develop personally and academically. The benefits of mobility are mainly reflected at the individual level and serve to broaden the students' horizons. Exchange programs contribute to the development of language competence, critical thinking, adaptation, and interpersonal communication skills. In addition, students involved in the exchange program gain a vast network of contacts, which is associated with greater prospects for young people. Participation in exchange programs has a number of advantages, including broadening the horizons, forming a value system, gaining new knowledge, adapting to a foreign culture in a new environment, and gaining informal education and life experience. Permanent exchange creates a condition for the improvement of the educational process at the home university. Also, the student is allowed to compare and evaluate the education system and learning process, as well as the standard of living and socio-cultural environment of Georgia and the host country, which contributes to the development of comparative analysis skills. According to the respondents, mobility is a new way for students to realize themselves, as they develop their receptiveness to innovations, time management, and independent decision-making skills. In addition, students who return from mobility are more rational and tolerant. The experience they gain increases their social responsibility, become active citizens, and they reach a new level of professional development.

The respondents also spoke about the motives for students to engage in exchange programs. The following are among the main reasons given: gaining new experience, getting to know a foreign culture,

independence, self-development, self-determination, and career advancement. As respondents explain, an education in Europe is a gateway for students to a larger, globalized market.

An essential aspect of the qualitative research was identifying challenges related to the mobility process. As it turned out, great importance is attached to which country students attend or what program they study during mobility. According to respondents, for students to receive optimal benefits from an exchange program, the standards and education system of the host country need to be in line with Georgia. This fact puts on the agenda the need to consult with students before mobility about which country to choose. A significant challenge is the issue of credit recognition and course compatibility, which often limits the effectiveness of exchange programs. Students mainly face the challenge of course compatibility during mobility in specific programs (for example, computer science, computer engineering, civil engineering, and electrical engineering). When the host university's courses do not cover the courses at the local university, students returning to Georgia face difficulties recognizing the credits they have completed.

Respondents noted that introducing the ECTS system has significantly simplified student mobility. The ECTS system implies that credits should be accumulated during study and transferred to any higher education institution in any country with the same system. However, in reality, the transfer and recognition of credits are accompanied by certain difficulties. As it turned out, the courses taken by a student during international mobility should be identical or equivalent to those taught at their home higher education institution. However, in most cases, identical courses do not exist, so whether the courses are equivalent and have equivalent learning outcomes must be determined. If the learning objectives and outcomes of the courses taken differ significantly from the courses at their home university, the accumulated credits are recognized as "free credits". Free credits are not included in the credits required for obtaining a diploma but are included in the diploma supplement as an external curriculum activity. The recognition of accumulated credits is carried out through the National Center for the Development of Educational Quality. Firstly, the student submits a transcript to the center, which must confirm its authenticity. Only then does the home university have the right to recognize the credits. According to the respondents, in cases where the content of the courses taken at the host universities is inconsistent, the home university recognizes the credits received at least as "free credits". The student is forced to take an additional semester in case the free credits are already used, which is associated with an extension of the study period, additional financial costs, and a postponement of the start of his career.

In addition to challenges related to credit recognition, respondents also spoke about inequalities in participation in mobility. In particular, a large number of students who participate in international student mobility come from families with an above-average economic status and better education. Accordingly, despite the goals of the Bologna Process to make international student mobility accessible to students of all social classes, students from lower socio-economic classes have less access to it. In addition to financial issues, another problem is that social inequality affects students' awareness of the benefits of mobility. As noted by respondents, although the Erasmus+ program is particularly interested in encouraging the mobility of socially disadvantaged and vulnerable groups, in reality, their participation in the program is low due to a lack of information provision.

It is also worth noting that insufficient knowledge of a foreign language is a significant barrier to international mobility. Students with inadequate language competence cannot fully demonstrate their potential, so they often avoid participating in international mobility programs. In addition, the language barrier hinders students' academic, social, and cultural integration in the host educational institution. It is also worth noting that the interview process with candidates at the selection stage for an exchange program is an obstacle for students. Due to the lack of such cross-cutting competencies as communication skills, problem-solving skills, critical and analytical thinking, knowledge of foreign

languages, computer skills, time management, adaptability and flexibility skills, students present themselves inadequately at the interview and lose the opportunity to participate in mobility.

Conclusion

Therefore, the theoretical material discussed on the research topic and the results of the qualitative research conducted allow us to discuss the benefits and challenges of international short-term mobility. The benefits of mobility for students are multifaceted, namely:

- Strengthens students' soft skills;
- Forms an environment oriented towards students' personal growth;
- Improves students' global outlook and cultural understanding;
- Allows students to deepen their knowledge;
- Creates a basis for future career development;
- Develops students' linguistic and transversal competencies.

The study results show that international student mobility leads to an increase in the visibility of local universities. This contributes to establishing international ties by the state and improving the quality of education. Accordingly, Mobility is the cornerstone of intercultural exchange and cooperation.

Despite the existing benefits, international student mobility is hampered by challenges such as:

- Inconsistency of study courses;
- Difficulty in recognizing credits;
- Low involvement of vulnerable groups;
- Language barrier;
- Lack of transversal competencies;
- Lack of funding.

To eliminate these obstacles, the following recommendations were identified:

- In the future, the state should deepen international cooperation and ensure full compliance with the requirements of European standards;
- Obtaining more funding for mobility programs and concluding more partnership agreements between Georgian and foreign educational institutions is very important (additional scholarships will allow more students to use mobility);
- Increase awareness of the possibility of international mobility so that everyone has equal access to it;
- More emphasis should be placed on cross-cutting competencies (communication skills, foreign language, analytical skills, computer skills) in learning/teaching process so that students demonstrate their full potential.

As a result, the state will receive an increased involvement rate in mobility programs, which means having a competent, realized, and European value system-bearing young generation. In unity, all this guarantees the development of local higher educational institutions and the welfare of the state.

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