

## Equity in Access to Higher Education for Special Needs and Socially Deprived Students in Georgia

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### Abstract

The goal of the article is to explore the issue of equity in access to higher education (HE) for special needs and socially deprived students, give a vivid picture of education policy discourse in the system of higher education and show the importance of defending the principles of social justice in order to ensure inclusion for vulnerable groups. The overview of the Georgian legislation including the law of Georgia on higher education is of vital importance to see the statutory responsibilities towards socially disadvantaged groups. The analysis of the Georgian higher education system alongside the admission system is vital to understand whether it serves and meets society's needs and demands in terms of social justice and to generalize the factors that work either as incentives or impediments for socially deprived and special needs students to get a fair access to higher education.

**Key words:** admission system, equality, equity, higher education, social inclusion, social justice, special needs students, socially deprived students.

### Introduction

Many radical changes have occurred in recent years, especially, in the field of education due to globalisation and new trends, one of which, massification of education puts countries under the biggest pressure to meet societies' increased diverse demands. Therefore, the nation-states face challenges to create the policy relevant to their national interests and global demands. The role of education has substantially changed due to the processes. It is already seen as the way of supporting social mobility and leading to a welfare and sustainable future. Education policies and strategies need to develop in order to meet societies' increased demand for higher education. Widening access posed many challenges for the policy-makers in terms of social justice, since the main principles

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of social justice, such as equal opportunities, fair distribution of resources, fair and equal access to education require an immediate effective response.

Education has become pivotal for the attainment of social justice. In spite of the evident increased participation of diverse groups of people in education systems, underrepresentation of socially disadvantaged groups is still a problem. Lack of information, lack of responsibility, less involvement of the society and less protection from the state creates the obstacles for vulnerable groups. The problems need to be identified and require an active participation of the state, educational institutions, international organizations and the society to ensure inclusion.

The issue of equal representation of disadvantaged groups is dominant in education policy discourse. The importance of active involvement of disadvantaged groups in social life is vital for the society and for vulnerable groups as well. Ensuring equal rights to these groups can help them feel included in the society, and the society will inevitably benefit from the feeling of responsibility and the sense of citizenship developed in them. Various attempts and strategies have been developed and employed to equalize the opportunities of socially vulnerable groups worldwide. Fortunately, the opportunities of sharing global experiences enable countries to develop the policy appropriate for the attainment of social justice if there is a political will and societal demand.

Political will and societal demand can be decisive in attaining social equity and inclusion, because, in spite of the expansion, education systems try to respond to increasing demands by adopting different selective systems, and the systems should be based on a major principle of fairness. Access to higher education largely depends on the selection of just and transparent admission models. A lot of countries, including Georgia, apply a selective system by using standardized testing, which is quite a common practice worldwide. Interesting approaches towards the selection of students are developed across the countries.

Alongside fairness rationale, selective systems are developed to ease a state financial burden and, accordingly, funding discourse is the most vulnerable issue in the modern education policy. To redeem the possible adverse effects of education expansion, states often apply the neo-liberal model of funding discourse, which helps to increase the enrollment rate by letting (and sometimes, 'kindly' forcing) candidates pay for their tuitions. The mixed system of funding – public spending and private spending with various financial aid programs is claimed to be fair for giving wider opportunities.

The article aims to provide a highlight of major changes in the field of education globally and link these changes to specific policies underpinning certain reform initiatives in the field of education; it will explore one of the most broadly spread trends in modern policies worldwide – unprecedented focus on special educational and socially deprived students. The article attempts to explore the issue of equity in access to higher education, give a vivid picture of education policy discourse in the system of higher education and show the importance of defending the principles of social justice in order to ensure inclusion for vulnerable groups. The article presents a case of Georgia, explores reforms in its system of higher education and analyses the concepts of equality and equity of

special educational needs and socially deprived students trying to reflect on the policy approaches through formal discourse, on the one hand, and practices in higher educational institutions, on the other.

## Literature Review

### Social Justice and Higher Education

Justice is a central moral standard in social life. The controversy over its meaning and interpretation is caused by its crucial role in transforming individual lives, relationship, and societies. Its inter- or trans-disciplinary nature requires fundamental analysis in connection to other related fields (Cohen, 1986).

Social justice exists when people having common humanity are entitled to equitable treatment, support for their human rights, and a fair allocation of community resources. They are not discriminated against or prejudiced based on gender, sexuality, religion, political affiliations, age, race, belief, disability, location, social class, and socioeconomic circumstances (Robinson, 2016).

It is regarded as distributive justice. Therefore, equality, equity, fairness, and distribution are the most commonly used concepts in this regard. The complexity of 'distribution' requires analysis, as this concept refers not only to division of benefits, but also to allocation of burdens as well produced in the joint labor with the help of social and institutional arrangements (Oduaran, 2006). Needless to say, that the state is the primary institution in collaboration with other institutions and agencies that influence the shares of resources available to different people (Waghid, 2014).

Defending the principles of social justice is important in every field, but the role of education in transforming society and reducing inequality is priceless. Education, especially higher education, has always been connected with the achievement of something morally worthwhile. Accordingly, it would be appropriate to connect higher education with the attainment of social justice (Waghid 2014).

The most significant theory of Rawls (cited in Meyer, 2013) about social justice defines three main principles: the liberty principle, the principle of fair equality of opportunity and the difference principle. This theory accepts some inequalities, as the difference principle implies that the greatest benefit should be given to the least advantaged members of society. Under a Rawlsian approach certain degree of inequality is acceptable in access to higher education if these inequalities allow the higher education system as a whole to achieve greater degrees of excellence, but here the question of 'reverse discrimination' arises and "since the application of social justice as a principle is not supposed to discriminate against anybody, there cannot be any grounds to be 'vindictive' and discriminate against any individual or group of individuals" (Oduaran, 2006, p. 71).

Considering funding discourse in terms of social justice is also very important. A neoliberal model, the direct response to global changes, implies a mixture of funding streams. In the period of the dramatic increase of

enrollment, the state could not continue the tax-funded socio-democratic access model since it is practically impossible to finance every low-income student. Consequently, more students are given the opportunities of private funding, but through ruinous bank loans and the role of the state is confined to the creation of new funding systems.

How is it possible that the scarce commodity be distributed among all competing constituents without violating their fundamental rights? The answer to the question is sought in education systems and their policies. Therefore, higher education systems as a multi-dimensional discourse are subjects to various and conflicting expectations and demands, such as equity, excellence, efficiency, etc. (Mayer, et al., 2013).

### **The Concept of Equity and Equality**

Equity in education is the most important facet in social justice, by distribution of education citizens are given opportunities "to develop their capacities and to participate fully in society" (Waghid, 2014, p. 1459).

To define equity is not easy; it embraces various dimensions and different scholars introduce different explanations to it. According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Review of Equity in Education, equity is defined as a concept having two dimensions: fairness and inclusion. Fairness means that personal and social status (i.e. gender, socio-economic position or ethnic origin) should not be deterrents in the way of achieving educational potential and inclusion assuming a basic minimum standard of education for all (Dias, 2015).

There are few researchers who analyze equity to access without differentiating it from other factors, such as outcome, since not only widening access to education ensures equity, but also retention and the return that a person can get from it. As Dias (2015) declares, equity involves two concepts: equity of access and equity of outcomes, which implies that everyone should have equal opportunity not only to access, but also to progress in order to complete higher education studies and achieve academic success.

The principle of social justice requires that education be distributed to ensure equal access for everyone. Although existing widening access to higher education is the indicator of existence of social justice, still there are many questions regarding fairness. The question arises, to what extent increasing access to higher education enables disadvantaged groups to get fair access. Does the equal opportunity guarantee inclusion for disadvantaged groups? For this reason, equality and equity, these two confusing concepts, deserve to be differentiated.

Equality of opportunity, one of the basic principles of social justice, involves having equal legal, political and civil rights (Waghid, 2014). In education, it is interpreted as having equal educational rights. Equality is considered to embrace uniformity and similarity and in terms of access, it treats all applicants equally in the selection process, whereas, according to Dias (2015), equity can be achieved by defending two interrelated dimensions: fairness and

inclusion. Educational equity insists that in the process of selection applicants be treated according to their individual differences (Chankseliani, 2013).

### **Access to Higher education and Admission Systems as the Way to Equity**

In order to understand modern trends in access to higher education, it is essential to have a historic perspective. According to Leach (2013), access strategy to higher education has been shaped by three principles over time. The first principle is 'inherited merit', when access to education was limited and only academically selected students experienced it. These people usually were male, representatives of high class and urban dwellers. Then it was followed by 'equality of rights' emphasizing that higher education should be accessible to more people irrespective of social origin and the third principle is 'equality of opportunity' which means that some affirmative actions are necessary to increase admission. However, the tension between equality and merit still exists and represents a dilemma for policy-makers.

The importance of widening access causes no doubts. To meet society's increased demands towards higher education, to give underrepresented groups equal opportunities to be part of the educational system, requires strategies and the analysis of the factors that can either be incentives or deterrents for access.

Based on the literature, Oduaran (2006) introduces three strategies that higher education institutions have used regarding access throughout history.

1. Access by patronage related to the period of the elite universities when entry was decided by social standing or by patronage. Governments actively used this strategy to provide people with abilities with scholarships.
2. Access by 'objective testing' – This strategy refers to using tests and examinations that emphasize academic criteria and promote a wider distribution of potential learners within the system. Through this strategy access was no longer an exclusive right for people with high socioeconomic status and became an opportunity for people with academic ability.
3. Access to target groups – This third strategy is considered to be innovative and vital for widening access as it is focused on target groups and considers the disadvantages of individuals.

The analysis of the literature has also revealed that though nowadays access to higher education has increased for under-represented groups, still there are many hidden elements that prevent them from fully participating in education system. Higher education institutions and policy-makers believe that barriers to equality lie with the gate-keeping mechanism and try to address this problem by modifying admission systems. As a result, a range of admission policies have been introduced to increase the enrollment of students from under-represented groups and set up specific admission criteria to insure that potential students have eligible qualifications and aptitudes for tertiary studies (Wang & Shulruf, 2013).

The selective admission system can be divided into three broad types: the system which relies on applicant examination performance and uses either secondary school leaving exams or higher education entrance exams as the admission criteria; the second type of admission system uses examination results and some other criteria, such as personal statement, prior academic achievement and references; the third type does not require applicants to sit any examinations and use prior academic achievement, references, personal statement, writing sample and interview. Socio-economic variables (e.g. gender, disability, ethnicity/race, family income) may be considered in the second and third type of admission system.

Standardized tests that are used by most selective admission systems are the subject of debate in terms of fairness. Meyer (2013) casts doubt on the sharp cut-offs and winner-takes-all principle –which is the case when an applicant is barred from access for missing some threshold test scores, perhaps even by a fraction. Although this test-based system is meritocratic, Meyer considers it as “harsh justice” since it rejects motivated students’ access based on small differences in standardized tests. Yet, simply lowering the access threshold to a point where everyone gets in will not result in a fairer system. On the contrary, the expansion of the system will be at the cost of quality. Another question is whether standardized tests are capable to measure merit of the great number of students. Pluralistic assessment is seen as an alternative way to deal with the great diversity of students and skills.

A lot of affirmative actions are in practice to promote a wider access for under-represented groups. For example, in the USA several universities introduced automatic admission entry for students who were at the top of their high school by ranking. The famous Texas program enrolls students automatically if they are placed in the top 10% (Wang & Shulruf, 2013). This policy became an incentive for universities to take into consideration socio-economic status, second language ability, extra-curricular activities and even the fact of being raised by a single parent. However, the substantial effect of this policy on enrollment is not evident.

### **Special Needs and Socially Deprived Students and Legislative Steps towards Inclusion**

While speaking about social inclusion of special needs students researchers differentiate between the impairment and disability by explaining the two existing models of disability – the social and medical models. The medical model of disability is viewed as a “direct result of individual impairment and functional limitation resulting in individual inadequacy, inability and abnormality” (Beauchamp-Pryor, 2013, p. 6).

The social model defines disability as a socially constructed phenomenon created because of limitations imposed on people with impairment. According to the social model, people with impairment experience are disadvantaged as they have to overcome barriers unfamiliar for the non-disabled. These impediments and not individual attributes disable them.

One-dimensional analysis of disability cannot reflect the complexities of the phenomenon and, for evaluating the disability from different viewpoints, disability and impairment cannot be polarized. Which disability is perceived

within the institution, formulates the policy: policy having a welfare context is focused on care and compensation and policy within a context of rights opposes inequality, oppression and exclusion.

Citizenship is the rights, obligations and burdens that the state and the society should take in order to ensure inclusion for disadvantaged groups. Unfortunately, the support for disabled people is limited to meeting their needs in most cases and the welfare support is focused only on providing care and compensation. This type of support is considered as a lower level of citizenship, as it fails to support the disabled people to get rewards from academic achievement. For that reason, the sense of belonging is an unfamiliar concept for the disabled and, in spite of being included, they may not experience inclusion (Beauchamp-Pryor, 2013).

The policy towards disabled people has radically changed in the last decades. Analyzing the literature does not show consistency in this regard. Some legislative steps exist that protect disabled people from discrimination, but in most cases they do not refer to higher education. The long, competing tensions existed and exist between policymakers, politicians, higher education providers and disabled people and organizations to identify the principles of citizenship and equality, oppression and power and barriers for marginalized groups in the system.

The case of the United Kingdom is worth considering due to the increasing number of students with disabilities in higher education. Recognizing a social model of disability can be a basis for promoting disability equality. The statistics show that the percentage of participating students in higher education in the UK is about 7.27 in 2007/08 and 7.87 in 2011/2012 (Beauchamp-Pryor, 2013). The Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (SENDA, 2001) and the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA, 1995) amended in 2005 recognized the inequality experienced by disabled people within society. Accordingly, the education system institutions were required to make reasonable adjustments by supplying the equipment or human support. Adjustments even involved physical features of the premises. Because of statutory obligations institutions are provided with 'premium funding' for disability support. Funding is based on the proportion of recruited students in receipt of the Disabled Student Allowance (DSA) with a little variance in the countries of the UK. This mechanism is a good financial incentive for institutions to promote inclusion.

The Americans with Disability Act of 1990 is praiseworthy for concentrating on the public accommodations, social services, and employment for the people with disabilities. In higher education this act aims to protect people with disabilities from discrimination regarding admission, academics and research and requires from the postsecondary institutions to make reasonable accommodations and modifications to enable students with disabilities to participate equally in courses, programs, and even in extracurricular activities. However, it should be noted that it is not necessary to alter processes fundamentally. Instead of fundamental alterations colleges can apply alternative methods intended by the educational program (American Psychological Association, 2016).

Alongside special needs students, socially deprived young people should be considered as a target group while discussing equal access to higher education. Apart from disability, socio-economic disadvantage is recognized as meaningful categories in almost every country's strategic policy with different contextual characteristics. In order

to insure access to higher education for disadvantaged groups countries have identified target groups to be focused on. According to Paul Downes (2014), in Lithuania socio-economic exclusion is not considered as a criterion for targeted access to education, even more, the information about student social profile is not accessible. The only category that is recognized in the country's policy is disability.

Hungary, for example, focuses on the recognition of the needs of those having low incomes and identifies target groups based on it. Alongside this group, orphans and people with three or more children, belong to the list of target groups. The statistics show that the number of disadvantaged students attending the full-time programs was 783 which was one quarter of the entire student population in 2010. However, the focus is only on low income, and does not take into consideration other factors, such as residential area, education level of parents or accommodation types.

Socio-economic criteria are the priority of policy strategies in England and Scotland, where social class is the dominant issue regarding the widening access to higher education. Widening the participation of under-represented groups involves having data from their public schools and colleges, from their low social class and from low participation neighborhoods (Downes, 2014).

Equal opportunities and distribution of resources in education involves providing everyone with equal educational rights. Unfortunately, equal opportunities do not always lead to equity. Widening opportunities have increased the rate of access to higher education, but for decreasing social inequalities inherent in the society more measures have to be taken. More affirmative actions, more focus on target groups are necessary to ensure inclusion and equal participation of disadvantaged groups. The state is primarily responsible for creating a proper legislative base for it.

## **Higher Education Admission System in Georgia**

### ***Admission***

Based on the three above mentioned strategies towards access introduced by Oduaran (2006), it can be concluded that the Georgian system experienced the first strategy 'access by patronage' in the Soviet period. Although the education system was free to all and applicants got solid scholarships, the access to higher education was limited, consequently, patronage – this coveted form of corruption - was a usual practice, especially, if we consider the fact that all higher institutions had their own admission systems.

The second strategy 'access by objective testing' is the strategy actively applied in the current education system. The selective admission system of Georgia is based on a meritocratic system and uses entrance examination results as the only criteria for admission. This system promotes equal opportunities and by widening access enables more capable students to benefit from education. However, the question still remains unanswered towards merit

and cut-scores. Is it possible for someone's merit to be assessed by standardized tests or who can prove that an applicant below the threshold is less capable than an applicant who crossed the threshold?

In terms of equality of opportunities standardized tests show advancement as they managed to tackle the widely spread practice of corruption and ensure equal conditions of competition for HE places for all applicants. But using the 'objective testing' as the sole criterion for HE admission and for tuition grant allocation across all HEIs without taking into consideration demographic, school-level, or personal achievement criteria cannot guarantee equity.

The third strategy - 'access to target groups' - implies focusing on target groups, creating new entry qualifications and providing special 'bridging courses' to equip them with the necessary skills for higher education institutions. This innovative strategy is not actively used in Georgian meritocratic education system. However, the law entitles foreign citizens to enroll without taking examinations and the holders of Azerbaijani, Armenian, Abkhazian and Ossetian general school certificate to take only general skills tests in their languages. The obligation of taking courses in Georgian Language Training Center can be considered as a sign of applying this strategy.

Georgian higher education system uses selective admission method based on the results of national examinations. The system ensures an equal opportunity to everyone, since the entrants are put in equal conditions. The system seems transparent in this regard. But it is important to analyze the admission system to see, to what extent it serves equity. According to the law on higher education, the exceptions made in terms of admission are the following:

- Foreign students or residents with the state general education certificate or recognized credits or qualification in their state-recognized universities can get admission without taking examinations;
- Georgian citizens with the general education certificate who studied abroad for two years and obtained credits or qualification there can get admission without undertaking the examinations.
- Students with Azerbaijani, Armenian, Ossetian and Abkhasian general education certificate can get admission only on the basis of the general skills test in their languages respectively, but the right to continue their studies is possible after they take Georgian language training program. (Georgian Law on Higher Education, 2005).

The document shows that there are no other exceptions for any other entrants. Examinations are held in the same manner by using the same type of tests.

### ***Funding***

Georgia, like European education system, minimized the direct funding of universities and replaced it by student funding, and the number of students determines the amount of funding. Despite these similarities, the Georgian funding system is different, as the amount allocated by the state covers only tuition fees and the state provides

resources not on the basis of the number of the students, but on the number of students who successfully passed Unified National Examinations. The rest of the students have to pay their tuition fees themselves (The International Institute for Education Policy, Planning and Management, 2013).

Alongside public funding, private funding is equally high in public and private sectors. The majority of students finance their tuition themselves in both types of universities. 64% of all students pay a full tuition fee to public (49%) and to private (15%) universities; there are additional 25% of students out of the whole student cohort who pay a partial tuition fee for their education. Summing up these figures shows a clear picture that even among post-Soviet states Georgia has the highest rate in terms of the number of self-financed students. Accordingly, the burden of funding is on students and their families. The limited capacity of funding can result in a limited access to higher education and poor quality as well (The International Institute for Education Policy, Planning and Management, 2013).

According to the Law on Higher Education, the Government of Georgia is responsible for implementing the state policy. It approves the annual volumes and amounts of state grants and master's state grants under the submission of the Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia. Besides financial merit-based support programs, the government also provides a small-scale social grants program for different categories of socially vulnerable students. The amount of funding of the students enrolled for accredited higher education programs within the framework of social program is 6-20% of the annual amount of state study grant funds. Notably, the amount allocated for social programs has increased compared to the previous 6-10%.

The funding within the social program does not only refer to students with low socio-economic status or people with disabilities, there are many other categories included in it, such as: students living in highlands, students from occupied territories, in ecological migration zones, etc. It is significant to note that on each category the number of students is strictly defined and in case there are more entrants than the places, the enrollment procedures apply to meritocratic system again and students with higher scores are admitted. In addition, public spending does not include maintenance costs. High competition for extremely scarce funding can affect HE access for the students with low socio-economic status (SES) in a negative way (The International Institute for Education Policy, Planning and Management, 2013).

The necessity of the more comprehensive needs-based funding casts no doubt. It is revealed that the data about the student family income does not exist and students are not asked to report family income figures while filling in the application form. It is explained by the mainstream belief in the society which considers that the data on the family income is confidential and the questions about parental education are unethical. The same can be said about students with disability. In spite of several efforts to increase the participation of students with disabilities, there is lack of information about it. The necessity of more sophisticated measures for involving students with disability is still vulnerable (Charekishvili, 2015).

The choice and the participation of the students from disadvantaged groups largely depend on the existing discourse in education policy. Policy-makers together with society should realize the importance of their involvement in social life and use additional financial or moral incentives to ensure their active participation for the benefit of sustainable future.

### **Research Methodology and Methods**

The researchers used the qualitative paradigm because this framework allowed most flexible approach as the topic had not been thoroughly studied before. Accordingly, the study conducted an exploratory approach which allows getting more data on the issue which has not previously been studied sufficiently (Schreiber & Asner-Self, 2011). Exploratory research was helpful to collect the data on the specificity of access to higher education in Georgia and the statutory basis which regulates the cases of special needs and socially deprived young people. Though a qualitative approach does not allow generalization, it was an appropriate framework to deal with individual feelings, emotions, expertise, beliefs and visions.

The secondary data for the research came from the review of scholarly articles, reports, scientific publications, conference proceedings and the government policy documents which the research could access and which were publicly available.

For primary data semi-structural interviews were held, and policy documents and university websites were analyzed. Questions of the interviews were developed based on the research questions that were shaped through the research problem, formulated after literature review and analysis. Primary data were obtained through in-depth semi-structured interviews with the educators from three private universities and three public universities of Georgia. To analyze the data obtained through primary data collection tools, content analysis approach was used, which helped the researcher to study the problems and attitudes in higher educational institutions, identify common issues and provide tentative solutions to the problems.

### **Research Findings**

#### ***Policy Document Analysis***

In order to depict the whole picture about statutory obligations and responsibilities, besides the law of higher education, there is a necessity of providing the analysis of other documents of Georgian legislation. The practice showed and the above-mentioned cases of the United Kingdom and the USA prove that special laws and acts are adopted for people with disability to protect their rights in every field including education. Special Education Needs and Disability act in Britain and the Americans with Disability act require the adjustment of the education system for them. Such an approach has become quite common in the world. Unfortunately, Georgia does not have any

special act towards disability in HE, but the introduction of anti-discrimination law can serve as the beginning of the introduction of other statutory documents in this regard.

The law of Georgia on the elimination of all forms of discrimination (The Law on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination, 2014) was adopted in 2014. The law prohibits discrimination and intends to ensure equal rights of every person irrespective of race, language, skin color, sex, age, place of birth or residence, social status, disability or political or other opinions, etc. According to the law, discrimination can appear in the society directly or indirectly. Direct discrimination occurs when on the ground of any characteristics people are treated less favorably than others in equal conditions or when under inherently unequal conditions people are treated equally. The indirect discrimination is evident, when a provision, criterion or practice are neutral in the form, but discriminatory in substance and puts people having one of the characteristics at disadvantaged conditions in equal conditions, or treats equally in unequal conditions. The only reason why such treatment can be justified is the states' purpose to maintain public order and morals. For example, disadvantaged groups, such as the elderly, children, people with disability, the terminally ill, persons with persistent medical problems, victims of natural disasters, etc. should be ensured some degree of priority regarding housing recourses. Unfortunately, such kind of priorities are not given to disadvantaged groups in education system by the law.

Financial assistance of international organizations is very necessary for developing countries in the process of the implementation of democratic reforms. Sharing their experience is also valuable. The development assistance grant agreement between the Ministry of Finance of Georgia and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) was reached in 2016 for the promotion of the disadvantaged groups. The target group includes women, people with disabilities, ethnic minorities, etc. The grant of about \$5million for the group will be allocated within the 5years and will help to protect their rights and their integration in the society. Once again, it is not directly addressed to education, but contributions to the development of just society are connected with educational institutions through their academic programs and courses.

The most recent document in the Georgian legislation system that refers to financing of the students enrolled for the accredited programs in higher education is the ordinance N 449, 20015. According to the ordinance, the amount of money allocated for the students enrolled for accredited programs within the social program is 2 520 000 GEL which is divided in three parts: 1 920 000 Gel for the students enrolled in the year of 2015 and 600 000 GEL for the students enrolled in 2013 and 2014.

The number and categories of students to be financed within the limit of 1 920 000 Gel are as follows: 206 students living in the regions of highlands and ecological migration zone; 170 students from the occupied territories; 50 students residing in the nearby villages of the occupied territories; 15 students having Azerbaijani general education certificates obtained in the Georgian state; 15 students having Armenian general education certificates obtained in Georgia; 26 students who are the children of the victims (killed or lost) in the war for the territorial integrity of Georgia; 5 places for the descendants of Samtskhe-Javakheti population deported during the

communist period; 50 places for orphans; 100 places for the students from the families having more than four children; 30 places for the students with moderate/ severe/ major disabilities; 16 students who have been under the care of the state for at least two years; 170 students whose families are registered in the Unified Database of Socially Vulnerable Families and their rating score is 7000 or less.

The analysis of the document reveals the small number of students with disabilities and with low socio-economic status financed within the program. Additional procedures are followed in specific cases. If a student falls within several categories, only one category is used for defining the funding; if the number of the students exceeds the predetermined places, the results of the national examinations are used again to make a decision about funding.

### ***Individual Case Study***

From ethical consideration, the name of the student who enrolled at university in 2014 in the frame of social program cannot be mentioned. Unfortunately, the next year she was deprived of the grant based on the ordinance N449. As the amount of money allocated for the students enrolled in 2013-2014 was worth 6 000 GEL, her scores obtained in the entrance examinations turned out to be insufficient for getting the grant for the following year. It is important to mention that the family still had the socially unprotected status. The fact seems to speak much about unfairness in the system.

### ***University Webpage Analysis***

The primary data collected through the analysis of the web pages of the institutions is very scarce. After having looked at their pages, no valuable information was obtained regarding the disadvantaged groups, and in most cases, there is no information at all. It can be explained by two reasons: for the universities it is more important to speak about their achievements, their students' outcomes, the number of students enrolled through merit-grants, than to speak about the issues they have not contributed to be handled so that they can be proud of. Another explanation can be made based on the mindset and attitudes of the people. Mostly, even the representatives of this group cannot admit their characteristics and the institutions, the society consider unethical to speak about this issue in public.

In some cases, private universities have some kind of grant system to attract talented students. One of the most powerful private universities offers students a co-financing grant system together with the state grants. In addition, the university has a revolving grant program that enables students not to pay during the cycle and after graduation to repay for the benefit of the future students. This loan offered by the university is interest-free. Besides, the students from regions can get a monthly allowance for living in Tbilisi. This system is a very good strategy and a good incentive for students. But it should be emphasized that the tuition fee in this university is high, and the competition is very high. Consequently, only the students with highest scores can enroll there. People from poor

backgrounds due to the uneven general education level have less opportunity to study in this university. Unfortunately, nothing is written about students with disability.

Similar supportive financing system exists in another private university, based on the merit and the achievements in general schools. Unfortunately, there is no evidence of the information about the students from the target groups.

Public universities do not need to have such extra financial aid programs. It is understandable, as the number of students is almost three times bigger than in private universities and the tuition fees are set within the limit set by the state. The information about socially deprived students and students with disability is lacking.

### ***Semi-Structured Interview Analysis***

Six participants were chosen from both higher education sectors: three participants from private and three from state universities. The questions varied and the interviews were very flexible and informative. The interviews employed the questions about social justice, social inequalities, the role of education to the attainment of social justice; the questions about the Georgian admission system dominated in the interview and everyone was asked the question whether the admission system served equity or equality from their standpoint. The system of funding was the issue of the interview and the questions were primarily about the social grants and any other supportive grants for disadvantaged groups.

The first question referred to the concept of social justice and their understanding of the issue. All the respondents underlined the principles of justice as fundamental for higher education. They associated social justice with equal opportunities for everyone in education system. One of the respondents connected it with inclusion of socially disadvantaged groups and explained that people of poor socio-economic background and people with physical or mental impairments should have rights to get a fair access to higher education. She shared her personal experience and feeling of admiration seeing people with mental impairments at master's cycle in Great Britain. Those people, though having a low intelligence quotient (IQ), had a talent for art or for sport and were highly skilled in their fields of study.

While speaking about Georgian admission system that is based on meritocratic principles, the respondents unanimously declared that this selection system is an advancement in terms of transparency ensuring equal opportunities. After analyzing some aspects of the admission system, they concluded that the education system in Georgia serves rather equality than equity and the representation of underprivileged groups should be promoted. One of the participants extended the answer to show that putting everyone in equal situations is not right towards the people who, for example, live in highland and cannot get sufficient knowledge for admission because of several factors, such as internet unavailability.

The question was asked about standardized testing and everyone approved it as a universal approach that is highly practiced in the world, but they acknowledge that the tests are unlikely to embrace all criteria necessary for assessing merit properly.

All respondents agreed that the funding allocated for socially deprived students is not enough and the scarcity of resources is one of the main impediments for socially vulnerable students to get an access to higher education. However, there is one tendency in private universities. In order to increase the enrollment of successful students, they offer special discounts to the students if they have gold and silver medals as a token for their excellence in secondary schools. Besides, the universities offer some kind of discounts to siblings and additional grants to the students who already have state grants. These initiatives are beneficial for both sides, as they work as an incentive for students to study there and the university benefits from the increased number of skilled students.

The interviewees from both public and private universities said that they have students with disabilities and the support is limited to providing those students with adjustable equipment, such as gangways to access facilities or special toilets. But not any of them proved the existence of adjusted academic programs and extra-curricular activities for them. That was explained by the lack of resources. The last question referred to obligations and responsibility that the society and the state should have to ensure inclusion of the disadvantaged groups in social life. They all stated that the state and the society should work together to attain this goal. The participants numbered the state, non-governmental organizations, charity organizations, different funds, educational institutions to be responsible for eradicating social inequalities. Education has a great role to raise the awareness of the society and institutional strategies should be employed not only to ensure their access to higher education and provide them with suitable conditions, but also to assist them to be integrated in the society. A very interesting proposal was made in this regard. One participant pointed out that success and outcomes of the vulnerable groups largely depend on the steps that universities should take, for example, providing them with part-time jobs will be a great step for their stable social life.

Another interesting idea referred to merit-based grants. The allocation of grants on a meritocratic basis is worth considering. The problem is that once the student gets the merit-based grant, they maintain it throughout the study cycle. In one of the respondent's opinion, it seems unfair as the financed student may have low achievement during the further years, while students who were not lucky at the national examinations can achieve high results at university. Therefore, the merit-based grants should not be permanent and the results of the students throughout the study should be the criteria for allocating grants. The interview proved very valuable for gaining a deeper insight into the issue.

To summarize the results of the interview, there is not a significant difference between public and private institutions' strategies towards the issue. Their support towards the students with disability is restricted to providing facilities, and socially deprived students are only under the care of the state. To deal with inequality, the state,

educational institutions and the society should work together to introduce and implement some strategic innovations to ensure access, retention and success of this group.

### **Final Considerations**

Education has acquired more importance in the competitive world. More than ever it is connected to new opportunities, to success, to social mobility. Education policy has to respond to the increased demand of a large number of diverse groups of people through defending the principles of social justice, which is directly connected with equal education rights and fair allocation of resources among all different groups of people. The state has primary accountability for ensuring the conditions and by various regulating and supervising agencies tries to lead the process. A widening access to higher education is achieved but it is at the expense of the students who finance their tuition and the share of the disadvantaged group is substantially low. The problem is common across the world including Georgia.

The admission system as the gate-keeping mechanism plays a great role in providing equal opportunities for all. The Law of Georgia on Higher Education ensures everyone's equal opportunities and the Georgian admission system is very successful in this regard. The transparent system gives every person with ability and motivation to get access to higher education. As a modest recommendation, it would be more desirable to give more opportunities to underprivileged groups and take into consideration their background information, such as lower level of education caused by their place of residence, disabilities, low socio-economic conditions, etc. Serious steps have been taken in this regard by enabling Azerbaijani, Armenian, Abkhazian and Ossetian students to take only general aptitude tests and offering some special Georgian language training courses for them.

Standardized testing is a universally acknowledged system of evaluation in terms of equality but it cannot reveal the hidden merits of the people, for example, of people with impairments. Therefore, creating some special mechanisms, such as a pluralistic system of evaluation would be beneficial for them.

Equity in access is very important, but equity involves retention, promotion of their development and outcomes as well. Georgian legislation, policy documents ensure equal opportunities for all and prohibit all forms of discrimination, but still many changes have to be done. Sharing of the experience of developed countries, which have special disability acts, will be profitable for Georgia. These statutory documents are focused on creating special background conditions and make institutions adjust their programs to ensure equal inclusion for students with disabilities. Only adjustable equipment is not enough to make them feel included. Introduction of a special document that will be addressed directly to the promotion of their active participation in education institutions will inevitably lead to equity. Satisfying the interests of people with disabilities is not only connected with providing basic things. As it is said, disabled people do not exist, people can be with different types of impairments, but it is the society that disables them. Therefore, the society should ensure their inclusion in social life.

To a certain extent, the existing model of funding in Georgian higher education as a direct response to global changes is relevant to the principles of social justice. The enrollment rate has significantly increased as students are given more opportunities of private funding. The majority of Georgian students pay for their tuition and the rest gets grants from the state. Public spending exists in two forms as merit-based grants and need-based grants. The study has shown that even merit-based grants are of insignificant amount and only around 9% of students get them. As for the need-based grants, the allocated 6-20% for special programs is not enough and it does not include only students with disabilities and low-socio-economic status. In addition, defining the number of places for specific categories is even less fair. Moreover, students are given need-based grants for the year they enrolled at universities and for following years their funding depends on the amount allocated by the state for each specific year. It seems quite unfair as a student can still have the low socio-economic status, but cannot get funding. It turns out that students are given merit-based grants for the whole cycle, whereas the allocation of need-based grants can be changing depending on the amount of grants. Socially deprived students should not be in constant danger of losing grants, and, therefore, more effective measures are necessary to be taken. The fact that grants do not include any maintenance costs is more alarming.

Finally, citizenship is the right, the feeling of obligation, the feeling of belonging and every member of the society should experience that they are part of the society and have responsibility towards other members as well. Therefore, the involvement of the state, agencies, institutions and the society for ensuring equity is crucial in this respect.

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