



SURVEY REPORT

ON THE STUDY OF CONDITIONS, PROBLEMS AND NEEDS OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS STUDYING IN UNIVERSITIES IN BATUMI

The survey was conducted by Young Scientists Union "Intellect" in the framework of the project
"The response to the Gaps Identified in the Rapid Needs Assessment"

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Batumi, Georgia

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About the survey

The report was prepared in the framework of the second phase of the project, "Response to the Problems Identified in the Rapid Assessment of Immigrant Needs", implemented by the Young Scientists Union "Intellect" with the support of the International Organization for Migration (IOM).

In August-September 2020, during the first phase of the project - "The response to the Gaps Identified in the Rapid Needs Assessment", Young Scientists Union "Intellect" conducted a study of the situation, problems and needs of immigrants living in the Autonomous Republic of Ajara. The study covered issues such as reasons for immigration and legal status of immigrants; Social and economic conditions of immigrants; Protecting the rights of immigrants; The needs of immigrants. A separate category of respondents was identified in analyzing the survey results - international students, whose answers drew particular attention and highlighted the need for a more in-depth study. The report identified several issues that needed to be addressed, especially regarding the financial transparency of higher education institution policies towards international students. Within the survey, the number of respondents in this category was small, and its results did not allow us to draw reasoned conclusions. In addition, the purpose of the research and, consequently, the design of the questionnaire was not explicitly focused on researching / studying the problems and needs of international students. Accordingly, it was concluded that a separate survey needed to be conducted only to investigate international students' conditions, problems, and needs.

This document represents the analytical report on the conditions, problems, and needs of international students living in Batumi.

Aim and objectives

One of the project's goals - "The Response to the Gaps Identified in the Rapid Needs Assessment" is to establish a transparent financial policy of Batumi State University in relation to international students.

As we saw during the preliminary study of the issue of financial expenses of international students, the establishment of a transparent financial system is not a one-component task and is not limited to paying tuition fees for the University. The non-transparent financial costs of international students are due to factors such as the company(s) receiving tuition fees and the presence of intermediaries in the financial transaction chains, length of study and related tuition fees, additional costs due to length of study (travel, living expenses, etc.), service fees of intermediary companies, the possibility of enjoying various benefits depending on the status of the student, etc.

In addition to financial issues, it was considered expedient to study other problems faced by international students, which may directly or indirectly affect the financial costs of international students.

Such an approach will allow us to comprehensively study the problems and needs of international students, including links between these components, and thus increase the purposefulness and effectiveness of the developed recommendations.

Ultimately, improving the study and living conditions of international students, raising their level of satisfaction will help to increase the attractiveness of Batumi, both internationally and in terms of tourism, increase its competitiveness in the international educational and tourism markets.

Research Methodology

The research studies international students of Batumi Shota Rustaveli State University and Batumi International University who are currently studying at the medical faculties of these higher education

institutions, regardless of their location. Accordingly, the study included those international students who were in Batumi at the time of the survey, as well as the students who were abroad.

Research Method

For the research purposes, the Google forms platform was used, where a questionnaire was published in English developed by Young Scientists Union "Intellect", N(N)LE. The average duration of completing the questionnaire is 20 minutes.

The questionnaire contained both closed-ended and open-ended questions that allowed students to express their opinions in more detail or explain their chosen answer.

Instruments of study

The research tool is a semi-structured questionnaire. The questionnaire consists of 4 thematic blocks. Each block is designed to obtain certain types of information:

- Learning environment and study process in the University;
- Social and economic conditions of students;
- Protection of students' rights, instruments of protection of their rights, and access to information;
- Access to student insurance services and mental health support.

Selection Design

The selection frame was identified as the students of Batumi Shota Rustaveli State University (BSU) and BAU Batumi International University (BAU). They were also invited to join a special Facebook group created by Young Scientists Union "Intellect" (N(N)LE) for international students of Batumi higher education institutions.

The research is based on the method of non-probability voluntary response sampling of respondents. The sample size was determined by 133 students, providing an 8% maximum margin error with a 95% confidence level.

The survey was conducted between March 8-21, 2021, and was attended by 133 students, of whom 98.5% (131 students) were studying the Medical Doctor program in English language in BSU. Overall, 601 students studied at the BSU during the study period.

Research management

At the initial stage of the research, Young Scientists Union "Intellect" specialists conducted a preliminary study of the issue and developed a relevant questionnaire.

Prior to the commencement of the works, the questionnaire was tested at a meeting with international student community leaders. As a result of the meeting, some of the questions in the questionnaire were clarified and formulated in a more understandable way for the students. Finally, the questionnaire was piloted, and instructions for completing the questionnaire were developed.

Leading students from BSU and BAU participated in disseminating information about the questionnaire and sharing it in a Facebook group and other social networks created by the organization specifically for international students.

In processing the research results, the researchers contacted the relevant respondents to clarify and/or better understand the content of the answers to some of the open-ended questions.

After processing the survey results, a meeting was held with part of the students participating in the study, during which a group discussion was held, and important details were clarified.

I. Outcomes

1. Data analysis

1.1 General analysis of student responses

According to the selection sample, the study's initial target number was 240 people. Response rate was 55%, which is a high rate considering that communication with potential respondents was difficult due to the current pandemic and stressful situation.

1.2. Respondents' profile

The total amount of interviewed international students studying at Batumi higher education institutions is 133. General information about the respondents is as follows:

- **Citizenship:** 97.7% (130 students) are citizens of the Republic of India. Single students are represented from Egypt, Kazakhstan, and the UK;
- **Gender:** 47% of students surveyed are male (76) and 43% are female students (57);
- **Age:** 18-30 years old, 91% (121 students) 20-25 years old;

Higher education institutions where respondents study:

- 98.5% (131 students) - Batumi Shota Rustaveli State University (BSU);
- 1.5% (2 students) - BAU Batumi International University (BAU).

All respondents are medical faculty students.

Note: As the absolute majority of respondents (98.5%) are students of Batumi Shota Rustaveli State University, therefore, the study conditions part of the survey results is generalized to this University.

1.3. Distribution of respondents according to the period of stay in Georgia.

About 96% of respondents live and study in Georgia for more than two years. In case of proper approaches, this period is enough to learn the Georgian language at a basic level and adapt international students to the local community.

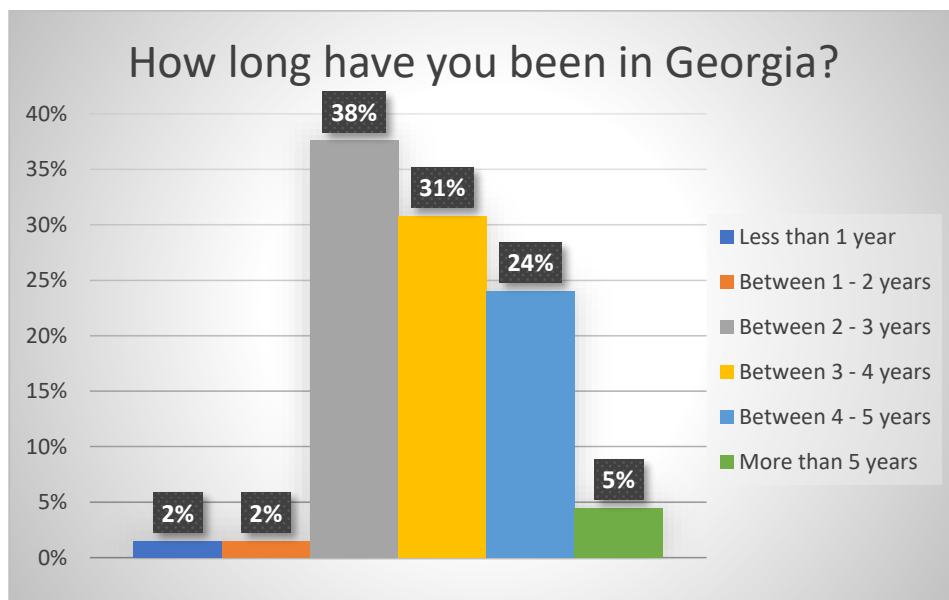


Figure 1. Distribution of respondents according to the period of stay in Georgia

1.4. Assessment of the quality of education by international students

1.4.1. Study schedule and its management

Only a small proportion of respondents (9%) rate the curriculum as "good" or "very good", 31% rate it as average, and 60% of students rate the curriculum negatively, citing the lack of formal communication channels between the University and students, delayed information on the curriculum or changes made to it.

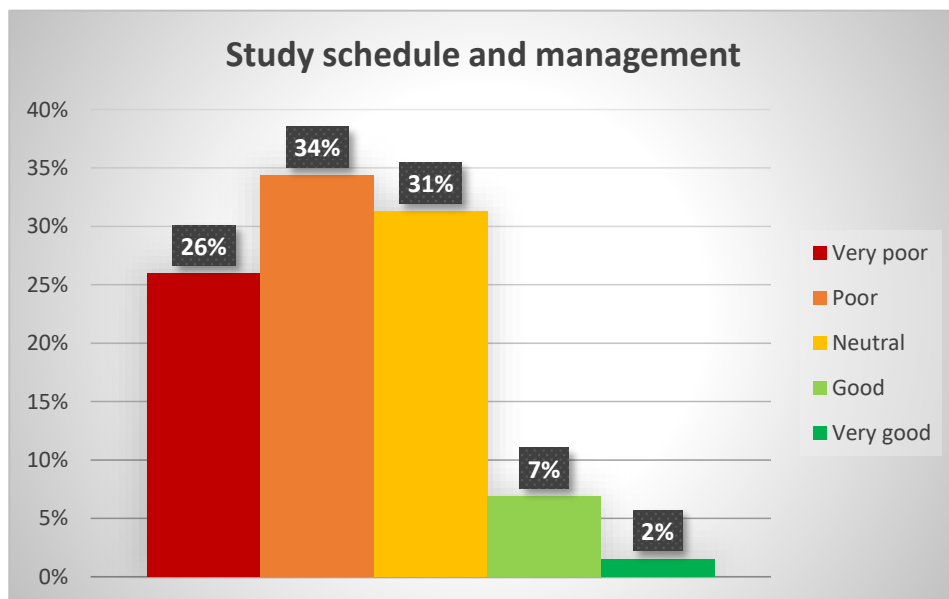


Figure 2. Degree of satisfaction of respondents with the study schedule.

According to the respondents, detailed information about the training modules and syllabi/contents is less available in advance. Also, in most cases, students are provided with study schedule in advance for the next one week only and not information for the entire semester. In addition, the schedule provided changes frequently.

1.4.2. Lectures and lecturers

Respondents mostly rate lectures and lecturers as "neutral" (48%), while 22% rated them positively. The comments mention the poor level of English by some lecturers. Also, there is often a long interval between lectures, and students have to wait a long time before the following lecture starts.

In addition, there are cases when the lecturers did not conduct lectures. However, after the completion of the module, the lecturer still held the exams. The students talked to the representatives of the Dean's Office of the University about this issue, but it was not resolved.

Students also want to prolong the duration of the Georgian language course.

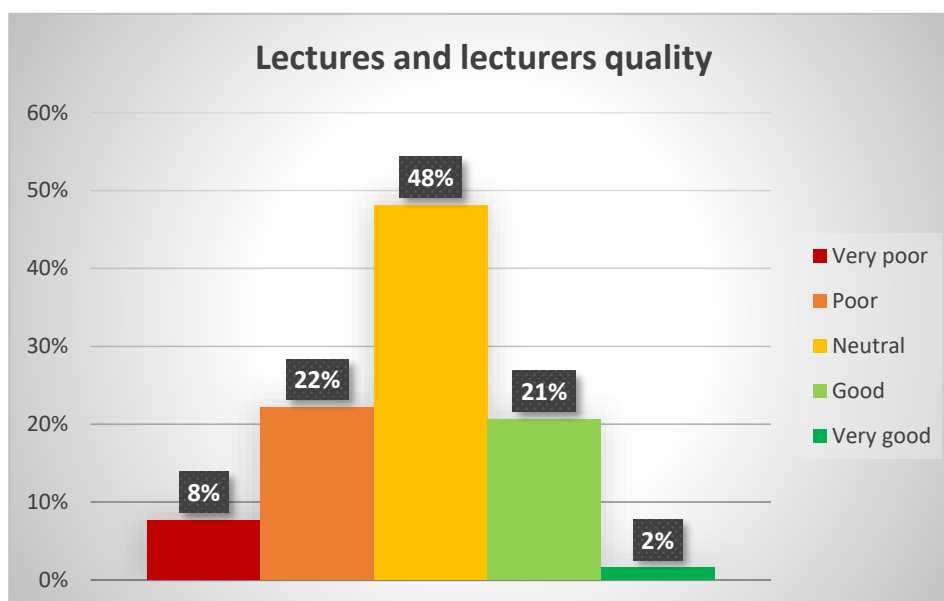


Figure 3. Degree of satisfaction of respondents with lectures and lecturers.

1.4.3. Exams management

Most of the respondents (62%) evaluate exams management as satisfactory (neutral - 40%, good 22%).

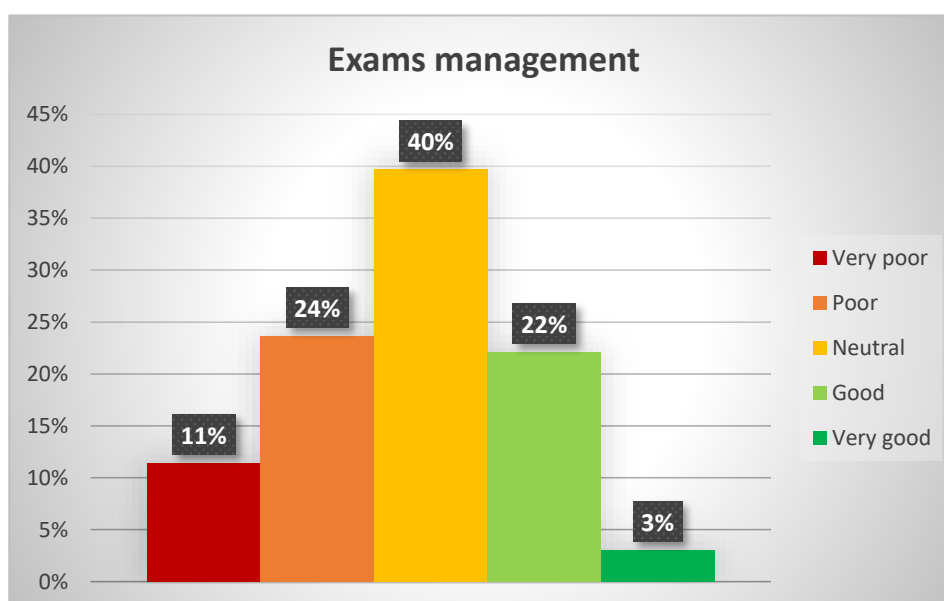


Figure 4. Degree of satisfaction of respondents with exam management.

Negative evaluation was given by 35% (poor - 24%, very poor - 11%).

Respondents point out in their comments the lack of information about registration procedures for retaking the training module in case of failure.

1.4.4. Study facility/environment

Most respondents rate the study facility/environment as “neutral” (38%) and “good” (20%). Some students say that there is a lack of free auditoriums or free seats in the auditorium.

The learning environment is related to the respondents' dissatisfaction with the publication of their personal data by the BSU in an informal online group set up to communicate with students (e.g., personal / passport number, contact telephone number, address, number of points accumulated). Accordingly, all students in this group have access to information containing their own and other students' personal data.

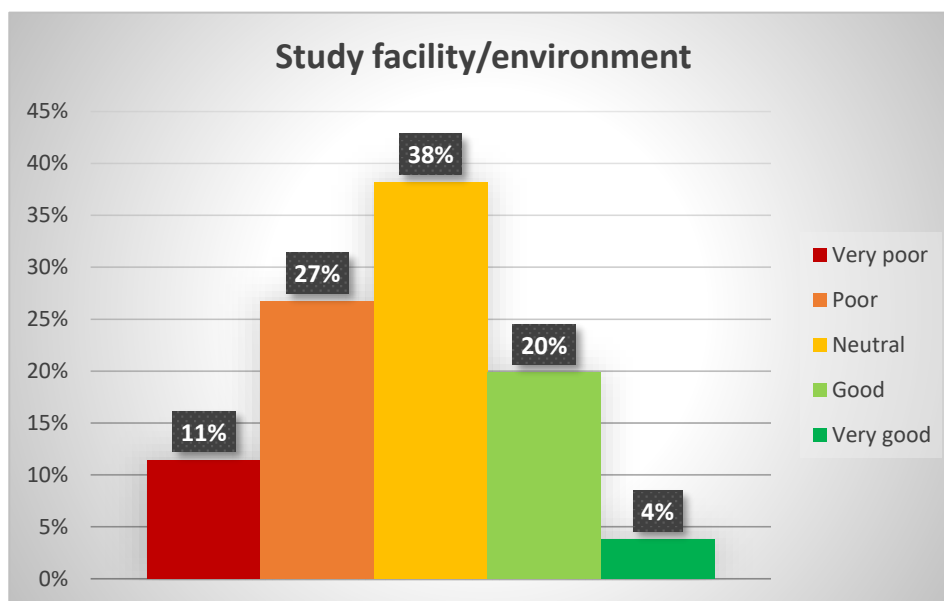


Figure 5. Degree of respondents' satisfaction with the study facility/environment.

In addition to the above, e-mail addresses created by BSU for international students also contain personal / passport numbers, which is also not acceptable to the students.

1.4.5. Access to labs / practical experience

Only a small proportion of respondents (7%) rated access to laboratories and medical practice as "good" or "very good", while 78% rated it as "very poor" and "poor". The reasons for this assessment are the lack of access to the laboratory and the lack of laboratory and clinical practice. According to the students, they cannot participate directly in various activities during the clinical practice period and are mostly limited to observation. Consequently, students are not given the opportunity to develop practical skills and deepen theoretical knowledge in various clinical situations.

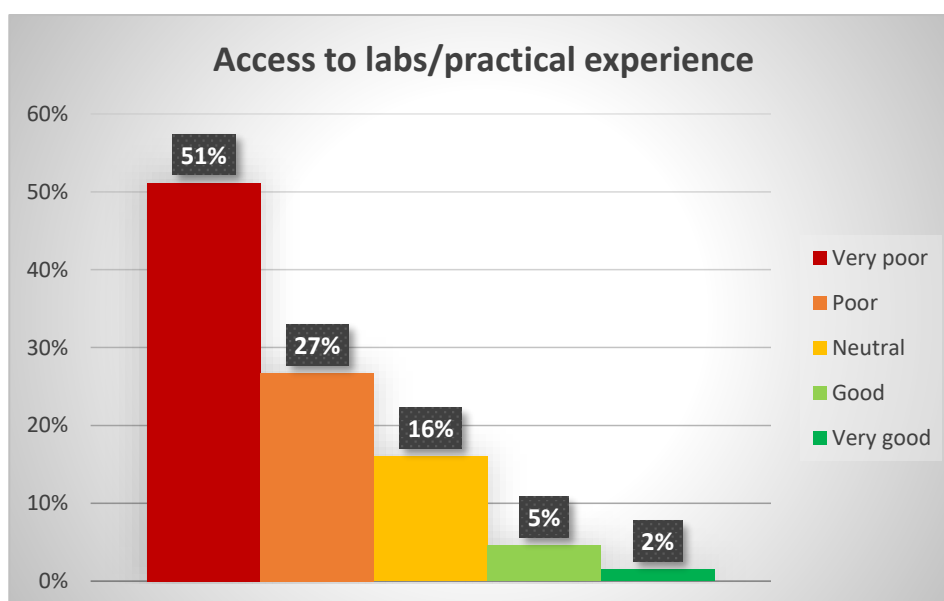


Figure 6. Degree of respondents' access to labs / practical experience.

1.4.6. Access to the library and books for home

Nearly 26% of respondents are satisfied with access to library resources and use of books (rating - "very good" - 8%, "good" - 18%). 41% rated the service negatively (rating - "very poor" - 24%, "poor" - 17%). The main emphasis is on the fact that students are not allowed to take study literature at home. They can use the books only in the library hall and in many cases only if they leave their passport with the librarian in return.

According to students, in many cases, the number of books in the library is insufficient.

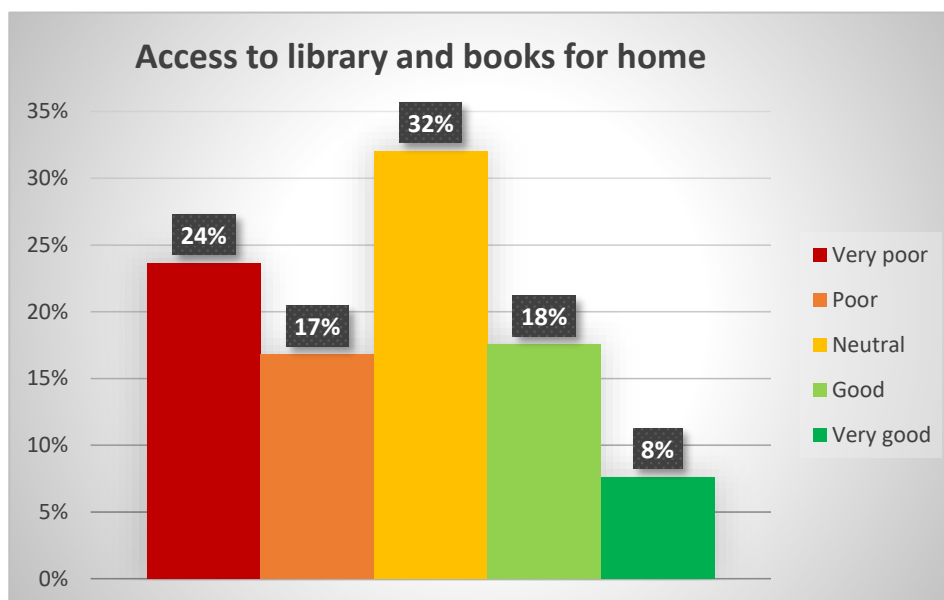


Figure 7. Degree of respondents' satisfaction with access to library resources/books.

1.4.7. Recreational and co-curricular activities.

The rating was "very poor" and "poor" by 79% (54% - "very poor", 25% - "poor"). There is a desire among students to have the opportunity to participate in more extracurricular activities, including joint participation of Georgian and international students, which would help integrate students more into the local community and improve their knowledge of the Georgian language. A similar experience would have had a positive impact on them as students.

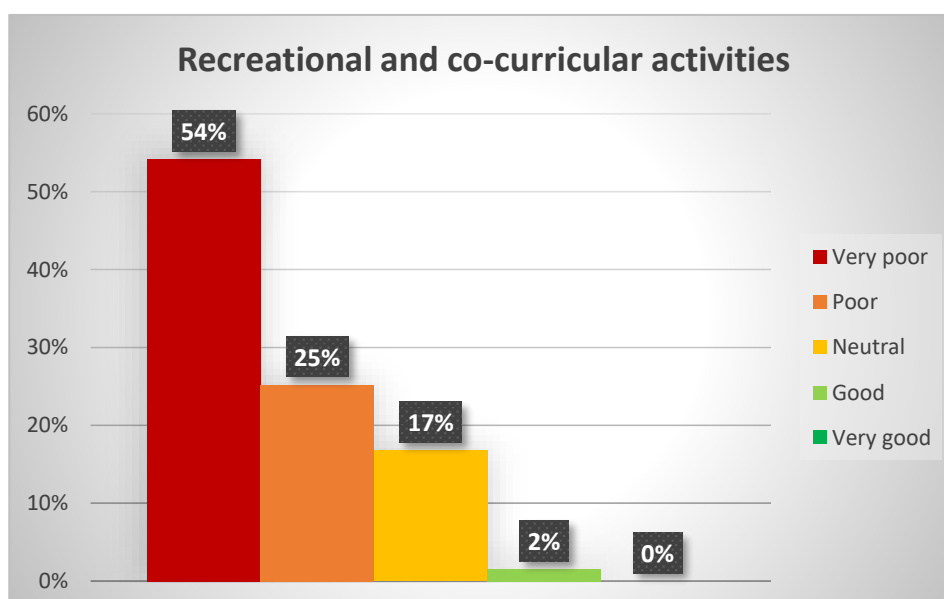


Figure 8. Degree of respondents' satisfaction with recreational and co-curricular activities.

1.5. Communication transparency between the University's administrative structures and international students

The communication of the University's administrative units with international students is assessed negatively by more than half of the respondents. Only 12% rate the transparency of communication as "good" and "very good". This is mainly due to the ineffective communication of BSU with its students.

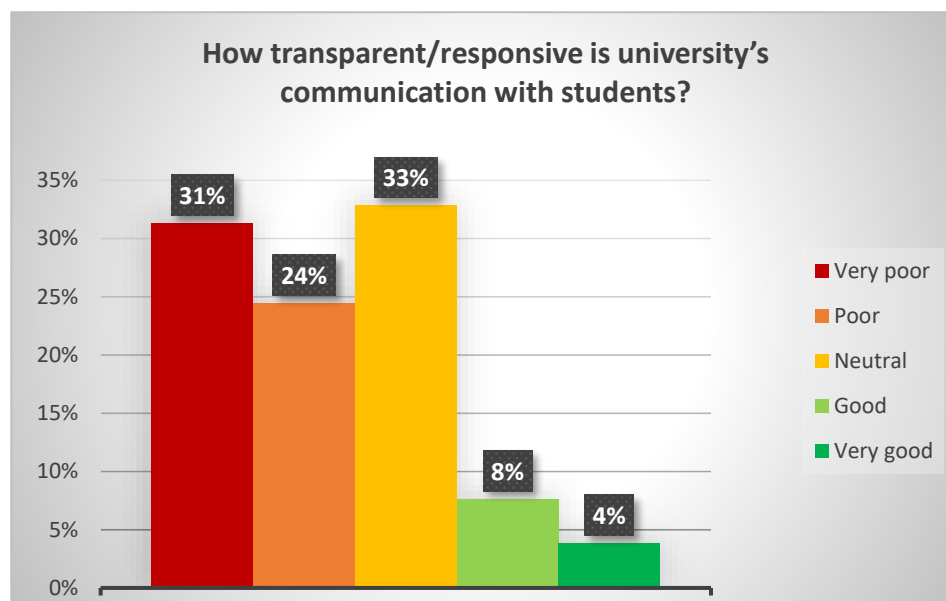


Figure 9. Evaluation of the transparency of communication between the university administrative structures and international students.

Students name the following factors as the main reasons for the negative evaluation:

- Delayed communication, late response, or lack of answers in case of a students' requests (e.g., delay in issuing a letter of recommendation or proof of tuition fee payment). In addition, students are not informed about the duration of tuition and the amount of tuition fees. Despite repeated communication with the university administration on these issues, they were unable to obtain comprehensive answers;
- The use of informal channels (e.g., Facebook group) instead of an Internet portal by the university administration for official communication with students;
- In case of non-payment of tuition fees, the University representative publishes a general warning in the informal Facebook student group addressing those who have not paid the fees. The post mentions that they will have their student status suspended/terminated. Because this information is not sent personally to the addressee of the problem and is announced in the form of a general message to the group, this causes uncertainty among the students who have paid the fee. Therefore, students are required to apply to the University for proof of payment of their tuition fee to make sure that the application does not apply to them;
- Language barrier with university administration. Students cannot write an official letter in Georgian language, which is the university requirement. Also, students do not know who the people in charge of various issues are and whom they should turn to discuss/resolve issues;
- Students emphasize the judgmental speech by university representatives. Consequently, students avoid talking about problems that arise so as not to be judged.

1.6. Documents in possession of students confirming their status as a student.

To the question "Do you have an official document proving that you are officially a university student?", 86% of the respondents answered yes.

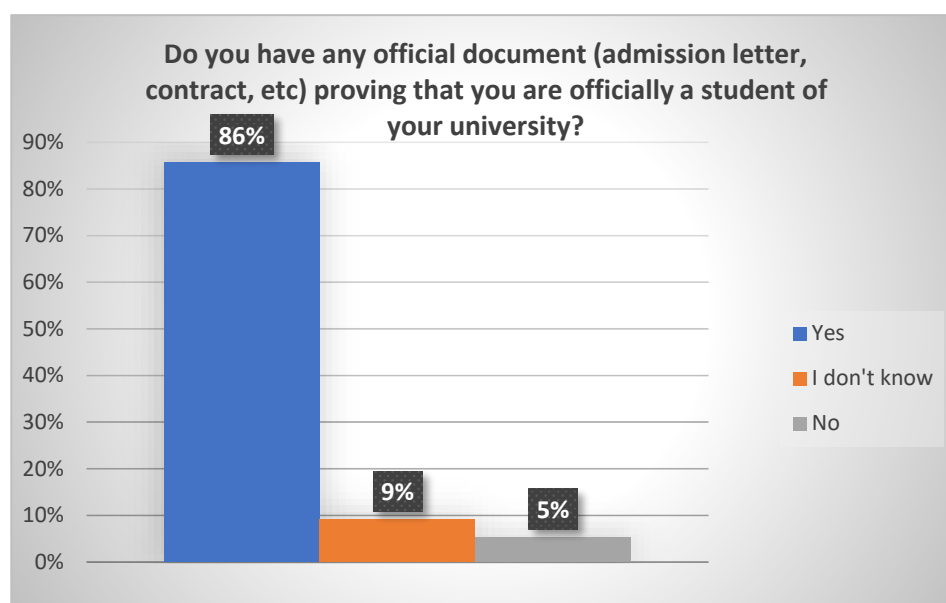


Figure 10. Possession of documents proving student status.

In the official document, 80% of respondents refer to the "Letter of Admission Offer" sent by the University, including 9% of students who also state that they have other documents, such as contract, residence permit, student card, etc.

13% of students applied to the University for a "Letter of Admission Offer" and received a response, while 8% did not receive a response.

1.7. Awareness of students about the amount of tuition fees.

It should be noted that the issue of the amount of tuition fees is especially relevant among respondents. Some students do not have clear information about tuition fees. Also, most students do not have a document confirming the payment of the fee issued by BSU. Some students paid the tuition fee into the bank account of an intermediary company that secured their enrollment in the University under a memorandum of cooperation with BSU. However, these funds were not reflected in the BSU account, meaning they owe money. Some students paid tuition fees for later years into a BSU account.

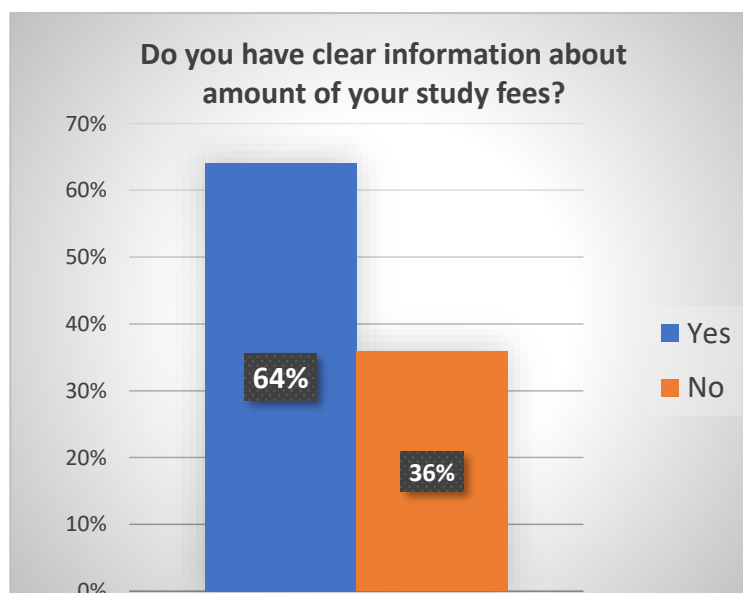
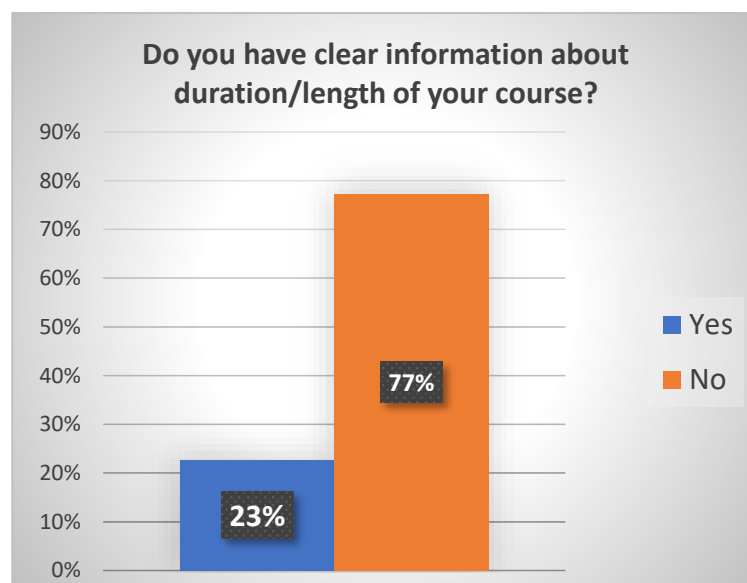


Figure 11. Respondents' level of awareness about the amount of tuition fees.

It should be noted that students do not have contracts with the University where information about tuition fees would be recorded. Such information is not provided in the "Letter of Admission Offer", which may lead to different interpretations of the amount of tuition fees by some intermediary companies or the University.

1.8. Awareness of students about the duration of the study.

As with tuition fees, the duration of study is one of the major problems for students. 77% of students do not have accurate information about the duration of the study. A large proportion of students (especially senior students enrolled in 2015-2016) were enrolled in the University with the expectation that they would complete their studies in 5 years. The possibility of completing the study in 5 years is indicated in the "Letter of Admission Offer", but then this condition was changed, which caused student dissatisfaction. In verbal conversations with them, representatives of the university administration stated that the duration of study has increased (some students state that the duration of study under the new rule is 5.5 years, according to some - 6 years). 95% of the students stated that they tried to get comprehensive information from the university on this issue but failed. It is clear from the students' responses that the university administration has not made enough effort to provide students with detailed information about the duration of their studies.

**Figure 12. Respondents' level of awareness regarding the duration of the study.**

Based on the above, some students state that the University is asking them to pay the next, i.e., 6th-year tuition fee.

Uncertainty about tuition fees and duration is a major reason for students' distrust of the University.

1.9. Equal learning opportunities for students with Georgian and foreign citizenship.

The assessment of the vast majority of respondents is negative (90% of respondents), and only a small part (10%) believe that they have the same opportunities to get an education in the universities as Georgian students.

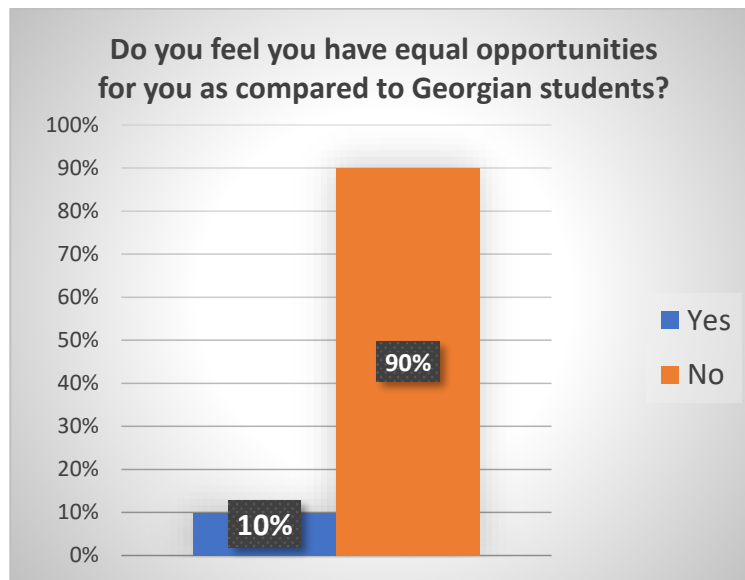


Figure 13. Assessment of learning opportunities of Georgian and international students.

The students' comments mainly express dissatisfaction with the following issues, which are partially mentioned above: unlike Georgian students, inability to register on the University's official portal, limited access to university news, various facilities and laboratories, dormitories for Georgian students only, etc.

1.10. Respondents' interest in additional opportunities.

In the comments, students wish to have the opportunity to participate in more varied types of events, for example:

- Practice in laboratories and medical institutions;
- Cultural and sports events;
- Seminars, workshops, and conferences;
- Exchange programs;
- Campuses;
- Activities in the social sphere and working part-time.

1.11. Respondents' access to the BSU Internet portal.

It should be noted that the University has an Internet portal only in Georgian. 64% of respondents say they do not have an account on the university internet portal. Additionally, 5% of students state that they do not know if they have such an account. Since they do not have information about owning an account on the portal, they cannot or do not use the account. Based on the above, we can most likely assume that they do not have such an account either.

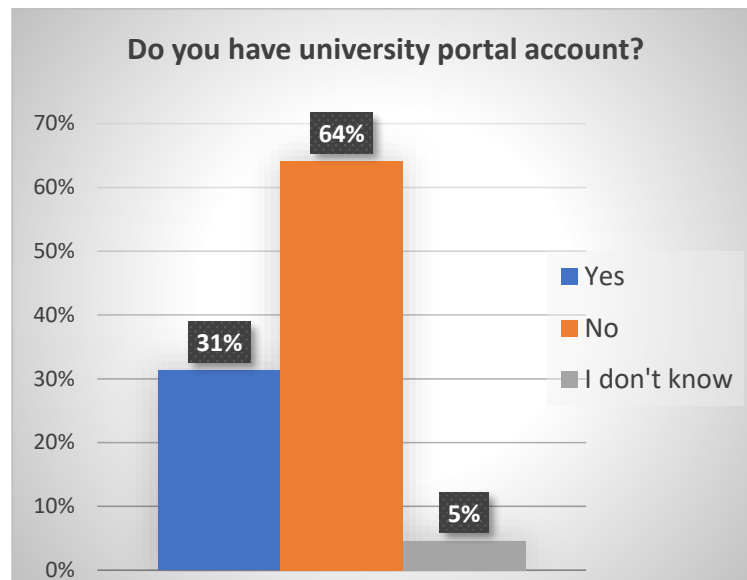


Figure 14. Getting an account on the University Internet Portal.

Students wish that the portal be available in English and an up-to-date, reliable, and official source of information. Through the portal, they would receive comprehensive and timely information on the study schedule, university governance decisions, career, and other opportunities, scholarships, various events, dormitories, registration for various modules and exams, and receive needed documents. In addition to what is very important for students, it would serve as an official channel of communication with the University in the form of a portal through which they would send a request or question and receive an appropriate response.

The comments also mention that international students have an e-mail address having the university domain - bsu.ge, however, it is not used to communicate with the University, making it useless. Students wish to register by e-mail using the bsu.edu.ge domain (and not bsu.ge), which would grant them free access to foreign online libraries and/or information resources.

1.12. Awareness of respondents on scholarship opportunities at the University / in Georgia.

42% of respondents state that they are informed about the scholarships available at the university / in Georgia, while 58% do not have information about the same scholarships.

This issue is mainly due to the lack of an English-language portal on the University, which would provide a level of awareness among students on various matters, including scholarship opportunities at the university and other sources.

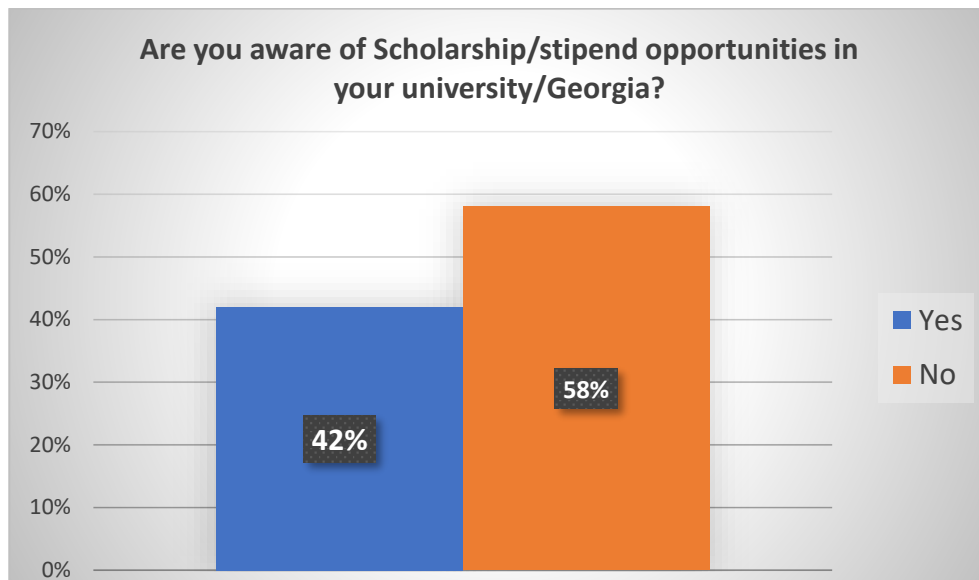


Figure 15. Awareness about scholarship opportunities at the University / in Georgia.

1.13. Respondents' awareness about the availability of the university dormitory.

21% of international students know that the University has a dormitory, although the majority say that it is not intended for international students as per their knowledge.

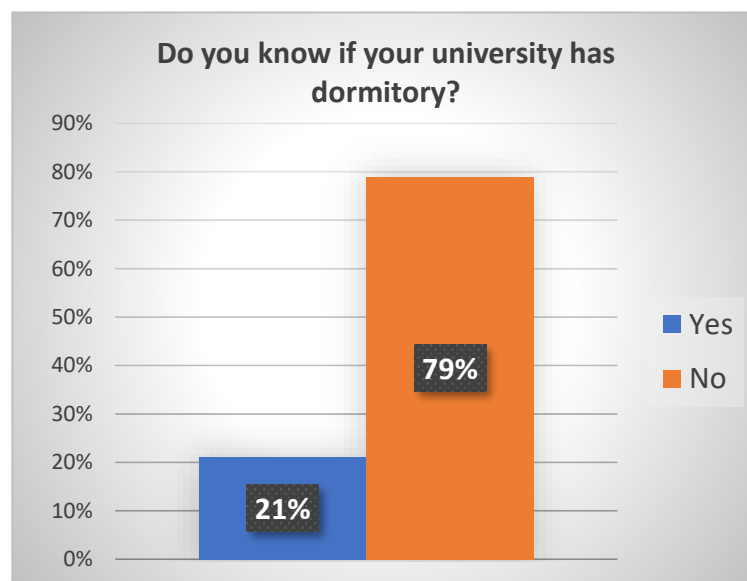


Figure 16. Respondents' awareness of the university dormitory.

1.14. Problems regarding accommodation and renting procedures.

54% of respondents said they had various problems in renting accommodation.

International students report the following problems with accommodation / rental issues:

- Difficulty of renting an apartment for the summer season;
- High rent for international students compared to Georgians;
- A discriminatory approach on ethnic grounds, which means that owners do not want to rent accommodation to Indian students;
- Fraud by landlords and/or real estate agents.

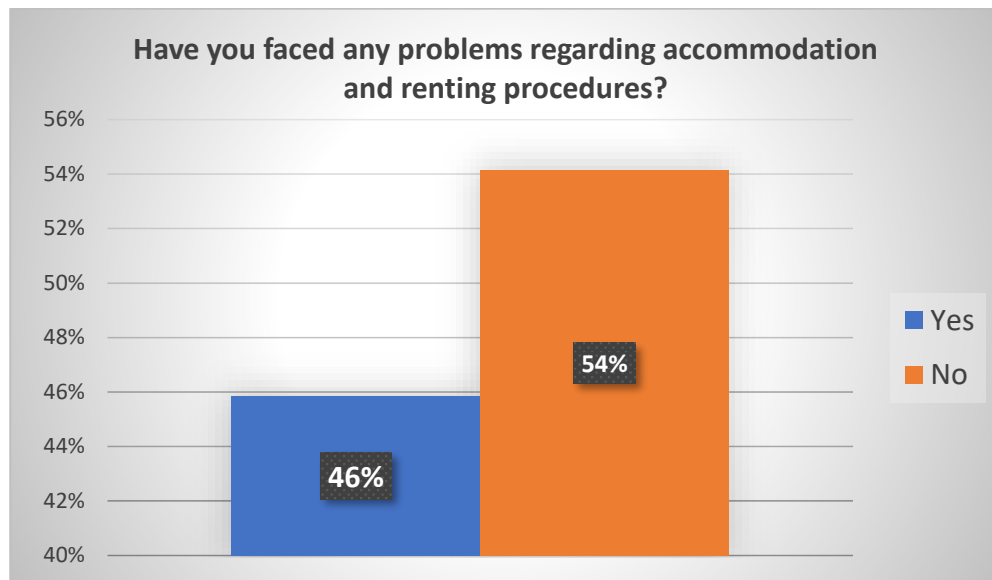


Figure 17. Problems regarding accommodation and renting procedures.

1.15. Employment of international students.

Most of the respondents (65%) do not work but are interested in employment opportunities. There is also a large group of international students who are neither employed nor interested in employment.

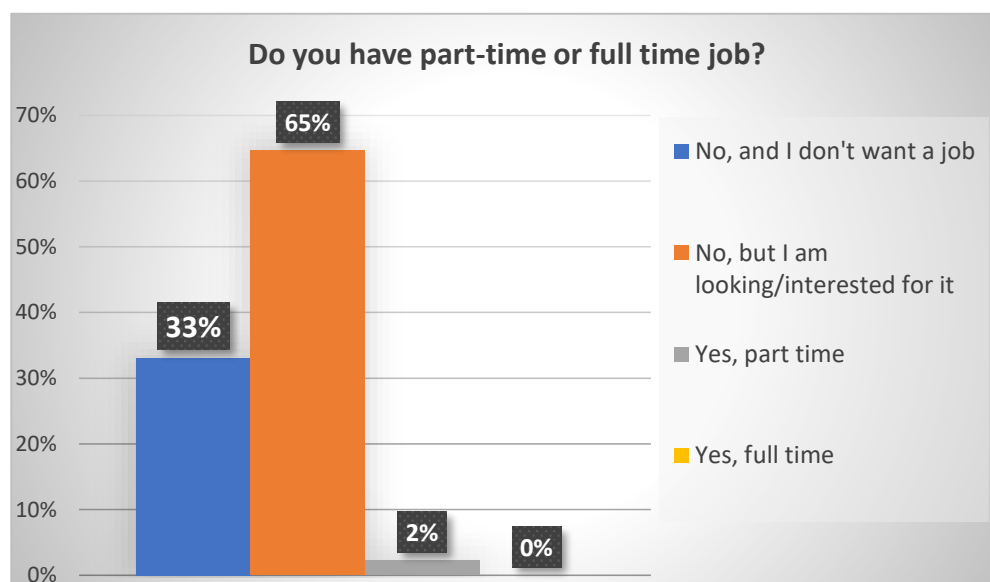


Figure 18. Respondent employment rate.

Only a very small number of international students are employed part-time (about 2%) and combine study and work.

1.16. Relations with the local community.

Nearly 35% of respondents indicate that they are trying to get to know as many locals as possible and establish relationships with them. 54% say they come into contact with locals only when necessary, the main reason being the language barrier. A small part of respondents already has a wide circle of acquaintances (2%). The number of respondents who do not try to build relationships with locals is only 4%.

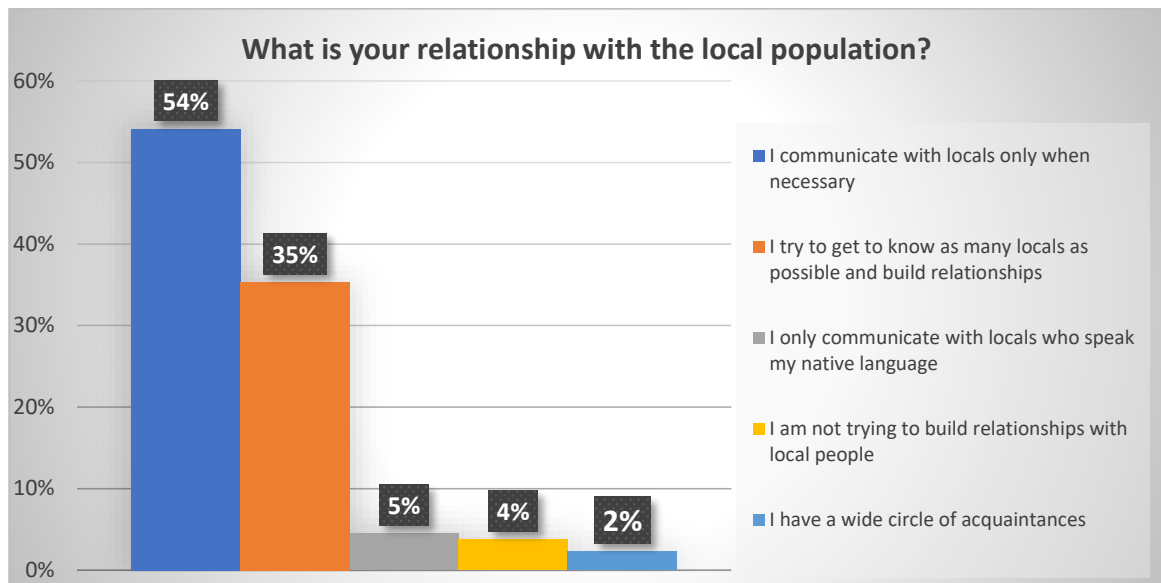


Figure 19. Indicator of the level of relations of international students with the local population.

The answers provided clarify that international students are open to communication, which is an essential prerequisite for their integration into the local community.

1.17. Discriminatory treatment.

The answers given to this question are a very good indicator to assess the degree of tolerance of the local community, considering the factors that international students pay significant amounts in the form of tuition fees, housing rent, and other needs.

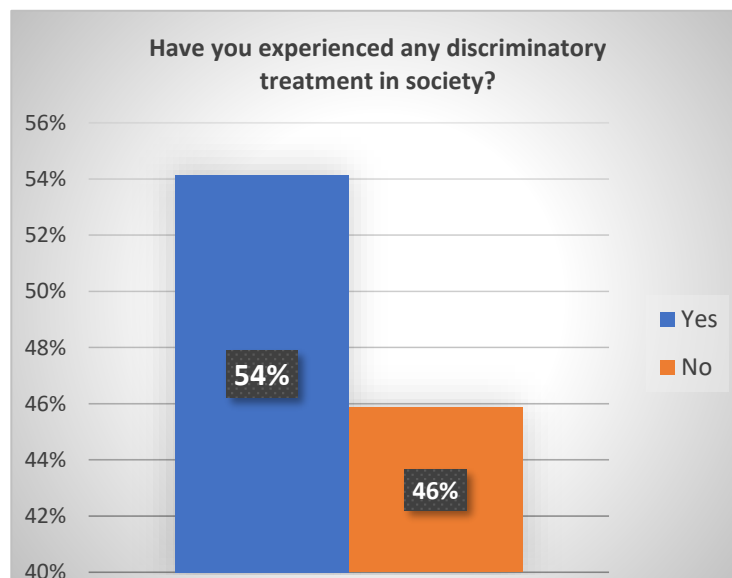


Figure 20. Facts of discriminatory treatment of international students.

Nearly 54% of the respondents speak about the facts of discriminatory treatment against them, while 46% state that the facts of discriminatory treatment have not taken place in their case.

1.18. Forms of discriminatory treatment.

Respondents had the opportunity to choose several answers to this question. The highest rate is discrimination on ethnic grounds (36%), followed by discrimination based on language barrier (33%). Other factors of discrimination are expressed at relatively low rates.

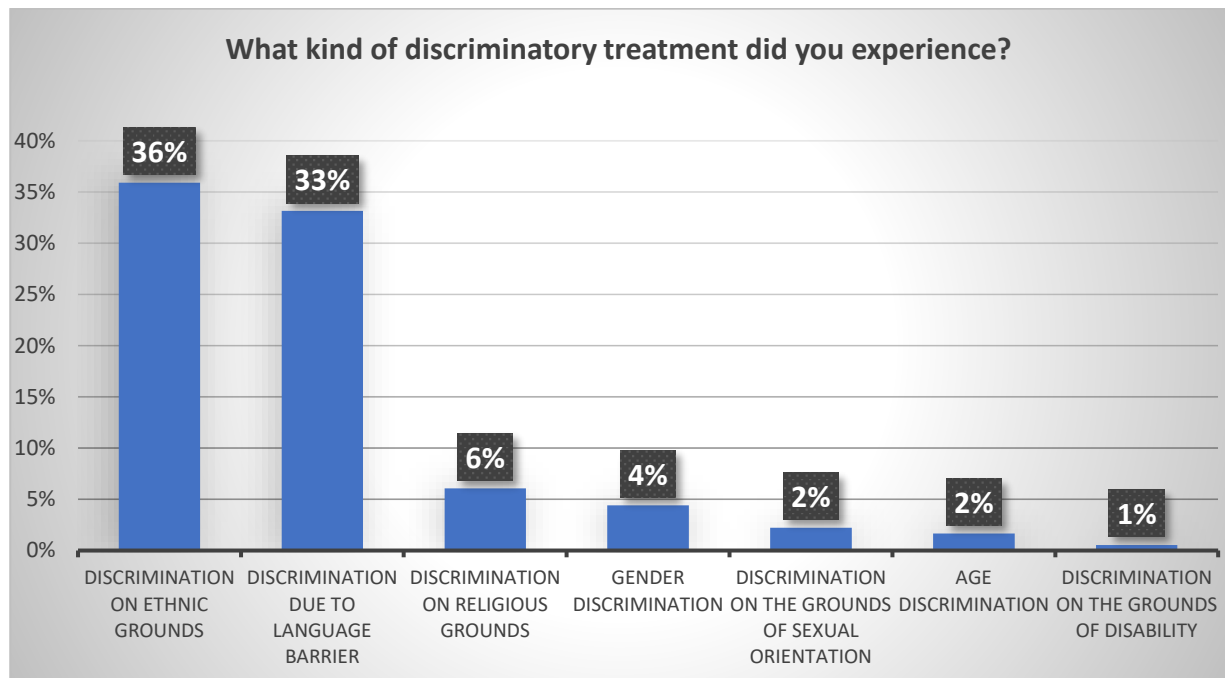


Figure 21. Forms of discrimination against respondents.

1.19. Events/opportunities that would help international students to improve student's experience in Georgia.

Respondents to this question could choose a maximum of four answers. The answers show that it is important for international students to have more relations with the local population, also to improve their Georgian language skills.

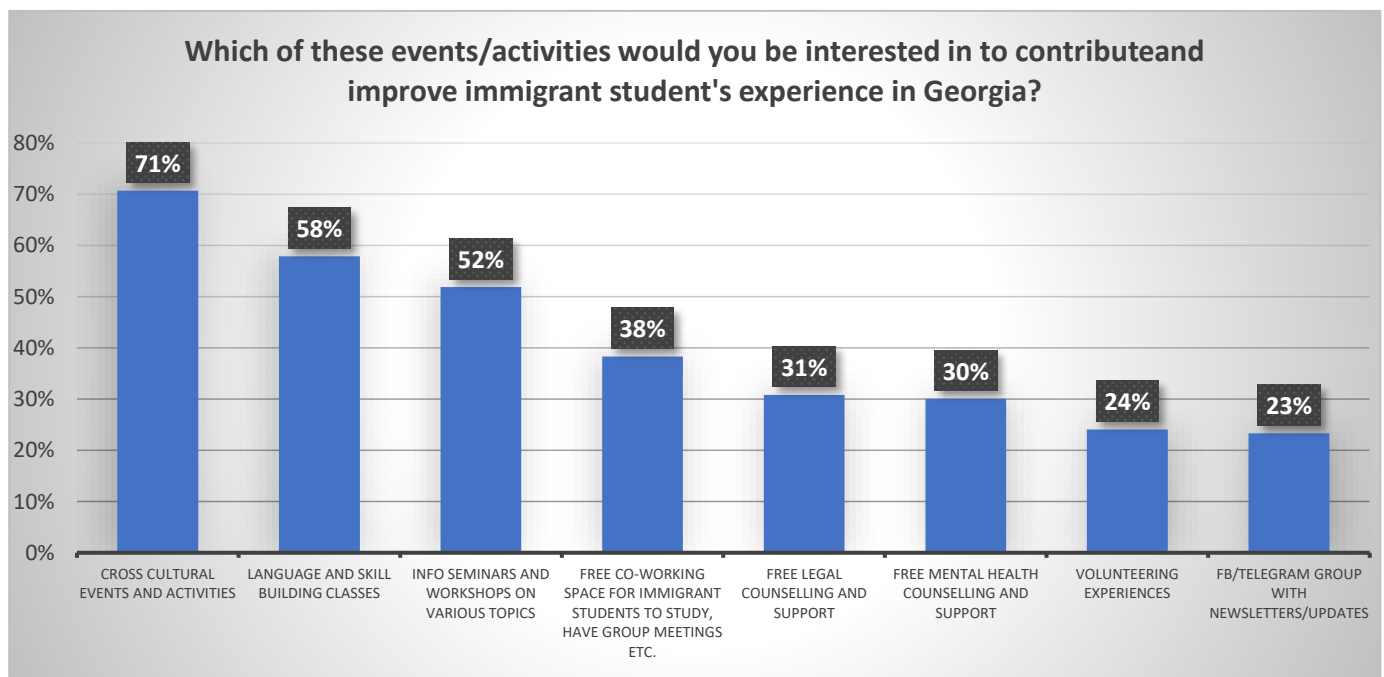


Figure 21. List of events/activities that would help respondents improve the student experience in Georgia.

1.20. Proficiency in languages by international students.

All interviewed international students state that they speak English. Also, a small part of them speaks Georgian. For 86 percent of students (114 students), the language barrier is an obstacle to get the services and information they need.

1.21. Rights of international students and the need for legal aid.

37% of the surveyed students (49 students) have found themselves in a situation in which they needed to defend their rights.

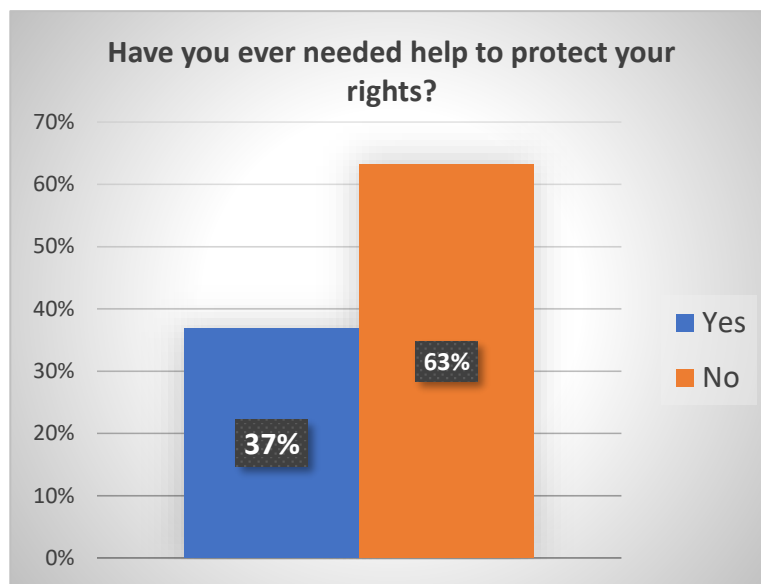


Figure 22. Index of cases of need to protect own rights.

The answers to the additional question - "Who did you turn to for protection of your rights?" Were distributed as follows:

- 10 - University administration, lecturers;
- 7 - no one;
- 6 - lawyer;
- 2 - the police;
- 2 - Embassy of India in Armenia;
- 15 - did not answer the question.

From the above, it is clear that only a small number of students applied for assistance to the authorities or persons with relevant qualifications to protect their rights.

1.22. Access to legal services / consulting.

A large proportion of respondents (81%) state that they do not have access to legal aid and counseling; 11% have information about private lawyers; Only 8% have a familiar lawyer to turn to if needed.

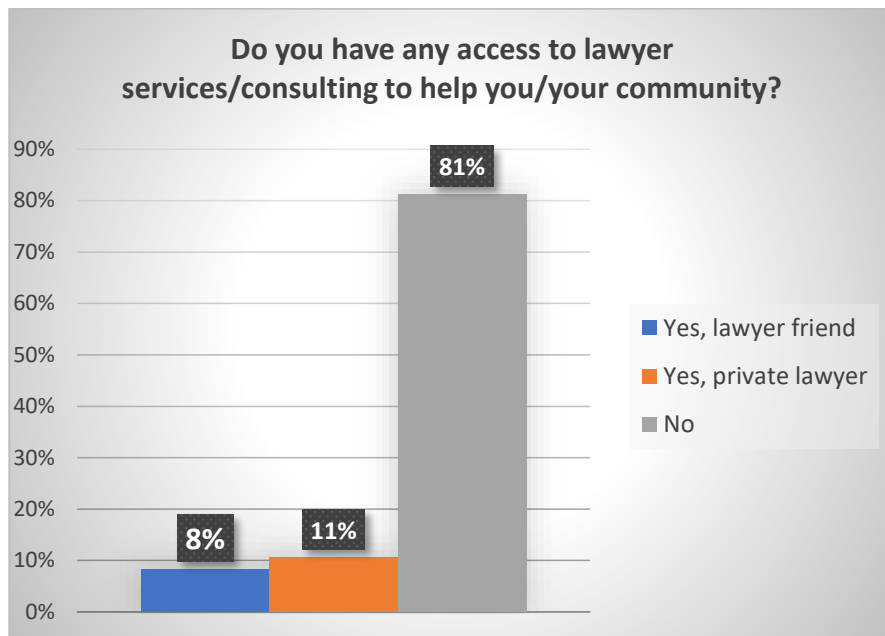


Figure 23. Respondents' access to legal services

1.23. The need for legal advice per issue.

The respondents could choose from several answers to the question “On what issues do/did you require legal counseling often?”. 47% of BSU international students say that the need for legal advice is related to university-related topics, and the following issues are mentioned in the comments:

- Tuition fees;
- Duration of study;
- Issuance of a diploma or equivalent document.

The second important issue is related to the residence permit.

Students also talk about fraud by private property owners or real estate agents.

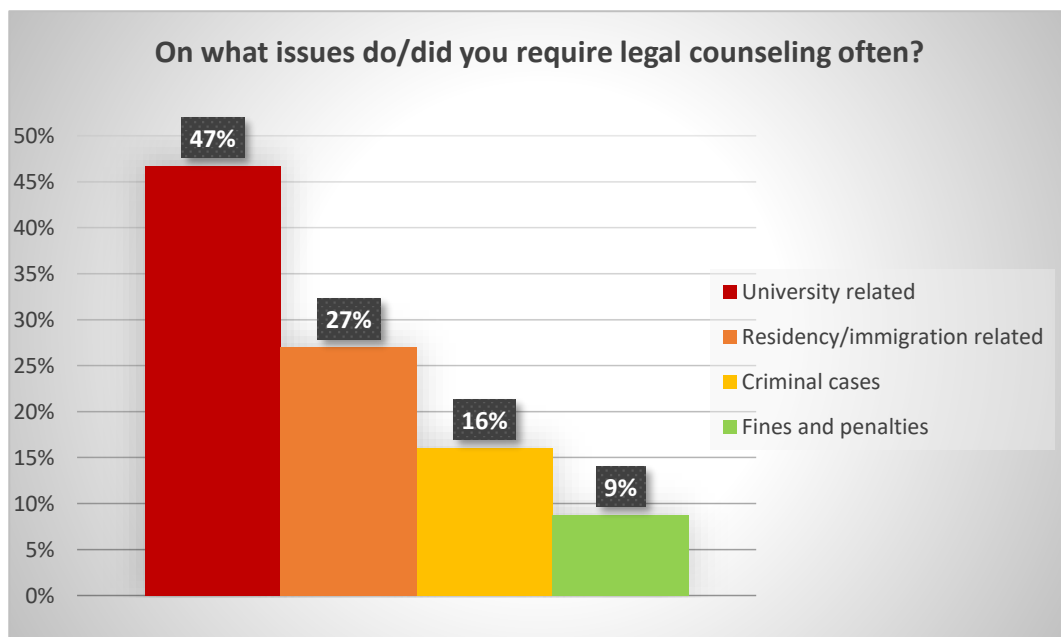


Figure 24. Reasons for needing legal advice.

1.24. Procedures for obtaining a residence permit in Georgia.

Respondents could choose from several answers to the question. 51% were able to obtain residency independently, and 32% through the help/advice of friends.

In verbal conversations, the students noted that the implementation of legal procedures for obtaining the right of residence was the responsibility of the intermediary companies. Nevertheless, students had to independently conduct procedures for obtaining a residence permit.

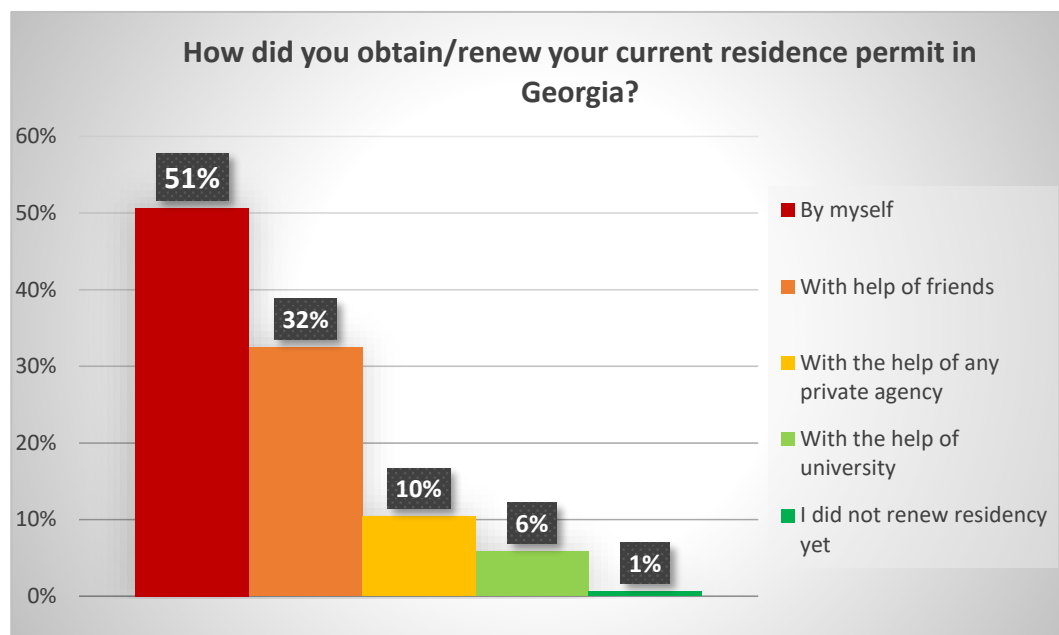


Figure 25. How did the respondents obtain/continue their right to reside in Georgia?

1.25. Information about governmental or non-governmental organizations working to support immigrants/students.

The vast majority of international students (94%) have no information about state or non-governmental organizations supporting immigrants/students. Consequently, if necessary, they cannot take advantage of the additional opportunities offered by the local community.

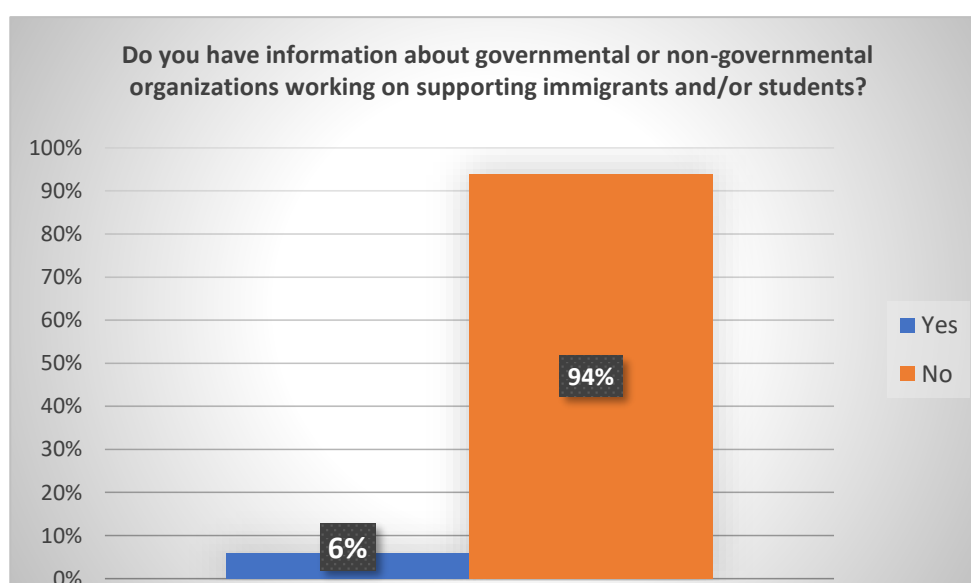


Figure 26. Awareness about the information on governmental or non-governmental organizations working to support immigrants/students.

1.26. Sources of information on news, rules and regulations.

Respondents could choose from several answers. For most students, the most preferable source of information is Facebook.

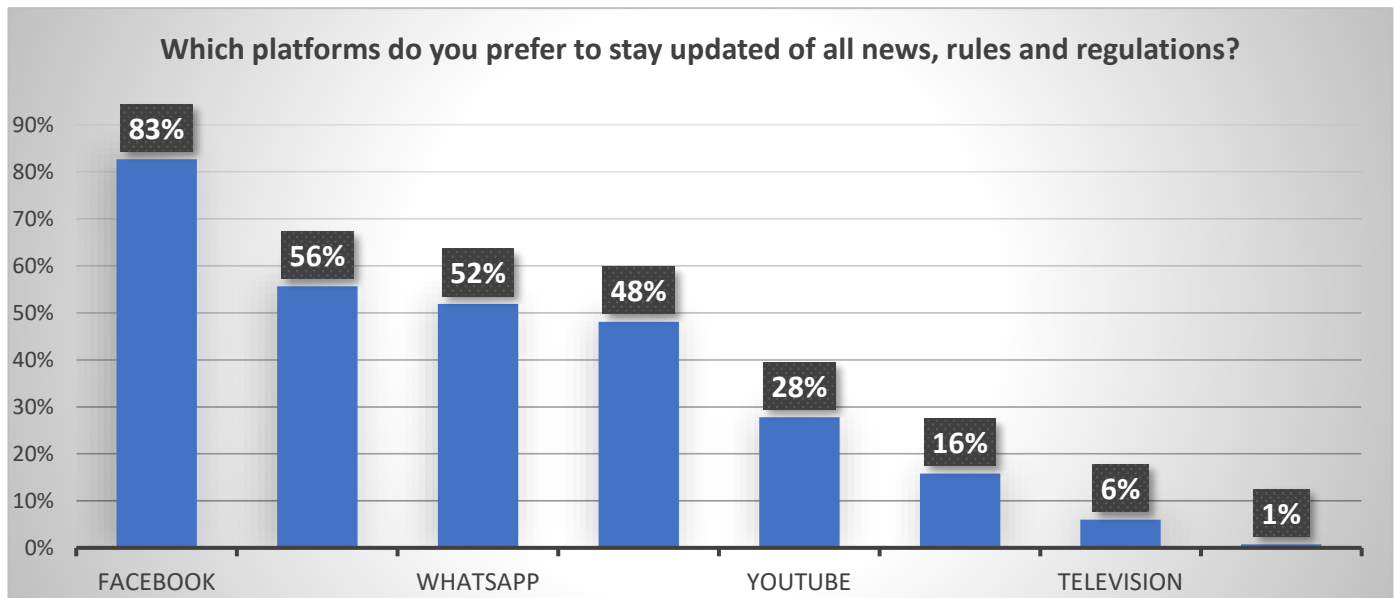


Figure 27. Popular sources of information about news, rules and regulations by respondents.

1.27. Cases of law violations due to lack of information on laws/ordinances/regulations.

Nearly 9% of international students say they have been fined for ignorance of the rules and 4% specify that they have been fined for violating traffic rules in a vehicle.

1.28. Access to health insurance services.

On September 10, 2020, the Government of Georgia adopted ordinance # 572, "On Determining the Conditions and Rules of Health and Accident Insurance for Foreign and Stateless Students on the Territory of Georgia", within which international students were required to have health and accident insurance during their stay in Georgia. We were interested in getting information on how many students are insured and what kind of problems they face in this regard. However, as shown in Figure 28, a significant number of international students (49 students, 37%) do not have insurance. Some of these students may not have been in Georgia during the survey period, 9 of them specifically mentioned it in the questionnaire.

Regarding insurance companies, students name the following problems: the problem with insurance reimbursement and complicated procedures related to it (13%), they see less benefit in insurance, high price (11%), distrust of insurance companies, and negative experience in relationships with them.

Also, 17 students (13%) expressed their willingness to get insurance but did not know how to.

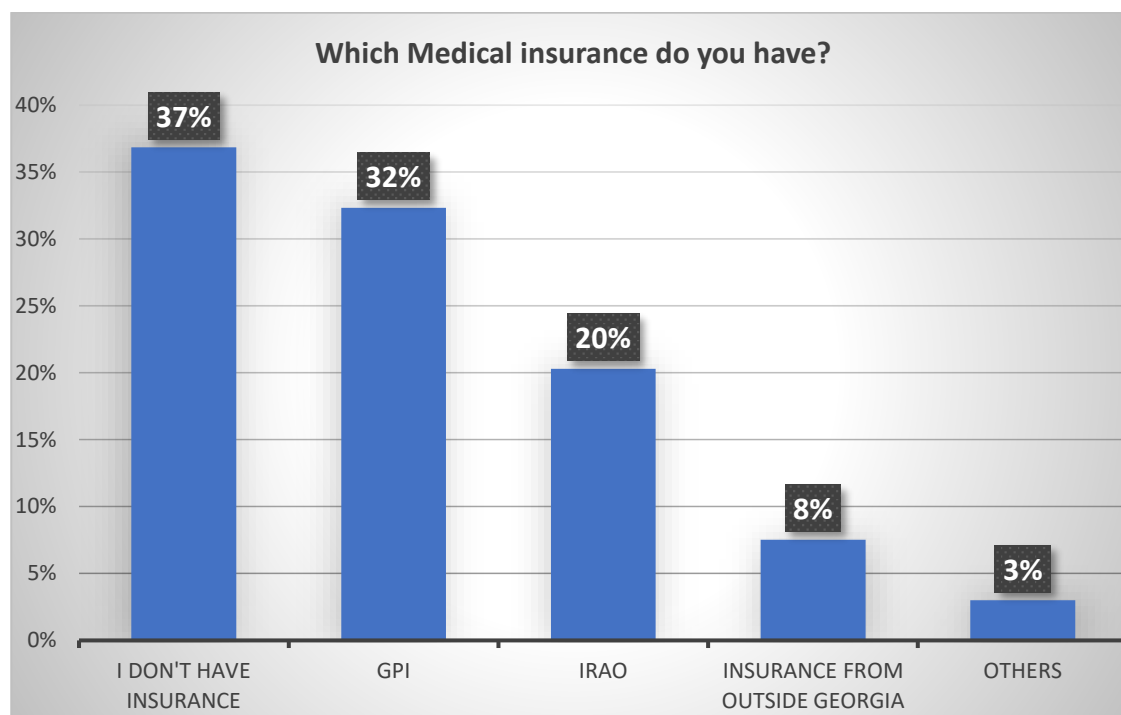


Figure 28. Respondents' health insurance data by insurance companies.

1.29. Access to mental health support/counseling services

33% of respondents (44 students) say they do not have access to mental health support/counseling services but need such services.

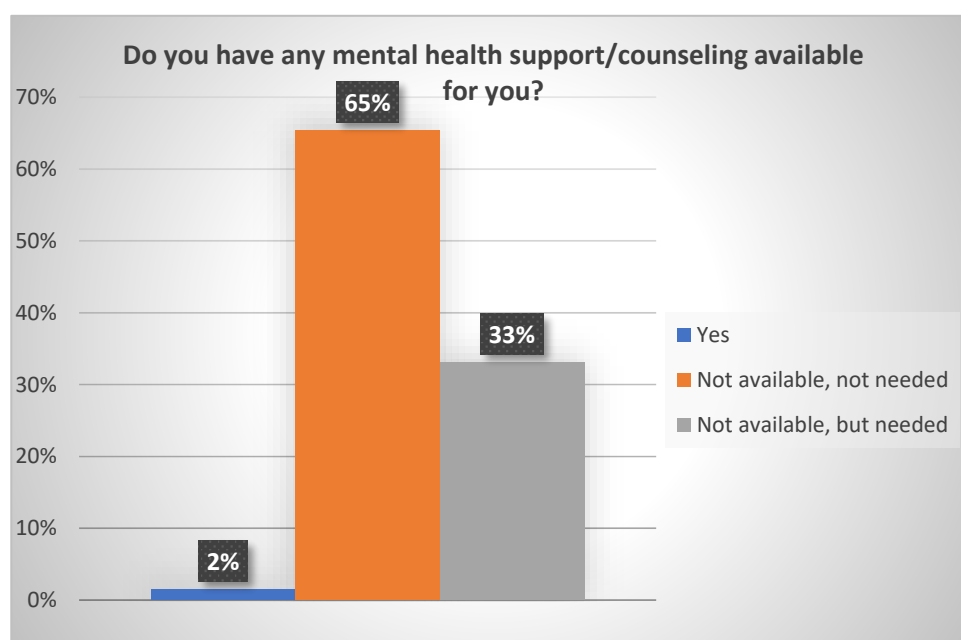


Figure 29. Access to mental health support/counseling services for respondents.

II. Key Findings.

2.1. Regarding the study conditions of international students at Batumi Shota Rustaveli State University.

There are a number of shortcomings in the implementation of the BSU Medical Doctor program in English language, which are mainly related to the management of the educational process and finances:

- A significant proportion of BSU international students do not have a document establishing a legal relationship between them and the University - a contract that would define the rights and obligations, financial obligations, relationship rules, and procedures of the parties.
- Most students do not have comprehensive information about the duration of their studies. According to the "Letter of Admission Offer", students were expected to complete their studies in 5 years. In fact, according to the resolutions of # 107 of August 27, 2014, of the BSU Academic Council and # 06-01 / 26 of May 22, 2020, the duration of the program is 6 years, the total number of credits is 360 credits. Consequently, students will not be able to complete their studies in 5 years.
- A significant proportion of students do not have information about tuition fees.

These factors create the possibility of a non-transparent formation of tuition fees by the University or some intermediary companies. Also, the extension of the study period to 6 years, the need to rent accommodation in the private sector, travel and living expenses in a foreign country place an additional burden on students, which negatively affect their financial situation, students' trust in the University.

- BSU international students negatively evaluate specific components of the educational process - lectures and lecture process, study schedule and exam management, study facilities/environment, access to laboratories and practice, access to library resources.

- International students feel that when using the study facilities, participating in the practice process, and being offered various opportunities, they are in an unequal position compared to Georgian students.

The dissatisfactory learning process creates a significant disparity between the amounts paid by students and the product that students receive in return for the amounts paid by them.

- A particularly acute problem is inadequate, inefficient, time-consuming, and incomplete communication between international students and the BSU administration, which creates uncertainty among students, difficulties in the learning process, and reduces the quality of education. The language barrier also creates additional challenges in communication.

As a result, students question the transparency of the University's activities towards them, which significantly undermines the University's authority and may in the future become a significant impediment to BSU positioning as an international educational center and attracting international students.

Negative evaluations of the University can be reflected in the same way on Batumi as a tourist city of international importance.

- BSU students do not have access to university dormitories or information about its existence. Consequently, international students are not able to take advantage of this opportunity. Due to the above, the cost of living in Batumi is high, and some of them face problems with accommodation.

- Most students do not have information on scholarship opportunities at the University / in Georgia, nor do they have information on student employment programs.

- A significant percent of international students are trying to get to know and build relationships with locals, although the language barrier is a significant impediment. The number of international students who do not try to establish relationships with locals is only 4% of the respondents.

- In the practice of most students, there were cases of discrimination, mainly on the basis of ethnicity. Relatively less, based on language barriers.

Due to the above, the cost of living in Batumi for international students increases significantly. Even the lack of information about scholarships and student employment opportunities does not allow them to at least partially compensate for the high tuition costs in Batumi compared to Georgian students.

Cases of discrimination also have a negative impact on students, the recognition of the University and the city, and their attractiveness to foreigners. Dissemination of negative information can become a significant obstacle to the path of international recognition of BSU, interrupt international students' influx, and cause considerable financial loss.

- There is a need for legal aid for international students on both study and other issues.
- Students do not have access to institutions working on international students' issues, be it public (University, local government), NGO or student self-government. They would act as an intermediary between students, the local community, and the University to reduce communication barriers and ensure greater integration.
- International students do not have access to a consolidated information source to obtain the information they need.

Although the English language version of the website of BSU contains information about the existence of a legal clinic for international students (<https://bsu.edu.ge/sub-34/page/3-173/index.html>), none of the students applied to it. However, the presence of such a structure at the University is unknown to them. It should be noted that whether if the legal clinic actually exists or if it is only a PR step for the University is unclear. But the existence of legal aid services supporting international students (both at the university and outside) is crucial for protecting their rights and improving their study conditions. This indirectly affects the financial costs of students, which also has a negative impact on their conditions.

- Students face significant problems with insurance companies - the problem with insurance reimbursement and related procedures is the reason why they see less benefit in insurance. Non-fulfillment of their obligations by insurance companies and high prices generally build distrust and insensitivity to insurance companies.
- Students do not have access to mental health support/counseling, which, especially during the pandemic, increases stress and exacerbates the student's condition.

Lack of insurance or non-compliance by insurance companies with their obligations can place a heavy financial burden on students in the event of deteriorating health. Lack of mental health support/counseling services complicates the situation of many students and negatively affects their student achievement. Low academic achievement creates the need to retake certain subjects and consequently incurs additional financial costs.

III. Recommendations

Attracting international students to Batumi universities should not be the objective of only the higher education institutions. Establishing the higher education institutions as international educational centers will generate significant financial income for both these higher education institutions and the city as a whole. Accordingly, attracting international students to Batumi education institutions, creating comfortable educational and living conditions for them in Batumi universities, bringing them closer to Georgian youth, and integration into the local community should become one of the main priorities for Batumi Municipality and the government bodies of the Autonomous Republic of Ajara.

Recommendations developed include various stakeholders who are directly (or indirectly) interested (or should be interested) in attracting international students to Batumi higher education institutions, thus developing Batumi as an international educational center.

The following recommendations are suggested:

3.1. Recommendations for Batumi Shota Rustaveli State University.

3.1.1. It is desirable to have a special group of marketers at BSU, who will periodically study the requirements of the educational market, develop and implement the marketing policy of BSU, will have direct communication with people interested in studying in Batumi and intermediary companies. Study the history of these companies and assess the degree of their credibility;

3.1.2. It is necessary to develop both long-term and short-term strategies for attracting international students to BSU and timely action plans;

3.1.3. It is necessary to have a staff unit/units/structure in BSU, which will be empowered to study the quality of satisfaction of international students and, together with other structures of the University to solve problems, develop recommendations and monitor their implementation.

The introduction of an international student attraction system will ensure an increase in the number of international students at the University, hence the financial income, the establishment of direct communication channels with interested people, the exclusion of unscrupulous intermediaries from the value chain, reducing student financial burden and advancement of BSU as an international educational center.

3.1.4. The University must pay special attention to the legal aspects of relations with international students and intermediary companies - to conclude bilateral, individual, bilingual (Georgian and English) contracts (in case of participation of intermediary companies, three-sided agreements are possible: University - intermediary company – student). In the contract, in addition to information about the rights and obligations of the parties, it is necessary to indicate detailed information about the duration of tuition and fees, additional services provided by the University as well as the amount of commissions charged by intermediary companies and the principles of financial cooperation.

Given the lack of experience in international relations, it is advisable to introduce the practice of conducting expertise for all non-standard contracts.

Following these recommendations, the University will be able to formalize its relationship between students and intermediary companies in a formal legal framework. As a result, all parties will be legally more protected and will avoid possible interpretations of the agreement and hence negative financial and reputational consequences.

3.1.5. It is necessary to create a constantly updated English-language student internet portal and to include all international students in it. Through the portal, international students should be able to:

- Receive reliable, official, and comprehensive information on various issues: study conditions, schedule, exams, academic or other registration, changes, news, use of various opportunities (e.g., scholarships, seminars, conferences, dormitory);

- Communicate formally with the University and receive timely and comprehensive answers to questions, required documents (e.g., certificate, recommendation);
- Get information about their legal status in relation to the University, their rights and responsibilities;
- Get information about restrictions and regulations in the country or at the local level, including the difficulties caused by COVID-19, the prevention and reduction of the spread of the virus, and the rules and conditions for entering the country.

Considering the above recommendation, BSU, on the one hand, will be able to make the learning process more systematic and organized. On the other hand, it will be much easier for students to find the information they need, reduce uncertainty on various issues, avoid more difficulties, and significantly improve transparency and quality of the process.

3.1.6. Acts governing the conditions of study, which are directly related to the educational process of international students (decision of the Academic Council, orders of the Rector, etc.), must be translated into English and published in official sources available to students;

With this recommendation, international students will be fully informed about the current state of study, will be able to avoid complications that may arise due to lack of information. In addition, the number of applications to the University on these issues will be significantly reduced, which will also have a positive impact on the activities of the University.

3.1.7. It is advisable for the university administration to provide periodic meetings with international students (e.g., once or twice during the semester), be it with all students, with specific students separately, or only with active and leading students. The following issues should be discussed at the meeting:

- Problems, needs, and difficulties faced by students and ways to eliminate them;
- Significant changes in study conditions or legislation that may have a material impact on their learning process (e.g., duration of the study, limitations, and difficulties caused by pandemic regulations, etc.);

The above meetings may be conducted directly by the university administration with a student-selected student group (student community leaders) who will be in constant contact with both the university administration and their classmates.

With this in mind, the University will be able to respond to the acute problems students face, take them into account as much as possible, find ways to solve them, as well as explain the decisions made by the University and answer relevant questions. Students will be given the opportunity to express their views on the teaching process and conditions, as well as get answers to frequently asked questions. Feedback will help the University identify gaps in the teaching process, improve the quality of teaching, develop recommendations and take them into account in the future, avoiding similar problems with new students.

3.1.8. The University should provide equal study opportunities for both Georgian and international students. Also, ensure equal access to information for all.

3.1.9. The University should take into account the requests of students and extend the Georgian language course. In addition, it is advisable to add some hours to this course to learn about Georgian culture, Georgian people, their values and customs.

Improving Georgian language skills and getting more information about the local community will facilitate more effective communication of international students with the administration, lecturers, Georgian students, and the local community in general.

3.1.10 It is desirable for the University to make more efforts to provide information about dormitory opportunities for international students. The information will allow international students to enjoy dormitories if the relevant criteria are met. This opportunity will give students more incentive to improve their academic performance and avoid such problems as finding and changing accommodation, the high cost of renting a private residence, etc.

3.1.11. International students should have access to the person(s) responsible for their issues at the University, who would be the primary contact person(s), and provide students with information about matters of interest to them.

3.1.12. It is desirable for the University to have a mental health support/counseling specialist who would help students overcome learning-related stress and increase learning incentives. For issues, needs, and problems that are clearly characteristic of many students, the specialist should work with the university administration to find solutions. For international students, psychological stress can become an important impediment to their academic achievement and, more generally, to develop their personality. They are especially affected by the following factors:

- Foreign country and related difficulties: lack of knowledge of local customs, different attitudes of the population, language barrier, different culture;
- Different lifestyles and living environment;
- Lack of contact with family members and friends, consequently limited and inadequate support and assistance from them;
- Different environment and rules from school in higher education;
- Unfamiliar with whom they have to study and spend time (classmates, lecturers);
- Add to all of the above is currently worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic and related stressful situations.

In the matter of mental support, the University may cooperate with other organizations that would provide similar services on behalf of the University. Such a partner organization, which will not be associated with the University (will not be included in its structure), may enjoy more trust from students, especially due to the specifics of the educational issues. Consequently, its activities maybe even more effective.

3.1.13. It is desirable to plan joint co-curricular events (sports, cultural, etc.) with the participation of foreign and Georgian students. Any kind of multicultural event will facilitate the mutual integration of both foreign and Georgian students at the university level.

3.2. Recommendations for regional state and local self-government bodies.

State agencies and self-government bodies of the Autonomous Republic of Ajara can play a significant role in developing Batumi as an international educational center, attracting international students and creating modern educational and comfortable living conditions. The needs of international students often coincide with the needs of other categories of immigrants. Consequently, by launching separate service systems for immigrants, it is possible to meet the needs of international students as well.

The Ministry of Finance and Economy of the Autonomous Republic of Ajara, through its departments and sub-departments, can provide significant assistance to the University in the development of marketing plans, preparation and conclusion of international agreements, and legal examination of individual contracts.

The Ministry of Education, Culture and Sports of the Autonomous Republic of Ajara, through the Ajara Education Fund, can ensure the development of an additional curricula (including distance learning) for international students. It is also desirable to involve international students in various cultural events.

As international practice shows, local self-government bodies play an essential role in informing, consulting, and integrating immigrants. Given the location of international students in the region, this role must be fulfilled by Batumi City Hall.

Although international students are a specific category of immigrants, their needs coincide with other immigrants' needs in many ways shown by both surveys conducted by Young Scientists Union “Intellect”: in August-September 2020 and in March 2021.

Activities that can be carried out by local self-government bodies:

- Information provision and consulting service for raising awareness on various issues, within which the local self-government will provide the immigrants with information about the public or non-governmental organizations that could solve the issues they face, realize their rights and protect their interests. They could also provide immigrants with other types of information, such as various opportunities for immigrants;
- Organizing various cultural and/or sports events for different ethnic groups, as well as with the involvement of immigrants and the local population;
- Also implement educational and PR measures to increase the level of tolerance among the local population and to reduce the facts of discrimination against international students.

By organizing these activities, the local self-government will improve the living experience of immigrants in Batumi, prevent violations caused by lack of information, and will be able to enhance the process of bilateral integration.

3.3. Recommendations for civil society organizations.

The recommendations given to the government can be fully or partially implemented by civil society organizations if appropriate resources are available. Foreign nationals try to contact the authorities only when necessary, especially if they have or have had any kind of misconduct. In this regard, civil society organizations have a greater degree of trust. Consequently, they have more opportunities to implement relevant projects successfully. The legal counseling and assistance service is especially in demand, provision of which is not the direct obligation within the competence of the government. Also, in cooperation with the University, it is possible to carry out student mental health support/counseling activities.

3.4. Recommendations for the Government of India, the Embassy of the Republic of India in Armenia and Georgia, and NGOs in India.

The research area does not allow to generalize its results throughout Georgia, however, its results throughout Batumi are quite sufficient to draw attention to these organizations.

It is necessary to focus the activities of the Indian government, its diplomatic missions, or Indian non-governmental organizations on the Indian students living in Batumi on the following issues:

- Conduct periodic surveys on student living and study conditions and respond appropriately to identified problems and needs. Such measures will help to obtain information about the current situation, to respond in a timely manner to the problems that have arisen before entering their acute phase;
- Provide / publish advice and recommendations for students before leaving for Georgia on relations with intermediary companies and/or the University. As well as providing detailed information on communication and response mechanisms (hotlines, foreign aid organizations) in the event of problems. This ensures the readiness of students to respond to possible challenges posed by both the University and the local community;
- Cooperate with intermediary companies and develop recommendations for them. Recommendations should be directed at making more effort by these companies to provide students with comprehensive information about their commitments (e.g., to enter into agreements with students, to provide proper study documentation). Through this, students will have clear information about their and the contractor's rights and responsibilities, the ambiguity regarding study fees will be reduced, the degree of protection of students' rights will be increased;
- Cooperate with non-governmental organizations working in the field of protection of the rights of foreign citizens in Georgia to obtain the necessary and timely information from them and to take adequate and timely measures. Through this, Indian governmental and non-governmental organizations will be able to respond more effectively and implement successful practices in protecting the interests of students in the long run;
- Planning / conducting cultural events in Batumi (especially events with the joint participation of Indians and locals), which will help Indian students to engage in activities aimed at strengthening their cultural identity and also to bring closer the local society and the Indian community;
- Informing Indian students about Georgian legislation/government regulations. It is especially important to provide timely and comprehensive information on COVID-19 pandemic regulations. Through this, students will be able to avoid the negative consequences that can result from a lack of information about Georgian legislation/government regulations.