



## Regional Students' Resilience: Coping with Precarious Life in Tbilisi, Georgia

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### Summary

This study examines the challenges faced by students who have graduated from their secondary education outside of Tbilisi, and are currently enrolled in Tbilisi-based higher education institutions. It focuses on the crucial issue of affordable housing. Disparities between urban and rural areas in Georgia create barriers to higher education for young people from peripheral areas. To comprehend the behaviors and resilience levels of regional students in Tbilisi concerning these challenges, academic staff and students from the sociology program at the Georgian Institute of Public Affairs conducted a mixed-methods research study. This approach involved a combination of online surveys, expert interviews, in-depth interviews, and focus groups.

The study's findings suggest that the housing crisis in Tbilisi is driving non-Tbilisi native students to seek inadequate and often expensive alternatives in the city, leading to precarious employment and negative impacts on academic performance and mental health. The study highlights the survivalist approach of these students, adapting to immediate challenges rather than fostering growth. Although students receive familial support, the absence of a collective resilience network among peers negatively impacts their political agency and ability to participate in student movements to demand better policies and services from educational or state institutions.

The study highlights the importance of more in-depth research into the transition of regional students from survival to growth modes. Developing collective resilience is a vital component of promoting positive social change in higher education policy in Georgia. The research enhances our knowledge regarding the various difficulties confronted by regional students, and emphasizes the demand for targeted interventions to improve their academic experience and overall well-being in the higher education environment of Tbilisi.



## **Introduction**

This study examines the individual and collective resilience levels of non-Tbilisi native students facing challenges related to affordable housing in Tbilisi, revealing the impact on academic performance, mental health, and political agency. Before we discuss the exact framework of resilience, it is crucial to define the adverse conditions faced by students pursuing higher education in the capital.

In the context of Georgia, the accessibility of higher education is a significant issue, with pronounced disparities between urban and rural areas. This inequality is particularly evident when comparing the capital city, Tbilisi, with the rural and remote regions of the country. Economic and social factors often prevent young people from these regions from receiving high-quality higher education.<sup>1</sup> Often, this is manifested in the multiple disadvantages young people from such areas face,<sup>2</sup> like lack of financial resources, social capital, and access to adequate educational services. In turn, this can lead to uneven opportunities for pursuing higher education.<sup>3</sup>

Obtaining higher education in Georgia is further complicated due to the nature of its educational system, which is centered on several urban areas and most importantly in the capital city.<sup>4</sup> Universities in Tbilisi are also the most prestigious and the vast majority of bright pupils aim at continuing their studies in the capital.<sup>5</sup> However, the most pressing problem amongst regional (i.e. hailing from outside Tbilisi) students is the lack of affordable housing, which adversely affects their academic performance, participation in social activities, and well-being.

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<sup>1</sup> Lela Chakhaia and Tamar Bregvadze, "Georgia: Higher education system dynamics and institutional diversity," In *25 Years of Transformations of Higher Education Systems in Post-Soviet Countries: Reform and Continuity*, ed. Jeroen Huisman, Anna Smolentseva, Isak Froumin (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 175-197.

<sup>2</sup> Maia Chankseliani "Rural disadvantage in Georgian higher education admissions: A mixed-methods study," *Comparative Education Review* 57, no. 3 (2013): 424-456.

<sup>3</sup> Maia Chankseliani, Sophia Gorgodze, Simon Janashia, and Kairat Kurakbayev, "Rural disadvantage in the context of centralised university admissions: a multiple case study of Georgia and Kazakhstan," *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education* 50, no. 7 (2020): 995-1013.

<sup>4</sup> According to the data from the Georgian National Statistics Office, as of the 2022-2023 academic year, 9 out of 19 active state universities in Georgia are based in Tbilisi, while 32 out of 43 private institutions operate in Tbilisi. Source: <https://www.geostat.ge/en/modules/categories/61/higher-education>.

<sup>5</sup> According to the National Assessment and Examinations Center of Georgia for 2023, as well as in the past years too, Universities located in Tbilisi attracted the highest number of entrants. For more details, please see: [https://naecen.files.wordpress.com/2023/12/report\\_naec\\_2023.pdf](https://naecen.files.wordpress.com/2023/12/report_naec_2023.pdf).

The scarcity of dormitories in the capital, as well as the inability of existing student housing to meet the basic standards of decency, are significant obstacles for non-Tbilisian young people.<sup>6</sup> This gap has not yet been filled by the private sector, and the situation is worsening due to the trend of price increases and inflation in the country. The recent influx of visitors and migrants from Russia and Belarus has particularly contributed to a notable increase in housing prices.<sup>7</sup> Overall, the lack of affordable housing creates adverse living conditions for regional students, demanding a high level of resilience to navigate these challenges and thrive in their pursuit of higher education.

These conditions are multifaceted and affect the students in many ways. The first key aspect is the deterioration of socio-economic conditions, and as a means of mitigation, young people take up work, often overtime and under difficult conditions. Over 61% of employed students work more than twenty hours, according to the Georgia Eurostudent survey.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, the underlying issue is not working per se, but rather the quality of the work available. In precarious circumstances, students often find themselves compelled to accept jobs that realistically do not align with the demands of sustaining a full-time academic life. For instance, a 2022 study on the social needs of Georgian students found that students in employment are working beyond their prescribed hours, which results in poor academic performance and hinders the balance between work and study.<sup>9</sup>

Mental health problems among students are also not negligible. A 2023 study conducted at seven state universities in Georgia found that nearly two-thirds (62%) of students know at least one peer who needs help from a mental health professional.<sup>10</sup> Alarming, the study found that nearly a quarter of the

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<sup>6</sup> Mariam Janiashvili, "Proper accommodation For students: challenges and ways to solve them," Center for Social Justice, February 2, 2023, <https://socialjustice.org.ge/ka/products/satanado-satskhovrisi-studentebistvis-gamotsvevebi-da-mati-gadachris-gzebi#>.

<sup>7</sup> For further details regarding the increase of prices for Tbilisi real estate, please review the information from "Real estate of Tbilisi, June 2023, monthly review," <https://tbccapital.ge/static/file/202307144859-tbilisi-residential-market-monthly-watch-june-2023-eng.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> Institute for Social Research and Analysis, "Eurostudent VII 2019-2021 Main results of the national survey of Education of Georgia and Ministry of Science," 2021, <https://mes.gov.ge/content.php?id=12536&lang=eng>.

<sup>9</sup> Ana Papiashvili and Temo Bezhanidze, "Higher education and social justice: Student social needs survey," Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung & Platform for Critical Politics," 2022, <https://southcaucasus.fes.de/news-list/e/higher-education-and-social-justice-student-social-needs-survey>.

<sup>10</sup> Nino Kokosadze and Kristine Lortkipanidze, "A study of university students' mental health and their access to mental health services," United Nations Children's Foundation, page 9. "In total, 33% of 18-24-year-old students have thought about suicide at least once in their life and/or wished that their life would be over or to go to sleep and never wake up (females 37%, males 28%)," 2023, <https://www.unicef.org/georgia/reports/study-university-students-mental-health-and-their-access-mental-health-services>.

respondents had experienced anxiety symptoms and a third had contemplated committing suicide or thought of suicide-related ideas.

Hence, while facing these problems, students, their families, educational institutions, and governmental agencies need to employ different resilience strategies to navigate the challenges and adversities associated with the pursuit of higher education in the capital. At its core, resilience is defined as the capacity of individuals and communities to adapt, rebound, endure and grow in the presence of adversities.

In this respect, a sociology research project conducted by the Georgian Institute of Public Affairs (GIPA) explored this issue, and aimed to understand how the existing challenges affect students' academic performance or personal well-being. The project culminated in a research report written in Georgian and summarizing the key descriptive findings of the study.<sup>11</sup> Along with the report, this paper further sheds light on the following research questions:

- How do the challenges related to affordable housing in Tbilisi impact the academic performance, career prospects, and mental health of regional students?
- How do regional students develop and sustain resilience in the face of housing-related challenges, and what kind of individual and collective coping strategies do they employ to navigate the difficulties associated with the lack of affordable housing in Tbilisi?

## **Methods**

The study utilized an online survey, expert interviews, in-depth interviews, and focus groups to examine students residing in Tbilisi who come from other regions. This approach allowed for triangulation by gathering multiple perspectives and facilitating a comprehensive examination of the research topic. While the study primarily focuses on qualitative exploration of how students cope with challenges like relocation, urban adaptation, housing issues, and coping strategies, it additionally includes a quantitative component (Table 1). This aims to provide a broader perspective and estimate the scale of challenges and practices within the target audience. The quantitative component includes the 399 responses from

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<sup>11</sup> The descriptive report prepared following the project completion and written in Georgian is available from here: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/373688738\\_khelimisatsvdomi\\_satskhovrebeli\\_da\\_umaghlesi\\_qanatlebis\\_khelimisatsvdomoba\\_tbilisshi\\_regionebidan\\_charitskhuli\\_studentebis\\_kvleva](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/373688738_khelimisatsvdomi_satskhovrebeli_da_umaghlesi_qanatlebis_khelimisatsvdomoba_tbilisshi_regionebidan_charitskhuli_studentebis_kvleva).

the online survey. The qualitative aspect involves two phases, pre- and post-survey. Qualitative phase 1 began with six expert interviews, which informed the development of the in-depth interview and focus group guides, as well as the survey, which was also informed by the pre-survey in-depth interview and focus group results. A total of ten in-depth interviews, five pre-survey and five post-survey, and four focus group discussions were conducted with students from both private and state universities. All given quotes, percentages, and other statistics were directly collected using data collection instruments designed and implemented by the GIPA team for this research project.

*Table 1. The data collection process of the study*

Qualitative phase 1		Quantitative phase	Qualitative phase 2
6 Expert interviews	5 pre-survey in-depth interviews with students	GIPA Online survey: 399 completed valid responses	5 post-survey in-depth interviews with students
	4 focus groups with students		

The study specifically targeted students who had completed their secondary education outside of Tbilisi and were currently studying at higher education institutions in Tbilisi. While ethnicity and nationality were not exclusionary factors, due to the language of the study instruments, the vast majority of respondents and interview participants were ethnic Georgians.<sup>12</sup> Throughout the text, for convenience, this target group of students will be referred to as regional students.

Due to the limited funds and lack of sampling frame information, it was decided to use a non-probabilistic sampling approach and online mode of data collection. The online survey was distributed through social networks and student groups. Targeted advertising was employed to increase response rates.<sup>13</sup> The survey was exclusively available to non-Tbilisi native students enrolled in Tbilisi-based institutions, and filter questions were applied to eliminate irrelevant participants. Data collection took place from April 10 to June 13, 2023, resulting in 399 valid responses. Due to the data's limited observations and structure,

<sup>12</sup> The regional distribution of respondents, ethnicity, gender, age and current housing conditions are shown in the descriptive tables in Appendix 2 of this research brief.

<sup>13</sup> The survey was distributed in the public student groups on Facebook, and the survey link was also advertised on the Meta social networking platforms, Facebook and Instagram. More details on the methodology can be found in Appendix 1 of this research brief.

descriptive (frequency) indicators were utilized for analysis. The research team lacked the information and data on the sampling frame of the target population (regional students studying in Tbilisi) and were not able to conduct the quantitative data collection using probabilistic sampling. Therefore, the extrapolation of the survey findings should be cautious. Nevertheless, in combination with the qualitative data, the findings still give valuable insight regarding the characteristics and behavior of regional students.

## **Theoretical Framework**

In establishing a theoretical framework for this study, the researchers drew on existing literature that explores resilience and coping strategies among individuals and communities facing socio-economic challenges. Grounded in resilience theories, the framework seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of how regional students individually and collectively navigate and overcome the adverse effects of precarious life in Tbilisi.

Existing research shows there is not a singular, universally agreed-upon definition of resilience. Scholars from diverse fields, including natural sciences, psychology, and sociology, discuss how to precisely define and conceptualize this multifaceted concept.<sup>14</sup> However, for operational purposes, scholars often associate resilience with the capacity of an entity (individual or collective) to adapt, manage, and bounce back in the face of trauma, stress, and shock,<sup>15</sup> such adversities can be related to socioeconomic, political, physical, and environmental threats.<sup>16</sup>

Some authors also differentiate various levels of resilience. At its basic level, resilience involves survival, and recovery to a pre-existing state following adverse events. Progressing to a higher level, resilience strives to foster growth and elicit positive changes in response to challenges.<sup>17</sup> This emphasis on growth is particularly crucial in the context of higher education, where being a student and engaging in academic

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<sup>14</sup> Laurie McCubbin, "Challenges to the Definition of Resilience," American Psychological Association, U.S. Dept. of Education Educational Resources Information Center (2001), <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED458498.pdf>; David V. Rosowsky, "Defining resilience" *Sustainable and Resilient Infrastructure*, 5,3, (2020): 125-130.

<sup>15</sup> Gill Windle, "What is resilience? A review and concept analysis," *Reviews in clinical gerontology*, 21,2, (2011): 152-169; Tanja Trkulja, "Social resilience as a theoretical approach to social sustainability," *Defendologija*, 18,36, (2015): 47-60.

<sup>16</sup> Pedro Estêvão, Alexandre Calado and Luís Capucha, "Resilience: Moving from a 'heroic' notion to a sociological concept," *Sociologia, Problemas e Práticas*, 85, (2017): p. 19.

<sup>17</sup> Christyn L. Dolbier, Shanna Smith Jaggars, Mary A. Steinhardt, "Stress-related growth: Pre-intervention correlates and change following a resilience intervention," *Stress and Health: Journal of the International Society for the Investigation of Stress*, 26,2, (2010): 135-147.

life are inherently associated with the processes of personal development and progression.<sup>18</sup> For instance, embodying resilience as a student should extend beyond merely surviving student life; it should encompass the pursuit of more ambitious goals for progress and personal growth.

Scholars consistently highlight the pivotal role of resilience in students' lives, recognizing its direct links to high academic performance, career success, and overall physical and mental well-being. Initiating a new chapter in life after school demands an adaptation to change, and, in this transformative process, students must cultivate resilience to navigate the transition seamlessly.<sup>19</sup> This significance is further amplified when context and environment are marked by socioeconomic threats, where students grapple with challenges such as a scarcity of affordable housing, limited social connections, the absence of support services, a shortage of decent employment opportunities, and associated stress factors.<sup>20</sup>

It is also crucial to recognize that resilience extends beyond individual or psychological dimensions, encompassing broader community, social and political aspects of life. Solely discussing resilience on the individual level as an innate ability of a person can be problematic, as it tends to narrow resilience down to the internal psychological capacity of an individual, creating a potentially misleading portrayal of heroic resilience. This heroic and reductionist perspective is criticized by scholars because it neglects the interconnected and systemic nature of challenges that individuals and communities face. Resilience, when viewed solely at the individual level, runs the risk of overlooking the structural factors and societal conditions that contribute to vulnerability and adversity. Critics argue that this reductionist perspective reinforces individualization, diminishing the responsibility of governments and institutions to address systemic issues. Moreover, by emphasizing an individual's ability to overcome adversity, the heroic resilience narrative may inadvertently perpetuate a culture of self-blame for those facing difficulties. Scholars' caution against this narrow framing, urging a more comprehensive understanding that considers the social, economic, and political contexts in which resilience operates.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Margo L. Brewer, Gisela van Kessel, Brooke Sanderson, Fiona Naumann, Murray Lane, Alan Reubenson, and Alice Carter, "Resilience in higher education students: A scoping review," *Higher Education Research & Development*, 38, 6, (2019): 9.

<sup>19</sup> Michelle Turner, Sarah Holdsworth, and Christina M. Scott-Young, "Resilience at university: The development and testing of a new measure," *Higher education research & development*, 36, 2, (2017): 386-400; Emily A. McIntosh and Jenny Shaw, "Student resilience: Exploring the positive case for resilience," *Unite Students Publications*, 2017.

<sup>20</sup> Kathryn Hsieh, "Educationally resilient college students and their experiences with housing insecurity," *Journal of Social Distress and Homelessness*, (2023): 1-10.

<sup>21</sup> Estêvão, Calado, & Capucha, "Resilience," 12-16.

In contrast, the concept of community resilience recognizes that, amidst adversity, individuals confronting similar challenges frequently mobilize resources and collaborate collectively. This perspective leans more towards sociology than psychology, highlighting the group's collective resilience in navigating and adapting to shared dangers through mutual support, mobilization, and interaction. As a result, collective resilience is activated in response to external shocks of a systemic nature that not only alter individual and familial conditions but also lead to a reconfiguration of social structures. In this case, this social structure is the regional students' actual condition and struggle, which has material, social and political context. In this framework, the entire burden of adversity is not on individuals; instead, risks are distributed among communities, social institutions, and the state. The proposed dynamic perspective considers both the structural context and the reflexive agency of those affected, emphasizing the reciprocal influence between individuals and their evolving socio-economic environment.<sup>22</sup>

For instance, the resilience of regional students in Tbilisi is contingent not only on the psychological resilience of individual students but also on collective resilience. This collective resilience involves the strength of students' families, relatives, and other students who might come together in a collective act of resilience, which may also have political dimensions to demand better-supporting services from educational and state institutions. Acknowledging and understanding resilience in this broader, community-oriented context is essential for a more comprehensive and nuanced perspective, moving beyond individual heroism to appreciate the collective efforts required to navigate shared challenges.

All in all, the theoretical framework highlights the importance of analyzing resilience across multiple levels, particularly distinguishing between survival and growth-related types of resilience. Therefore, in the analysis process, survival and growth-related resilience types were coded in different themes. Moreover, after reading the critique of heroic resilience, it became evident that a focus on collective efforts was necessary. Throughout the thematic analysis process, the aim was to identify any collective efforts from support groups such as families, governmental institutions, universities, NGOs, or social movements.

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<sup>22</sup> Estêvão, Calado, & Capucha, "Resilience," 17-20; Zakaria Tavberidze, Anna Margvelashvili and Tamar Zurabishvili, "Individual vs community resilience: Case of Georgia," *Tudásmenedzsment*, 24, 4 különszám, (2023): 60-72; Kate Murray and Alex Zautra, "Community resilience: Fostering recovery, sustainability, and growth," In *The social ecology of resilience: A handbook of theory and practice* (New York: Springer, 2011), 337-345.



**Overview: identifying key challenges faced by regional students**

Young students from rural areas often face a challenging reality at the beginning of their academic careers. Many find that their education will require more resources than they initially anticipated.<sup>23</sup> The qualitative interviews and focus group discussions indicate, that during their first semester, students often struggle to adjust to a new social and urban environment as well as the demands of a university education:

"I cannot say that during the transition period [from my hometown to Tbilisi] I had someone I could turn to even when I was sick or had any personal problems."  
(female, 20 years old, renting, state university)

During the focus group discussions and in-depth interviews students reported notable concerns about the rising cost of housing in Tbilisi, which led some students from the region to abandon their academic pursuits. Nevertheless, others sustained their studies, but encountered declining living conditions and multiple setbacks. For instance, certain students searched for work outside of academia, affecting their academic performance negatively or experiencing psychological difficulties such as depression. The inability to meet basic or decent living standards, as noted above, is the starting point of these troubles:

"As for the [old] dormitory, it was the worst day of my life. I came from Batumi [city in western Georgia] and hoped that there would be at least acceptable living conditions here. But when I arrived, I found such living arrangements that I felt completely sick, on the second or third day I returned to Batumi saying: No chance, I won't study at all, and I won't live here." (male, 21 years old, student dormitory, state university).

According to the survey data, most students try to find housing through online channels (33%) or social (6%) and personal networks (25% relatives and 13% friends) due to the lack of suitable housing, the lack of student housing, or difficult living conditions. Nonetheless, this pursuit is not painless and not all students are able to navigate the housing search process easily:

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<sup>23</sup> Maia Chankseliani, "The financial burden of attending university in Georgia: Implications for rural students." *Prospects* 43, (2013): 311-328.

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"First of all, probably, the process of searching for housing itself [is the most difficult circumstance for those coming to Tbilisi for studies] ... the process of searching, walking from street to street is exhausting. And then the conditions of the apartment [are also depressing]. Due to the fact that they are students [in need] and they are looking for a budget apartment, often the conditions are not as favorable as they should be in a normal house where one can live." (female, 19 years old, renting, private university)

In addition to financial hurdles, insufficient social networks may preclude students from securing affordable and satisfactory accommodations. For instance, students during the focus group discussions and in-depth interviews assert that discovering an apartment lacking connections and a network of acquaintances is a stress-inducing task. Common complaints also included the shortage of affordable and well-equipped student housing, which forces regional students to compete with other house seekers for affordable and adequately equipped housing:

"I had no contacts in Tbilisi, having only been there only once before. I felt anxious about finding suitable accommodation. I was afraid that I would not be able to find it, and I would have to give up my studies ... my psychological condition was bad then and it is now" (male, 21 years old, student dormitory, state university).

"Before the Russians arrived, it was much easier to find an apartment, and then [after the Russians arrived] it became very difficult... from my personal experience – my friend and I occupied the apartment for only 2 months, and then the owner came up with completely meaningless reasons to move us out to rent the apartment to the Russians. He rented it to the Russians for 800 dollars, while we paid only 800 GEL for it." (female, 21 years old, renting, state university)

Even if they succeed in finding an apartment, it is typically small,<sup>24</sup> poorly equipped, and far from their university.<sup>25</sup> In some cases, they must share living space with older relatives (36%), family members (parents 8%, partner/spouse 5%), or friends (24%). Additionally, there is a prevalent trend (18% of those surveyed) of commuting from hometowns and villages near Tbilisi instead of searching for a flat in the city in order to save money. 41% of these commuters mentioned they did not relocate to Tbilisi to save money, and 54% reported still having financial difficulties behind this decision. However, such commuting results in students spending a lot of time on uncomfortable and often unsafe intercity transportation:

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<sup>24</sup> According to the results of the online survey, the average living space is 48.14 square metres, and the average number of people students currently live with is 3.

<sup>25</sup> The average time needed to travel from home to university by public transport is 48.71 minutes.

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"Basic cleanliness is not maintained, even inside the 'marshutkas' [a type of popular transport in Georgia], in terrible conditions, so it is not comfortable in this respect either. I had to stand on the highway in the wind, in the rain... [there are no designated bus stops] ... last semester I had to go to the marshutka place no later than 8 o'clock in the evening, otherwise I would miss the last marshutka and be left on the street, near the bus station." (female, 22 years old, living in a neighboring municipality to Tbilisi, state university)

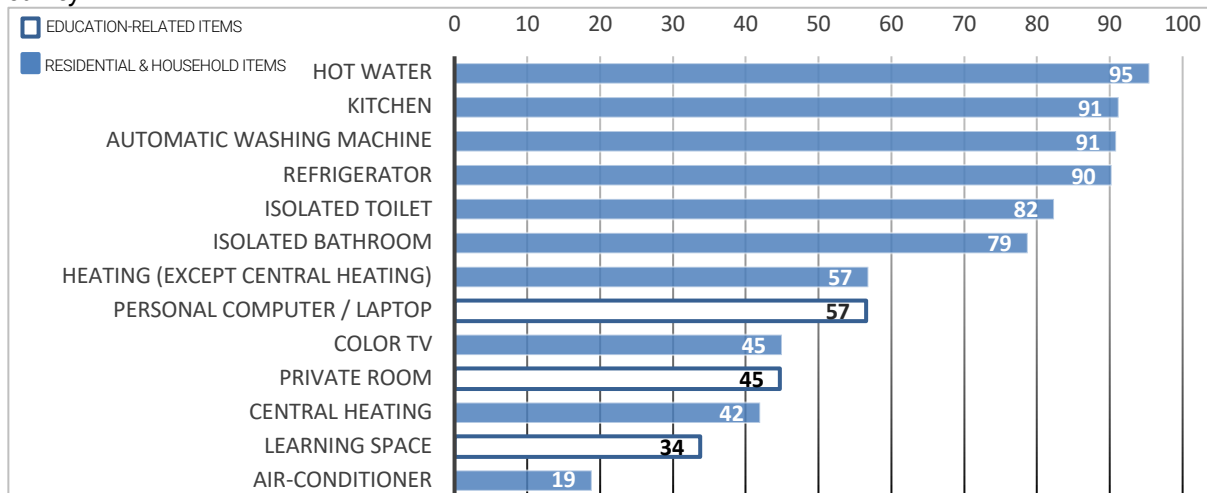
Living in another city or on the outskirts of a city can isolate students from their peers or social life according to the findings from focus groups and in-depth interviews. While not being from Tbilisi presents one barrier to blending into the community, this additional logistical issue creates further obstacles to integration into Tbilisi's circles of young people. Participants frequently expressed this sentiment during in-depth interviews and noted that this factor did not contribute to their integration into the existing student, academic or interest circles:

"In my case, last semester I lived in Kaspi [a town in eastern Georgia, about 40 km from Tbilisi] and I spent 4 hours a day travelling to and from the university. If you travel 4 hours a day ... you can do nothing ... you are not productive, you have 0 productivity, you cannot manage anything... I was so physically and mentally tired that I could not keep up with my work and my studies." (female, 19 years old, renting, private university)

"It takes me an hour to get there [university] and an hour to get back, so after work I am so tired and exhausted that I do not want to go [to university to attend classes] and in many cases I have to miss that day." (female, 21 years old, lives with relatives, state university)

Housing facilities often fail to provide university students with basic amenities or a private place to study (Figure 1). A considerable proportion of students encounter obstacles in obtaining crucial educational resources. Only 34% of the students reported having a designated learning space, 45% had access to a private room, and 57% possessed a personal computer. This indicates that over half of the students lack even the most basic conditions necessary for studying in their place of residence. Students also voiced their concerns regarding insufficient privacy and the inability to concentrate on academic and personal affairs throughout the focus groups and in-depth interviews. During the focus group discussions and in-depth interviews, students often emphasized that poor living conditions, lack of space to study, lack of a room, or lack of a computer also prevent them from concentrating on learning.

Figure 1. Items/services available in the current place of residence (% of mentioned); Source: GIPA Online survey.



The high cost and substandard quality of housing, as well as transportation issues related to inconvenient locations, frequently hinder students' learning and compel them to devote time to mitigating these problems. One potential solution that is often pursued is entry into the job market. As the job market is already saturated and students from the regions do not have the necessary qualifications or experience, they often end up in precarious jobs, which are often low-paid, manual, intensive work with inflexible and tense schedules that do not have positive impact on academic performance or general quality of life or academic performance:

"For example, my course-mate, got sick many times during the lecture because he was coming from the night shift to the lecture, and he has not slept the whole night." (female, 20 years old, renting, private university)

"Fatigue, and with this fatigue it means you have less time, and sometimes you don't even go to lectures anymore." (male, 22 years old, renting, private university)

"Many students work in supermarkets, but the conditions in most supermarkets are so terrible that they can't stand it physically... in most cases, students pay less attention to their studies because they have to work for a living and live independently. (female, 21 years old, renting, private university)

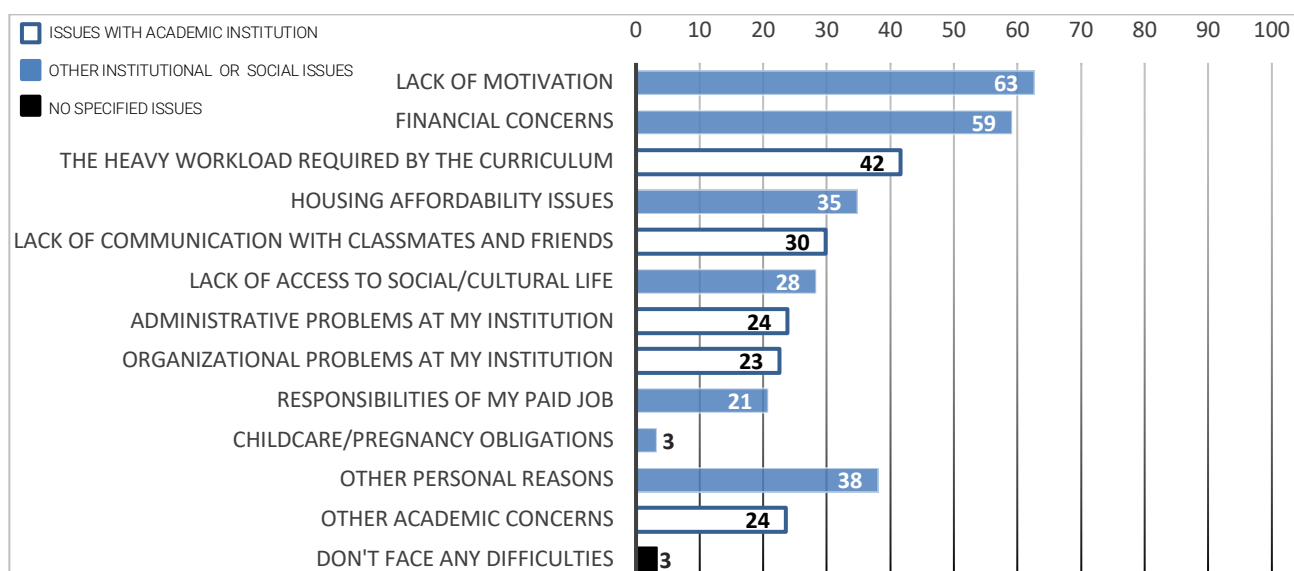
In the online survey, 39% of respondents said they had permanent or temporary gig jobs, with most saying that their employment did not fit in with their academic pursuits. Furthermore, a substantial portion of respondents indicated that their academic studies were impeded by a burdensome workload. On average,

students who were employed reported 35 hours of work per week, and 30% of these individuals reported working overtime hours. Despite being employed, insufficient wages impede full-time students from attaining financial independence, resulting in reliance on family or relatives, as reported during the focus group discussions and in-depth interviews:

“...[despite working] I still have to bother my parents even about finances, apartment problems, so that they can find out and help me and so on.” (female, 20 years old, renting, state university)

In addition, the low social capital and limited personal connections that regional students experience while living in Tbilisi is another dimension of the lack of independence or personal agenda. More than a third of the newcomers to Tbilisi do not have acquaintances in the city who could lend them 100 GEL (roughly equivalent to 30 Euros). Additionally, around a quarter of the newcomers have no one to help them share a place to stay temporarily if needed. As a result of these circumstances, some students have had a difficult time adjusting and adapting to their new environment. As discussed above, respondents reported that incoming students from the regions often feel alienated in a foreign city and have difficulty making social connections. Quantitative data also show that students often feel lonely (63%) and about 41% are afraid of losing their housing.

*Figure 2. Issues related to academic performance and studying at university (% , multiple choice). Source: GIPA Online survey.*



Eventually, the challenges of living in poor conditions, spending a significant amount of time in labor-intensive work, and feeling disconnected from local peers have had a detrimental effect on the overall mood and motivation of regional students (Figure 2). Mental health challenges are common among students, but access to psychological support services is inadequate. Some students reported during interviews that they lack support systems to talk about these issues:

"I have not used it [psychological support from the university] and I do not think they have either. Or maybe they have, and I never thought I could benefit from the help of a university psychologist, I cannot tell you. In my opinion they probably have not." (female, 21 years old, renting, state university)

"I tried to discuss this issue [personal psychological and economic challenges] with one of the members of the administration, and his answer was that when you apply to the university, you know that it could be expensive .... that you would have to live in another city, that if you didn't have your own place you would have to rent it, and so on. In other words, you should have understood all this from the beginning and stressed my personal responsibility in this context." (female, 21 years old, renting, private university)

"Students are being blamed again, and our generation is being blamed again, that is, we cannot talk about depression, if we say that we have a problem, we do not have a problem and we are making all this up! They [the older generation] do not understand our problems." (female, 20 years old, renting, private university)

The absence or invisibility of psychological support services in universities, as demonstrated by their non-existence, poor operation, or insufficient student knowledge, underlines the critical necessity for higher education institutions to enhance both awareness and provision of such services. Based on the data from the online survey, the study has identified several aspects of the vulnerability of the students.<sup>26</sup> These include insufficient social and financial capital (34%), housing vulnerability (34%), as well as psychosocial and emotional vulnerability (50%). Moreover, approximately 17% of survey respondents reported that they experience severe vulnerability levels, categorized as experiencing all three identified vulnerabilities when contrasting varying levels of vulnerability. Additionally, 40% have at least two of the three factors present. Although not entirely representative, these survey results

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<sup>26</sup> These findings cannot be generalized to all regional students currently studying in Tbilisi, as the data collected from the online survey utilized a non-probability sampling technique. Nevertheless, these figures can provide some insight into the characteristics of the target group.

corroborate regional students' severely precarious living conditions and reinforce their significance given that they are consistent with findings from the expert interviews, in-depth interviews and focus groups.

### **Resilience in students' daily life**

The research showed that in the landscape of higher education in Tbilisi, regional students find themselves entrenched in a mode of resilience marked by survival and recovery rather than growth and progress. The multifaceted challenges, notably in housing affordability, financial constraints, and limited social networks, propel these students into a survival mode, where the primary focus becomes adapting to immediate adversities (Table 2).

In their efforts to adapt and recover from precarious living conditions in the capital, many students have found themselves compelled to exacerbate their already challenging circumstances. This involves willingly sacrificing their living conditions and social lives, restricting outings and socialization, and embracing employment opportunities unrelated to their studies or professions, often entailing overtime work. Despite these sacrifices, achieving financial independence remains elusive, compounded by a lack of basic learning facilities such as a private room or personal computer.

*Table 2. Regional Students Resilience: Matrix of coping strategies.*

	<b>Survival and Recovery</b>	<b>Progress and Grow</b>
<b>Individual</b>	<p>High resilience</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Accepting cheap accommodation with poor living conditions</li> <li>• Sacrificing and limiting social life</li> <li>• Accepting employment opportunities unrelated to current studies or future careers</li> <li>• Accepting to work overtime</li> </ul>	<p>Weak resilience</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learning how to balance studying and working (e.g. learning time management, life-work balance)</li> <li>• Learning how to handle mental health issues</li> </ul>
<b>Collective</b>	<p>Moderate resilience</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Financial support from families</li> <li>• Families taking loans or family members considering labor migration to cover the living costs</li> <li>• Relatives living in the capital providing free accommodation</li> <li>• Relatives and friends helping with housing hunting</li> <li>• Sharing accommodation with friends and relatives</li> </ul>	<p>Weak resilience</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students' protest movements for better housing policies (though few students manage to join the movement)</li> </ul>

This survival-oriented approach takes a toll on their mental well-being, as respondents frequently recalled experiences of panic attacks, anxiety, and depression, consequently negatively impacting their motivation, self-efficacy and academic performance. The weight of these challenges leads many to contemplate abandoning their educational pursuits, and regrettably, some have opted to leave universities due to the formidable financial and socio-economic dangers they face. The student life in Tbilisi, envisioned as a potential avenue for regional students to progress and grow, is instead marked by persistent struggle, posing a significant threat to the very foundation of their academic endeavors.

In this struggle, regional students are not entirely isolated; however, there exists a notable absence of resilience on a collective level. Families play a crucial role by providing financial support, and relatives residing in the capital often offer free accommodation. While students may voice discomfort about family dependence or living with relatives, these informal support networks remain vital for regional students:

"I have often thought that I would like my mother to be with me or a family member to help me with something ... [Family members] think that you are already independent, and nothing will go wrong with you. But to be honest, I've been here [in Tbilisi] for two years and I went to the bar three times to have fun with my friends, because the other time I was sick, and I wasn't mentally well and I was at home crying." (female, 20 years old, renting, private university)

It is noteworthy that some family members even resort to illegal labor emigration to cover the expenses of regional students, showcasing collective struggles of the families and their sacrifices made to afford higher education. However, knowing that family members endure such hardships for their education leaves students frustrated, contributing to lower self-confidence, self-esteem, and self-blame. Even students working full-time jobs label themselves as "parasites" simply because their family members have ventured into labor emigration to support their education:

"I'm a 'parasite' from the beginning ... it's very hard for me that I live in a rented house, and the second thing is that we had to pay tuition fees and pay for housing. This is the reason why my mother emigrated [illegal labor migration] after I started studying in Tbilisi." (male, 22 years old, renting, private university)



The safety net provided by families and relatives, while significant, reveals a blind spot when it comes to mental health support. Despite financial assistance and free accommodations alleviating some burdens, the prevailing mindset often discounts or overlooks the mental health challenges faced by regional students. The lack of awareness among the elderly generation about mental health issues contributes to their failure to perceive students' psychological problems as genuinely significant. In this context, students' resilience requires a form of heroic strength, as neither universities provide quality psychological support services nor do families or other institutions. Unfortunately, not every regional student can endure 'heroically', and some of them experience mental collapses. Some respondents reported that even before the interview, they were crying, had panic attacks, and had been unable to find the energy to go out for months. Overall, students with mental health issues found themselves isolated, leading to enthusiastic responses when interviewers asked questions related to psychological well-being:

"Yes, I really wanted to talk about this with someone, of course I have talked about it with my friends, and I have discussed this topic many times, but I am glad that you asked me this question." (female, 20 years old, renting, private university)

Despite openly expressing dissatisfaction with their housing situation, the pressures of daily life often drain students of the time and energy needed to take effective collective action. This is particularly evident among regional students, who face unique challenges in establishing a flat-sharing culture with unfamiliar peers. While they readily share flats with close friends or family members, regional students often exhibit hesitation when considering co-renting with individuals they do not know well. The lack of easily accessible and user-friendly webpages or platforms specifically designed to facilitate flat-sharing among students further hinders regional students' participation in this common practice.

Finally, the aggregated challenges contribute to a fragmented presence of regional students in the city, limiting their collective ability to advocate for or participate in activism related to student housing policies. While many regional students express support for student movements advocating for better housing options, their active participation in these endeavors remains limited.

## **Conclusion**

In summary, the challenges faced by regional students in Tbilisi encapsulate a complex web of challenges, prominently featuring the lack of affordable housing, financial constraints, and limited social networks. These multifaceted difficulties propel students into a survival mode, where their primary focus is on adapting to immediate adversities rather than fostering growth and progress. This is especially true for those students who experience vulnerability.

In this context, the challenges faced by regional students underscore the need for a shift from survival-oriented strategies towards fostering growth-promoting resilience. However, the situation is not developing in that direction due to the high cost and inadequate quality of housing, which significantly hinder students' academic pursuits and take a toll on their mental well-being, ultimately impacting motivation and academic performance.

The risks are further exacerbated by the scarcity of support services, both in terms of mental health and broader institutional backing. The findings emphasize the limitations of current individual and collective coping mechanisms. While familial and household-level collective resilience is evident in financial support and accommodation provision, the absence of a collective resilience network among peers and students leaves a significant gap. This gap is manifested in the lack of strong student movements and a diminished political agency to demand and advocate for better student housing policies.

As a result, individual students often find themselves needing to exhibit heroic efforts to tackle the complex challenges associated with affordable housing in Tbilisi. While some 'superheroes' may succeed through such individual resilience, the majority continue to face struggles and require additional collective support.

This study's findings and results align with collective resilience theories, stressing the importance of shared responsibilities, which underscores the necessity for proactive government intervention in addressing the social roots of these challenges. Furthermore, this emphasizes the reciprocal influence between individuals and their socio-economic environment, thereby advocating for comprehensive solutions to support regional students in Tbilisi. In particular, policymakers should focus on creating affordable housing solutions, expanding financial aid programs, and fostering a supportive social

environment. Universities must also enhance their support services, with a particular emphasis on psychological well-being, career guidance, and assistance in practical matters like job and house hunting. By doing so, both the government and educational institutions can contribute to breaking the cycle of survival mode and promote the holistic development of regional students in Tbilisi.

Also, the research indicates an urgent need for future studies to further examine and address regional students' challenges and struggles, especially in transitioning from survival mode to a framework that facilitates growth and progress. Recognizing and fostering collective resilience at the peer and student community level emerges as a crucial aspect for enhancing political agency and advocating for positive social changes in higher education policies in Georgia.

### **Appendix 1: Study context and detailed methodological overview**

This article is based on a study funded by the research department of the Georgian Institute of Public Affairs (GIPA) under the Small Research Programme. The initiative aimed to engage university teachers and students in research activities. The aim of the project was to investigate how students who completed their secondary education outside Tbilisi and are currently studying at Tbilisi universities cope with the challenges associated with housing accessibility. The project resulted in a report, written in Georgian, which summarized the main findings: the living conditions of students who graduated from a school outside of Tbilisi and are currently attending university in the capital; the barriers they face in securing affordable housing; and the impact of housing on their academic performance, labor market participation, self-evaluation, and mental health.

The research project used a method triangulation approach for data collection, including an online survey of students, expert interviews and focus group discussions with students. This allowed for a comprehensive exploration of the research topic from different perspectives and ensured a robust triangulation of data. A qualitative method was used to explore students' perceptions and barriers in relation to the cost of accommodation, and the impact that housing affordability has on students' academic engagement, performance, and productivity. The qualitative phase began with six expert interviews, which informed the development of the in-depth interview and focus group guides, and the online survey. Subsequently, 10 in-depth interviews and 4 focus groups were conducted with graduates of regional schools studying in Tbilisi. While recruiting the participants for focus groups and in-depth interviews, the type of housing, gender, and university type (private and state) were taken into account in order to have balanced and diverse sources. The thematic analysis of the qualitative data resulted in 14 sub-themes, organized into four main thematic blocks:

1. Disillusion with the expectation of studying in Tbilisi,
2. Housing and living conditions challenges,
3. Hardships of combining work and learning, and
4. Self-esteem and mental health-related issues.

Given the limited resources, the project decided to use a Computerized Self-Administered Questionnaire (CSAQ) to collect quantitative data. This online survey was designed to be short and tailored to different types of electronic devices in order to facilitate data collection. Feedback from experts and findings from pre-survey in-depth interviews with students were used to finalize the content of the questionnaire. The questionnaire included basic demographic questions and thematic sections on housing affordability, its influence on employment, managing the educational process and the link between housing affordability and students' physical and mental well-being.

The final questionnaire was created using KoBoToolbox and distributed through social networks (platforms of Meta: Facebook, Instagram, etc., that are the most popular in the Georgian context) and student communities. It was actively promoted and boosted on social platforms to increase response rates<sup>27</sup>. The survey specified participation criteria for current Tbilisi university students who had graduated from schools outside the Tbilisi. Filter questions were used to exclude non-relevant participants at an early stage of the questionnaire. Data collection took place from 10 April to 13 June 2023, resulting in 399 complete and valid responses. The initial processing and analysis of the quantitative data was carried out using STATA software, focusing only on descriptive indicators due to the limited sample size and data characteristics.

The survey instruments and data-bases are available from the following link from GitHub: <https://github.com/ratishub/Affordable-Housing-And-Access-To-Higher-Education>.

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<sup>27</sup> As the data was collected using a non-probability sampling approach, it is not possible to calculate true response rates. After the social media boost, the survey link was reached to 172,000 users. Of these, 3372 read the post and 465 opened the survey. Of these, 399 (86%) were eligible to participate in the study and completed the questionnaire.

**Appendix 2: Key socio-demographic characteristics of online survey respondents**

Age				
	Percentiles	Smallest		
1%	18	17		
5%	18	17		
10%	18	17	Number of observations	399
25%	19	18		
50%	20		Average	20.74
		Largest	Standard deviation	2.25
75%	22	28		
90%	24	29	Variance	5.04
95%	25	30	Skewness	1.03
99%	28	30	Kurtosis	4.31

Gender				
	Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Female	312	78.2	78	78.2
Male	86	21.55	22	99.75
Other	1	0.25	0	100
Total	399	100	100	

In which part of Georgia did you finish school?				
	Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Abroad	4	1	1	1
Abkhazia	5	1.25	1	2.26
Adjara	44	11.03	11	13.28
Guria	18	4.51	5	17.79
Imereti	56	14.04	14	31.83
Racha-Lechkhumi-Kvemo Svaneti	4	1	1	32.83
Kakheti	48	12.03	12	44.86
Mtskheta-Mtianeti	15	3.76	4	48.62
Samegrelo-Zemo Svaneti	68	17.04	17	65.66
Samtskhe-Javakheti	22	5.51	6	71.18
Kvemo Kartli	57	14.29	14	85.46
Shida Kartli	58	14.54	15	100
Total	399	100	100	

Respondent ethnicity				
	Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Refuse to answer	1	0.25	0	0.25
Azerbaijani	9	2.26	2	2.51
Armenian	11	2.76	3	5.26
Georgian	372	93.23	93	98.5
Other	6	1.5	2	100
Total	399	100	100	

What degree will you receive after completing the current study program?				
	Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Diploma of a single-level program educational	31	7.77	8	7.77
Bachelor's degree	309	77.44	77	85.21
Diploma of Educator of an educational program	6	1.5	2	86.72
Master's degree	48	12.03	12	98.75
Other	5	1.25	1	100
Total	399	100	100	

Which of the following fits to the type of your higher education institution?				
	Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Vocational school / college	1	0.25	0	0.25
University	398	99.75	100	100
Total	399	100	100	

Which of the following corresponds to the type of housing you currently live in [Tbilisi]?				
	Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Apartment in multi-apartment building	207	62.92	62.92	62.92
Private house	48	14.59	14.59	77.51
Apartment/room 'communal building'	55	16.72	16.72	94.22
Student housing	6	1.82	1.82	96.05
Other	13	3.95	3.95	100
Total	329	100	100	

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