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Paper

Title: Higher Education as Refuge: Georgia's Response to National and Foreign Refugee Crisis

Abstract

This paper explores Georgia's approach to the recognition of educational qualifications for refugees, particularly those from Georgia's own occupied regions, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia, as well as from Ukraine. In the case of Georgian territories affected by occupation, it was crucial to ensure procedural justice and equity. Within the framework of crisis responsiveness Georgia established a legal framework to recognise education obtained in these occupied territories, allowing fair recognition procedures by acknowledging the frequent unavailability of archival records. These regulations have been revised multiple times based on analysis of practical experience. Under Georgian legislation, documents issued by self-proclaimed republics are not legally valid. Individuals must replace such documents with official Georgian state documents. The same principle applies to documents from other self-proclaimed territories - validity is granted only when documents are officially replaced in accordance with the host country's format. Since 2022, refugees from Ukraine have comprised the majority of education recognition applications in Georgia. Given the urgency and volume of requests, flexibility became essential. A major challenge was verifying the authenticity of documents, as many Ukrainian applicants were unable to obtain or present original documents due to fleeing crisis. To address this, Georgia allowed educational documentation retrieved from Ukraine's Unified State Electronic Database on Education to be accepted as valid under force majeure conditions, without requiring apostille or legalisation. Without this adaptation, Ukrainian refugees' access to education would delay significantly. Furthermore, Georgia introduced legislative changes to create a clear formal procedure for recognising education received by individuals with international protection status who are unable to submit documents evidencing education, ensuring a more transparent and fair process. Georgia's approach serves as a secure pathway for refugees to uphold the right to education and demonstrates the critical importance and effectiveness of adaptable recognition mechanisms in an increasingly internationalised context.

Introduction

Conflict situations, armed conflicts, war, and forced displacement affect many aspects of people's lives. Alongside housing, socio-psychological, and economic challenges, a particularly significant issue is the educational crisis. When displaced, individuals face numerous obstacles in continuing their studies or pursuing employment. Such challenges include incomplete educational documents, lack of documentation, destruction of educational institutions, absence of electronic databases, and more. People from conflict-affected areas experience challenges during the recognition process as they are unable to prove their academic achievements. Various documents, such as institutional records, transcripts, and diplomas, are frequently destroyed due to the conflict situation. In addition, some educational institutions that are demolished because of the challenging circumstances leave no electronic databases of academic history. As a result, conflict and displacement create an educational crisis that affects individuals' rights and employability. Furthermore, individuals may be excluded from further studies or careers, or recognition of their competencies if they are unable to provide documented proof of their studies. In these situations, recognition of their higher education plays a crucial role in enabling individuals to restart their lives and support their resocialization.

All of these circumstances present a major difficulty: how can educational systems recognize qualifications when documentation is limited or completely missing, and simultaneously maintain academic integrity? This article reviews how Georgia addressed the recognition of educational

qualifications for persons forcibly displaced from its own territories - the occupied regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and, since 2022, for Ukrainian refugees. The article highlights how Georgia's quality assurance system in higher education ensures fairness, equity, and crisis-adaptive responses in these recognition processes.

The role of education quality assurance in context of displacement

Continuity of education is one of the main guarantees for obtaining quality education. Access to education as a fundamental human right was established as early as 1948 in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (United Nations, 1948). However, access to higher education is even more complex and less universally guaranteed than access to school education, and approaches vary significantly across countries. The *Lisbon Recognition Convention* (Council of Europe & UNESCO, 1997) clearly outlines the legal mechanisms for recognising education obtained by refugees and forcibly displaced persons. Gardi (2021) notes that ratification of the convention does not guarantee that all participating countries implement procedures in full compliance, and there remains a critical lack of specific mechanisms in some countries.

Ensuring access to higher education is complex because it involves not only procedural recognition but also fairness and equity in the process. Blader and Tyler (2003) argue that procedural justice in decision-making should ensure fairness and transparency while respecting the dignity of the individual. Upholding these principles is particularly important in the context of refugees and forcibly displaced persons, who are in especially vulnerable situations.

Robust quality assurance mechanisms in education help learners continue their studies while fully adhering to academic standards (ENQA & Council of Europe, 2018). Advanced, well-developed, and strong mechanisms also legitimately recognise alternative educational pathways while supporting the fair recognition of acquired knowledge (INQAAHE, 2024). Developing crisis-adaptive response mechanisms in a flexible and time-sensitive manner is crucial for refugees and displaced persons (O'Keeffe, 2023).

Brunner et al. (2024) argue that in the case of refugee and displaced students, universities must adopt a dual role: on one hand, they must provide care and support to students, and on the other hand, maintain academic standards. The 2019 *Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education* and the Council of Europe's *Recommendation on Recognition of Refugees' Qualifications* are decisive in this context. These documents explain that, to ensure fairness, countries should implement recognition procedures for individuals who have incomplete educational documentation (Council of Europe, 2017; UNESCO, 2024).

In this context, higher education quality assurance mechanisms are critically important, because they not only serve to verify qualifications but also allow knowledge acquisition to be assessed through various methods, ensuring that flexibility and reliability are balanced.

Georgia's response to displacement from the occupied territories

Since the early decades, especially from the 1990s and the 2008 war, Georgia has faced a complex reality. Parts of our territory, specifically Abkhazia and Tskhinvali/South Ossetia, have remained outside the central government's control. The conflicts displaced many residents and affected education continuity. For internally displaced people, war caused significant losses in education - some studied for years without having the opportunity to access their official credentials, while others finished their studies but couldn't acquire their diplomas.

Initially, Georgia faced legal obstacles because documents issued by the self-proclaimed administrations in South Ossetia and Abkhazia were invalid under Georgian law. Additionally, these documents were produced outside any recognized quality assurance system or framework, which made it impossible to verify their educational standards. Yet, excluding these individuals from accessing education or employment would undermine their basic rights.

To address this issue, Georgia established specific legal mechanisms allowing internally displaced persons to replace their previous educational documents with state-issued documents given by the Georgian government. In higher education, the *National Center for Educational Quality Enhancement* is the responsible authority that assesses applicants' prior knowledge or skills and issues state-recognized diplomas. At the legislative level, Georgia has established a key regulation, *Order No. 1067* of the Minister of Education and Science of Georgia, dated 1 December 2009, on the approval of the rule for the recognition of higher education received in the occupied territories which regulates the recognition process of higher education diplomas and academic records from conflict-affected or occupied regions. This regulation offers alternative assessment methods and a case-by-case approach when documentation is incomplete or unavailable. Georgia unites this process with its national legislation and the principles of the LRC, ensuring that flexibility is applied transparently and within a quality-assured framework.

Because of the fact that many applicants from Abkhazia and South Ossetia could not provide their original diplomas, transcripts, or other academic records, Georgia implemented a document reconstruction mechanism as part of its quality assurance framework. Verification could rely on alternative forms of evidence, such as archival records from prior institutions. Also, witness statements or written affirmations from past teachers. Additionally, internal records of educational institutions that store any available data regarding the particular applicant's studies could be used. These flexible yet highly managed procedures provided academic integrity and traceability. Each instance or piece of evidence was thoroughly documented, ensuring that every recognized qualification could be verified later.

The fact that applicants can appeal the recognition decisions ensures that fairness extends beyond procedure to restore dignity and opportunity. Notably, transparency is the basis for public trust in the recognition system, as the process is open to everyone, free of charge, and equally accessible to internally displaced people, refugees, and anyone of comparable status. Furthermore, all procedural details, eligibility restrictions, and applicant rights are available on the NCEQE's official electronic portal. Decisions are made using set criteria, professional evaluation, and written reasons rather than on the basis of human authority. When necessary, NCEQE collaborates with academic specialists from authorised universities for competency testing and course evaluation, while maintaining complete independence in final judgment. Transparency also minimizes the stigma associated with education obtained in the occupied territory. When a certificate from one of these regions is recognized, an accredited Georgian institution issues a new diploma under its own name, without indicating original institution's name in the document.

It's essential to mention that the system remains adaptive throughout the recognition process. Legislation and procedures are altered to address changing needs while maintaining academic standards. Not to lose or ignore a detail from individuals' education, incomplete studies can be recognized in part by transferring credits to Georgian higher educational institutions, allowing relocated students to continue their academic pathway without having to take unified national entrance exams.

Nowadays, IDPs can officially request recognition of the education obtained in occupied territories, ensuring that the process is conducted clearly and in accordance with the law. As the Georgian official authority handles document replacement, we can guarantee the authenticity of documents and respect for each individual's educational background, no matter where the education was obtained.

Responding to Ukrainian refugee crisis

In February 2022, the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine war caused a rapid outflow of students from Ukrainian higher education institutions. Georgia was among the countries that faced a large and continuous influx of applications from Ukrainian and international students previously enrolled in Ukrainian universities, and therefore had to manage the resulting educational crisis. The main challenges included the sudden surge in applicants seeking recognition of their academic qualifications, time constraints to prevent students from losing a semester, and the need for swift procedural adjustments in response to these urgent circumstances.

A major issue was the verification of the authenticity of educational documents, as many applicants were unable to obtain the original physical copies from Ukraine for various reasons. To address this problem, given the force majeure situation and in line with *Order No. 98/N* of the Minister of Education and Science of Georgia (2010), it was decided that for Ukrainian students the standard requirement regarding the form of study (e.g., in-person vs. distance learning) would not apply, and educational documents retrieved from Ukraine's Unified State Electronic Database on Education would be recognized as valid without requiring additional legalization or an apostille.This decision reflected a deliberate balance between maintaining academic quality assurance standards and procedural fairness, while also demonstrating sensitivity to the vulnerable state of applicants. The ability to adopt such measures clearly illustrates the crucial role of quality assurance mechanisms under crisis conditions, where material evidence can be destroyed within moments, and human lives and futures can hang in the balance.

As in the case of internally displaced persons from Georgia's occupied territories, Georgia does not recognize educational documents issued under the name of the Russian Federation within Ukraine's occupied regions. Individuals holding such documents must replace them with officially issued Ukrainian educational credentials.

Additionally, to ensure flexibility within the education system, the Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia allowed pupils transferred from Ukraine to Georgian schools, enrol in Georgian higher education institutions without taking the unified national entrance examinations, and select their preferred academic programs freely (Civil Georgia, 2022).

Furthermore, although distance learning is generally not recognized within Georgia's education system, due to the war in Ukraine, Georgian citizens who studied in Ukrainian higher education institutions during the 2021-2022, 2022-2023, or 2023-2024 academic years or who enrolled in a university before January 1, 2025 were exempted from the standard requirement to reside abroad for a prescribed duration. Additionally, academic credentials earned during this period, including those obtained through distance learning, were recognized under Georgian legislation.

Within the framework of implementing the LRC, in 2019, Georgia refined its procedures for recognizing the education of persons with international protection status. This is regulated by *Article 51 of Order №98/N*, on the verification of the authenticity of educational documents issued in Georgia and the recognition of education obtained abroad. According to this rule, NCEQE recognizes the education obtained abroad by individuals with international protection status via verifying the fact of education and establishing compatibility between the foreign and Georgian qualifications. The procedure applies when the individual is unable to present documentary evidence of education obtained abroad. In light of the Ukrainian crisis, this legal framework was further reviewed and refined in 2023.

The decisions made in response to the Ukrainian crisis demonstrate that flexibility within qualification recognition mechanisms played a decisive role in ensuring the continuity of education for students seeking to pursue their studies in Georgia, while also upholding fairness in extraordinary circumstances.

Similarities and Differences between the Two Contexts

Georgia's responses to domestic and international displacement share common foundations. Both emphasize procedural justice, equity, and the central role of the NCEQE as a quality assurance authority. Both of them draw on international QA frameworks, including the LRC, the Bologna Process etc. Most importantly, both approaches position higher education as the cornerstone for social recovery.

The contexts for each of these two scenarios diverge in several ways. The problem with Georgian occupied territories was internal displacement and de facto governance, requiring to come up with domestic QA approach and replace invalid documents. In case of Ukraine, it came to mutual trust between two QA systems and cross-system validation. It should be highlighted, that responses to internal displacement developed over years, while the Ukrainian crisis response was met with immediate adaptations.

Challenges and Lessons Learned

Ensuring institutional capacity to handle and verify large volumes of applications remains critical. Quality assurance is a mechanism of trust building between the state, institutions, and refugees. Building such trust requires transparency, stakeholder engagement, and alignment with European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ENQA et al., 2015). Georgia's experience makes the country's educational system resilient for potential future crises. The crisis in Ukraine highlighted the value of cross-border quality assurance collaboration. In both national and foreign refugee contexts, QA's strength lies in its flexibility and adaptability, ability to maintain quality under shifting conditions. In this case, quality assurance is not just a compliance mechanism but a framework guiding to equal educational opportunities.

Conclusion

In Georgia, the QA system has shown adaptability and resilience during crises, allowing recognition procedures to adjust without compromising educational integrity. Trust in qualifications varies by origin: credentials from occupied territories face scrutiny due to weak QA mechanisms, while Ukrainian qualifications are trusted because of robust and reliable QA framework. Although recognition procedures are generally consistent, practical approaches differ depending on the source of the qualification. While challenges remain in capacity, sustainability, and preparedness, the fundamental achievement is clear: quality assurance enabled procedural justice, protected academic standards, and provided displaced learners with a pathway to continue their education.

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