

# International Mobility as a Perspective for Young Graduates from Georgia: Analysing Employability for the German Job Market

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## Abstract

This paper examines youth unemployment in Georgia and opportunities for graduates in the international labour market, with a special focus on Germany. It aims to address the challenges faced by young individuals in Georgia in accessing employment opportunities and their implications within the global job market context. Drawing upon the employability concept and the future skills approach, this study investigates the fit of labour market skills of Georgian graduates with competence expectations of companies in Germany. Methodologically, this paper relies on a literature review and statistical data analysis, while the empirical portion employs a mixed methods approach. Building on exploratory qualitative peer-group interviews, a quantitative survey was conducted among students and graduates in Georgia. The results of the data analysis show that Georgia also experiences alarmingly high rates of youth unemployment among graduates. The depopulation process is further exacerbated by substantial migration of the youth population from Georgia, often referred to as the "brain drain". Simultaneously, European countries are witnessing a growing shortage of skilled workers, necessitating well-trained labour to navigate economic transformations. Studies project that Germany, for instance, may face a deficit of up to one million skilled workers by 2030. The results of the empirical research demonstrate that Georgian students and graduates reflect on different skills discourses between their national and international labour markets. They situate these in the specific traditional, historical and cultural contexts of the country and derive specific challenges for themselves. Respondents in the quantitative approach answered that they take measures to improve their knowledge and skills in different ways to be more competitive not only for the regional but also for the global market. Ultimately, the study concludes by discussing potential recommendations to alleviate youth unemployment in Georgia and enhance their prospects in the international job market, focusing on the case of Germany.

**Keywords:** Youth Unemployment in Georgia, employability, skills and competences, social and cultural fit of skills expectations, international labour market, access to the German labour market

## Introduction

For many years, the authors have been conducting joint projects as university lecturers with Georgian and German students, aiming to impart skills that provide them with an advantage in the global job market [1]. While the German participants generally view this project as an opportunity to expand their individual skills or, in some cases, as an adventure trip in the Caucasus, the participants from the Georgian universities often focus on concrete career prospects.

International university projects open up opportunities for them to obtain scholarships for studies abroad, which in turn significantly enhance their chances in the international job market. Youth unemployment in Georgia is extremely high, while the German job market is currently desperately seeking skilled workers, with employers actively recruiting students straight out of university. This represents a serious difference in the career prospects and educational context of young academics. In the context of Georgian-German university cooperation, the authors were always faced with the question of whether their project could address the same competencies for all students or whether very different competencies should be taught for both target groups, according to their respective labour market specifics.

Against the background of these experiences, this paper examines youth unemployment in Georgia and opportunities for graduates in the international labour market, with a special focus on Germany. It aims to address the challenges faced by young individuals in Georgia in accessing employment opportunities and their implications within the global job market context. Drawing upon the employability concept and the future skills approach, this study investigates the fit of labour market skills of Georgian graduates with competence expectations of companies in Germany. The paper raises

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critical questions about global standards for employability skills and the role of national and local social and cultural specifics. Considering the exceedingly high unemployment rates among Georgian graduates, the inquiry examines how they assess their prospects in the international job market and whether their skills acquired during their studies align with the requirements of companies. Consequently, the paper also explores measures to reduce unemployment rates, with a focus on global mobility options. They will be discussed using the example of the German job market.

Methodologically, this paper relies on a literature review and statistical data analysis, while the empirical portion employs a mixed methods approach. Building on exploratory qualitative peer-group interviews, a quantitative survey was conducted among students and graduates in Georgia.

After the scholarly discourses on the concept of employability have been introduced, an analysis of selected market data from Georgia as well as data on the skills shortage in Germany will follow. Empirical findings will then be discussed and presented in the concluding comments.

### **Contextualising employability concepts**

Employability is not a new concept but has changing connotations in recent decades. Since the 2010s, numerous publications and studies on this subject abound, and their prioritisations and focus are contingent upon the perspective and discipline they represent, often shaped by the specific economic and political contexts they are situated in. Employability can be examined from various angles associated with the requirements and interests of diverse stakeholders, including government, employers, students, and universities [2].

In the 1980s and 1990s, the predominant notion of employability lay in individuals' productivity and cumulative marketability (income that they can earn) based on human, social, and cultural capital. According to Römgen et al., who aim to integrate research on employability in higher education and the workplace, all definitions of employability ultimately revolve around an individual's (perceived) ability to secure and maintain employment throughout their career [3]. An employee's expertise, competences, skills and motivation play a major role in this context [4].

This widespread focus of employability on skills and the responsibility of the individual to acquire these skills has been strongly criticised, especially from a globalisation-critical education and economic policy perspective. McGrath blames globalisation and neoliberal developments for a shift in emphasis away from workplace conditions to personal effort and skills [5]. He argues for a concept of "interactive employability", which is based on the idea that employers and policy makers interact with individuals to obtain and maintain employment. "While accepting the importance of individual agency, this notion sought to balance personal efforts with structural factors" [6].

Knapton, who looks at employability from a critical education perspective, speaks of a "high-jagged concept" [7]. The author criticises the widely used definition of employability as skills, understanding and personal attributes that make individuals more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations. She points out that an individual's socioeconomic contexts will make a difference as to the ability of someone getting a job [7]. Both critical approaches agree that contextual factors such as social, economic, or structural factors must be considered in the concepts of labour market readiness.

Shalini Singh and Soren Ehlers argue in a similar direction. They point out that in recent years, employability has developed as a global norm that has a great influence on the labour market opportunities of university graduates [8]. The authors criticise skills and competences that are constructed in a seemingly culture-free space. In particular, students from the Global South are disadvantaged in this respect. Singh and Ehlers analyse transnational policies on employability and identify the OECD, whose influence was first limited to high-income countries, as the most impactful agent in the field of employability policies. Since 2008, UNESCO and ILO policy recommendations, based on OECD strategies, have included low- and middle-income countries struggling with poverty and unemployment. "While the relatively small numbers of homogenous OECD member countries accepted a clear norm on employability in the beginning, the ILO provided the legitimacy needed to promote it globally by engaging stakeholders from a large number of heterogeneous low- and middle-income countries" [9].

In the context of fundamental changes in the global labour market, a renewed debate about skills is observable. There is a consensus that megatrends pose major challenges for companies and require employees to have skills that enhance their innovation potential. As the education scientist Ulf-Daniel Ehlers points out, society is moving towards a new era, which he calls the postknowledge age and which

requires new skills, so-called future skills. Future skills are defined by Ehlers as “competences that allow individuals to solve complex problems in highly emergent contexts of action in a self-organised way and enable them to act (successfully). They are based on cognitive, motivational, volitional and social resources, are value-based and can be acquired in a learning process” [10]. They are embedded in the discourse around the goal of higher education and employability as, according to Ehlers, the goal of any educational process that aims at vocational aspiration of any kind.

While Ehlers explicitly incorporates the concept of culture into his approach, it primarily pertains to organisational cultures and places less emphasis on the social and cultural contexts of life. Nonetheless, he critically highlights that the expectation should not be that all working-age individuals inherently possess the same high level of skills. Given the backdrop of international migration flows, the requirements of diverse cultures must also be considered [11].

### **Current social demographic challenges and threats in Georgia**

Since 1998, Georgia's National Statistics Office has been compiling labour force statistics using the International Labour Organisation's methodology [12]. The recent data are indeed alarming. It appears that Georgia is currently experiencing a significant decline in its population, which can be termed depopulation [13].



*Figure 1. Population of Georgia from 2010 to 2022 (Thousand people). Data Source [14]*

This decline can be attributed to various unfavourable factors stemming from the nation's political and economic unrest [15]. Notably, the surge in unemployment rates [15], a noticeable trend of labour migration [16], and a gradual decline in birth rates [17] have all played a role in this demographic shift. As a result of these demographic processes, the population of Georgia in 2022 compared to 2010 decreased by approximately 3 percent and amounted to 3,688,600 people (Fig. 1).

The global problem of unemployment is widely recognised, and it stands as a crucial indicator for evaluating a country's social security and overall living conditions [18].

Fig. 2 illustrates the unemployment rate in Georgia over the period from 2010 to 2022. In 2021, unemployment rose by 2.1% to 20.6%, a noteworthy increase over the previous year. This marked the highest level in the past four years. Undoubtedly, the pandemic played a significant role in contributing to both the surge in unemployment and the decline in the number of economically active individuals during this period [20]. Due to the pandemic, many businesses were forced to use layoffs as a last choice, which led to many workers losing their jobs. These people ultimately experienced financial instability as a result of their struggles to cope with the difficulties of unemployment, and many of them consequently decided to migrate within the country to other regions or outside of their own country [21].

Based on the latest available data from the National Statistics Office of Georgia (Fig. 2), it was observed that in 2022, Georgia experienced a substantial decline in the unemployment rate, which decreased by 3.3% compared with the previous year 2021 and reached a level of 17.3%. This rate represents the lowest level recorded in the past ten years.

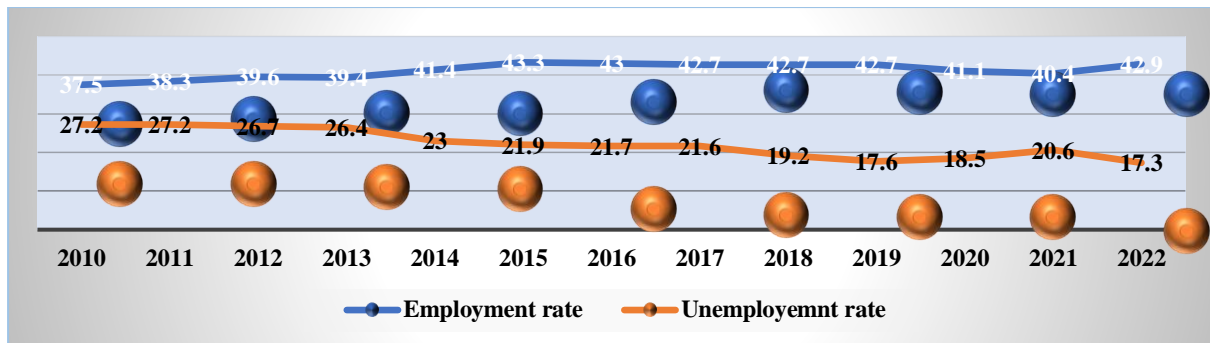


Figure 2. Employment and unemployment rates in Georgia from 2010 to 2022 (%). Data Source [19]

Additionally, there was a noteworthy rise in the employment rate, with an increase of 2.5 percentage points in 2022 in comparison to the previous year, resulting in a total of 42.9% (Fig. 2). In 2022, a total of approximately 1,283,700 individuals were employed. Furthermore, specific employment categories also saw positive changes during the postpandemic period. The number of hired individuals increased by 41,500 people, while the number of self-employed individuals rose by 24,900, reaching 870,900 and 412,100, respectively. In 2022, approximately 68% were engaged in hired employment, while the remaining 32% were self-employed. In the same period of time, the largest proportion of the employed population, amounting to 20%, was found in sectors related to agriculture, fishing, forestry, hunting, and beekeeping. Employment in the trade sector, including automobile and household goods repair, accounted for 15%, and the education sector provided employment for 11% of the workforce [19].

The postpandemic period is characterised by the opening of borders between countries and the inclusion of organisations in different activities. All of these factors improved the positive dynamics of the tourism sector, reduced the unemployment rate and contributed to the economic growth of the country in 2022 [22].

It is important to highlight the substantial disparities in unemployment between urban and rural areas in Georgia. As is evident from the data provided by the National Statistics Office of Georgia, rural areas have a substantially lower unemployment rate than urban areas. For the year 2022 in urban areas, the unemployment rate reached 18.3%, while in rural regions, it was lower at 15.7% [19]. It should be noted that the share of self-employed people in rural areas is higher - 48.8% of total employment. In urban areas, it was only 20.3% because most self-employed people work in the agriculture sector [23]. In comparison to 2021, the employment rate in 2022 rose by 3.2 percentage points in rural areas and 2 percentage points in urban areas [19]. Compared to other Georgian regions, in 2022, Kakheti had a lower unemployment rate – 9%. This is related to the fact that the majority of the local population works in agriculture and that a significant portion is self-employed [24]. The unemployment rate in Tbilisi dropped by 4.3% from the previous year to 19.5% in 2022, placing it in third place among all regions [19]. The capital of Georgia continues to have a large part of the country's GDP and foreign direct investment, therefore, the large number of enterprises are open for society in this area [25]. This contributes to internal migration and, in turn, increases the unemployment rate in Tbilisi too.

Georgia's population consisted of 17.2% young people between the ages of 15-29 in 2022. In comparison to the other two age groups, the proportions of young people in the population between the ages of 20-24 and 25-29 are nearly equal at 5.7% and 6.0%, respectively. However, the proportion of young people in the population between the ages of 15 and 19 is comparatively low at 5.6%. Females make up 52% of Georgia's population. On the other hand, men aged 15-29 account for 52.2% of the population. Young men aged 15-29 make up 18.8% of the entire male population, and young women aged 15-29 make up 15.9% of the total female population [26]. When compared to women, men often have a higher unemployment rate in Georgia. This indicator among men for 2022 is 4.7 percentage points higher than the indicator among women for the same year [19].

Another important observation is that Georgia has a high youth unemployment rate [27]. Fig. 3 shows trends in unemployment rates in Georgia for different age groups. In general, it can be seen that in all years, the youth unemployment rate surpasses the unemployment rate of the general population (Fig. 2). According to the image above (Fig. 3), those aged 15-19 in 2022 had the highest unemployment rates at 47.4%, followed by those aged 20-24 at 37.3% and those aged 25-29 at 22.2%. The higher rate of youth unemployment in the age range 15-24 could be explained by enrolment in education and for those 25-29 by a lack of professional specialists. Clearly, the present educational system does not

completely reflect the requirements of the modern labour market [28]. In Georgia, youth unemployment has remained high and peaked in 2021 as a result of the pandemic crisis. Another indicator is the share of young people not in education, employment, or training (NEETs). NEETs account for almost 30.7% of the total youth population aged 15-29 in 2022. In comparison with previous years, this indicator has decreased by approximately 4%. There were more NEETs among women than among men (34.5% and 27.2%, respectively). Caregiving obligations for family members are the main cause of being a NEET. In addition, a handicap or illness may be to blame [29].

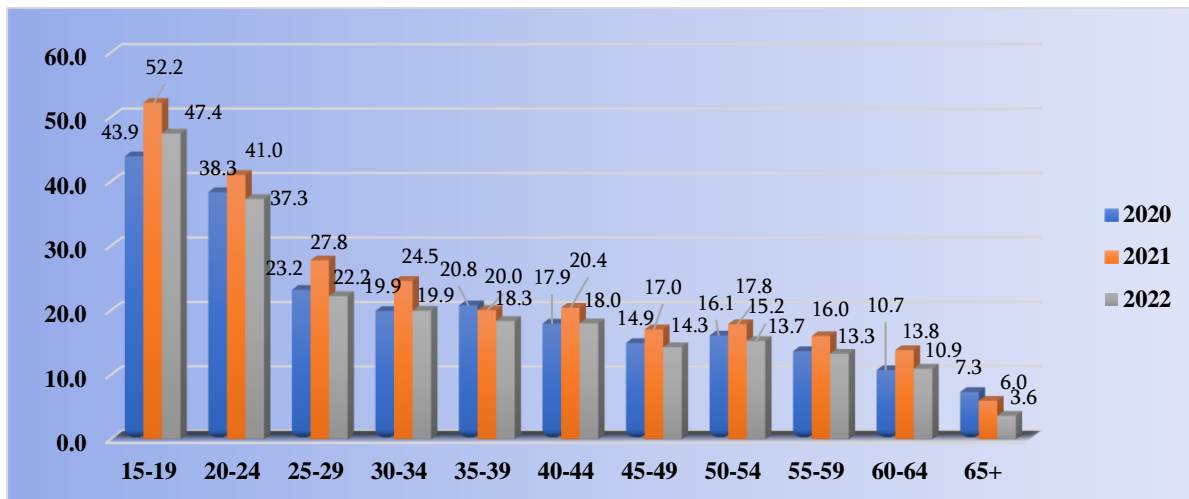


Figure 3. Unemployment rate by age group from 2020 to 2022 (%). Data Source [19]

Georgia is one of the states with the highest percentage of educated workers who are unemployed [21]. The employment rate of recent graduates aged 20-34 in 2022 was 48.2% [19]. This suggests that a high percentage of the youth labour force was unemployed and unable to sustain the country's economy.

In Georgia, the generation between the ages of 15 and 29 has declined by 10% during the past five years, and in 2022, it reached 634,100 [26]. This occurred due to a combination of factors, including low natural increase and substantial negative migration. The high unemployment rate and poverty in different regions is becoming a major driving force for the young generation to emigrate from Georgia [30]. This is a process known as "brain drain", and it is acute and current. This is an extremely negative consequence for the growth and development of the country's intellectual potential, as well as for the retention and increase of a highly qualified workforce [15].

Based on the latest available data from the National Statistics Office of Georgia, it was observed that the migration balance significantly decreased from (-194634) in 1994 to (-26376) in 2003 [31]. This means that the number of immigrants in Georgia has risen, and the number of emigrants has declined. This situation may be partly attributed to the fact that many fellow citizens who were abroad returned to their homeland after the Rose Revolution (in 2003), as the socioeconomic situation in Georgia improved [32]. In 2020 and 2022, the number of immigrants in Georgia surpassed the number of emigrants; in practical terms, we can say that this is the first time in the last twenty years that the migration balance in Georgia has been positive. In 2020, the migration balance was 15732, which can be attributed to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. During the global pandemic, many Georgian citizens returned, and the local government provided assistance to facilitate their repatriation [33]. In 2022, the migration balance was 54,509 as a result of Russia's war against Ukraine, which led to Georgia hosting Ukrainian refugees [34] and Russian deserters seeking refuge in the country [35]. These geopolitical events influenced the migration dynamics in Georgia during the specified period of time. Emigrants from Georgia worked abroad and used their income to support their families at home. According to data from the National Bank of Georgia, in August 2023, 57.7% of all money transfers came from different countries: 21% came from the Russian Federation, 15.7% from Italy, 14% from the United States, and 7% from Germany [36]. The stabilisation of the Georgian economy still depends heavily on remittances [37].

## The German job market and its requirements

In its report "Global Employment Trends", the ILO describes an employment pattern of young people worldwide influenced by the Corona pandemic, which is also reflected in the comparison of the two countries Georgia and Germany." Young people have been disproportionately affected by the economic and employment consequences of the pandemic, and as highlighted in this report, the pace of recovery of youth labour markets in many countries and regions is falling behind that of the labour market for older workers." [38]. Upper-middle-income countries were particularly affected by high youth unemployment rates, while there were almost no effects in high-income countries [39,40].

In many countries of Western Europe, a completely different set of problems is emerging. European countries are witnessing a growing shortage of skilled workers, necessitating well-trained labour to navigate economic transformations. The lack of skilled workers is already an existential issue for many companies in Germany. The latest skilled labour survey indicates that there will be approximately 240,000 more vacancies in 2026 than there will be workers available [41]. Studies project that the country may face a deficit of up to one million skilled workers by 2030 [42, 43].

Fig. 4 illustrates the continuously declining unemployment rate among youth aged 15-25 in Germany from 2005 to 2022.

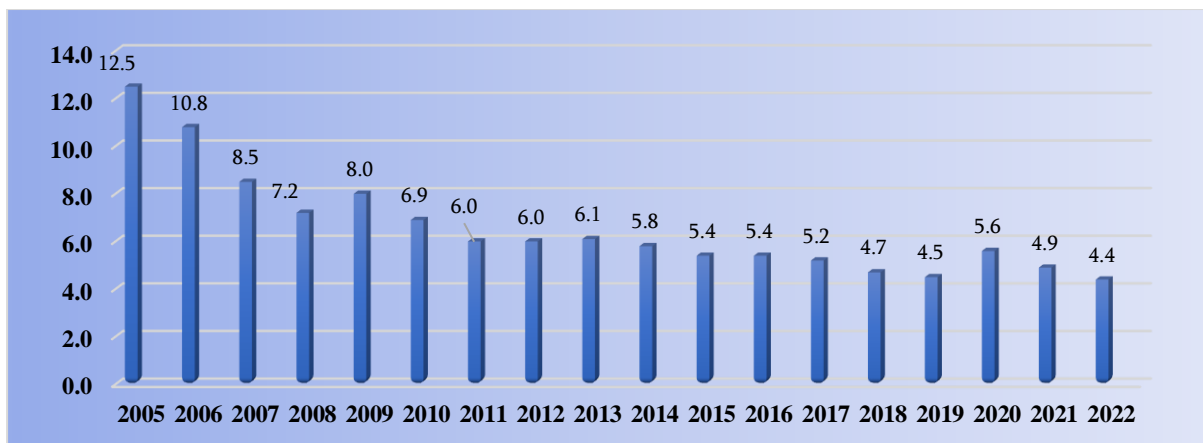


Figure 4. Development of youth unemployment in Germany by age group 15-25 in % (2005 – 2022). Data Source [44]

In September 2022, Germany presented the Federal Government's skilled labour strategy at the Skilled Labour Summit [45]. This initiative is aimed at attracting more skilled workers at home and abroad and focuses on five fields of action. In addition to the education of young people, professional development and training, higher labour force participation, especially among women, and an employee-oriented work culture, a modern immigration policy is an important element of this strategy. It is recognised that Germany is reliant on the immigration of foreign skilled workers and that actions should be taken to make immigration attractive to them [46].

In the meantime, Germany has concluded so-called recruitment agreements with various countries. There is also experience with Georgia, albeit only on a project basis. For example, the programme "Strengthening the Development Potential of the EU Mobility Partnership in Georgia through Targeted Circular Migration and Diaspora Mobilisation" was implemented from 2013-2016 [45]. Under this programme, 28 Georgian nurses and hospitality professionals were enrolled, and 27 were placed in Germany to improve their skills profile and employability for the Georgian labour market through job placement, employment and training in Germany [47]. The aim was to promote circular migration. This was defined as "the mobility of people between countries, including multiple temporary or long-term movements, which can be beneficial and developmental for all parties involved (migrants, countries of origin and destination, including the respective societies and individuals) if they are voluntary and linked to migrants' rights and competences and their development, as well as to the economic opportunities of the countries of origin and destination." [48]. The aim was therefore to prevent brain drain in Georgia, especially by providing incentives and means to facilitate reintegration of returned migrants, as well as possibilities for continued circular migration schemes [49].

In addition to the legal emigration barriers faced by Georgian citizens, one must consider the competency expectations of German companies. Key criteria for assessing competence encompass

professional qualifications, language proficiency, and the ability to adapt culturally. Schneider, a member of the Council on Integration and Migration, refers to this challenge as the "matching problem" [50]. Inconsistencies, particularly in the realm of skill expectations for higher education graduates, become apparent. The analysis conducted by Liu-Farrer and Shire reveals that despite comparable educational qualifications, foreign graduates experience significantly poorer labour market prospects than German nationals [52]. The authors point out that Germany is taking measures to facilitate the entry of foreign university graduates into the job market by allowing a period of 18 months for job searching for non-EU graduates. According to the German foundation "Stifterverband" [51], only 25% of foreign students found employment in Germany in 2016. The authors explain the difficulty in finding suitable employment by highlighting the construction of skill expectations within national employment contexts. In Germany, employers expect foreign university graduates to possess identical skill sets to their German counterparts. "Due to culturally inflected selection, a process of labour market segmentation occurs in the primary labour market" [52]. This demonstrates that despite a significant shortage of skilled workers, having the corresponding university degree alone does not guarantee labour market entry for foreign graduates in Germany.

Interestingly, this runs counter to the much-touted idea of diversity, which plays a significant role in companies in Germany, both in internal human resource management and in external representation (reputation and prestige), as advocated by the "Diversity Charta"[53].

### **Immigration patterns of Georgian Citizens in Germany and Potential Developments**

According to the Foreigners Central Register at the end of 2022, 44,390 people with Georgian citizenship were living in Germany [54].

In 2022, Georgia ranked eighth among the most common countries of origin for asylum seekers in the EU, with 25,935 applications [55]. In 2023, asylum applicants from Georgia ranked sixth in Germany, following Syria, Afghanistan, Turkey, Iran, and Iraq (in 2022, 7,963 asylum applications were filed by Georgians in Germany, and by April 2023, there were already 3,406 applications; Federal Agency for Civic Education: Demography of asylum seekers in Germany). Since 2019, Georgia has consistently been among the top 10 countries of origin for asylum seekers in Germany. However, since 2020, Georgia has also been at the top of the list of destination countries with the most frequent deportations (in 2022: 908 deportations to Georgia, with approximately 1,000 in the previous years).

According to the National Statistics Office of Georgia, Germany is the main destination country for Georgian educational migrants [56]. Krannich and Hunger explain how, with the beginning of the 21st century, a paradigm shift has occurred, no longer considering educational migration primarily as a brain drain for a country in the global south (dependency theories, theories of modernisation). Instead, an initial brain drain can result in a brain gain in the long term, as important skills can be acquired through studying abroad and relevant social and professional networks can be established [57]. An OECD report from 2016 also emphasises that "migration is not a precondition for development, yet it can contribute significantly to the development of countries of both origin and destination" [58].

According to Bogishvili, the main destination countries for Georgian labour migrants are primarily Russia, the Ukraine, the USA, and European countries [56]. Since 2017, access to the European Union has been facilitated for Georgian citizens. They are exempt from the visa requirement if they stay in the EU for a maximum of 90 days within a 180-day period [59]. Furthermore, since February 15, 2021, opportunities for unskilled workers have improved, as Germany allows Georgian citizens to have legal employment in agriculture. However, Bogishvili sees only limited chances for migration here since, although the "poorer, less educated, or unemployed part of the population of Georgia theoretically gets a chance for seasonal labour migration," they lack the necessary starting capital for travel preparation and application, as well as sufficient German or English language skills [56].

In the context of the shortage of skilled workers in Germany and the increasing recruitment and intergovernmental cooperation with various countries in the global south, efforts are being observed to promote skilled migration from Georgia to Germany. In a podcast by the German government, Joachim Stamp, the special representative of the federal government for migration agreements with Georgia, argues that this is initially motivated by the high number of asylum seekers from this country and the consistently high rejection rates. It is in the interest of both Germany and Georgia to end irregular migration. Regular migration options that are currently being negotiated with countries could play a

significant role in achieving this. Both sides focus on circular migration, similar to educational migration, which could have positive effects for both Georgia and Germany [60].

Therefore, the question of potential prospects for qualified young people from Georgia in the labour market in Germany will be examined in this paper.

### Results: Employability skills of Georgian graduates – Self-assessment of intercultural and international competences

Against the background of the question of how graduates from Georgia meet the skills expectations of labour markets in countries with severe skills shortages, the authors conducted two empirical studies. First, explorative qualitative research was conducted with a focus group methodology to capture the self-assessments and experiences of Georgian graduates. For this purpose, the topic was narrowed down to diversity experiences and intercultural competences. The second step was a quantitative survey based on this.

#### Qualitative Focus Group Interviews

Between November 2021 and January 2022, three focus group sessions took place. The sample included students and graduates from two universities in Tbilisi, Georgia. All participants were in business-related disciplines (finance, business administration, marketing), and one was in anthropology. The sampling was carried out through initial contacts with teachers at both universities who emailed their students, through contacts with participants of a Georgian-German summer school and, building on this, through snowballing. Each focus group discussion lasted approximately 60 minutes. Due to the mobility limitations of the COVID-19 pandemic, the focus groups took place via video conferences and consisted of 4-5 participants each.

The discussions were recorded, transcribed and coded using the analysis software MAXQDA in an inductive procedure. The aim was to generate insights into Georgian students' and graduates' understanding of diversity-related competences as well as their self-assessments of related competences in the national and international labour markets.

How the topic of diversity was discussed in the focus groups is summarised in Table 1.

Table 1 Overview Results of the Focus Group Interviews

Category	Summary	Examples	Results
Contexts in which students and graduates acquire intercultural and diversity competence	<p><b>experience abroad:</b> summer schools, international exchange programs, studying abroad, travelling</p> <p><b>International and intercultural settings in Georgia:</b> international students, ethnic minorities,</p> <p><b>International work experience in Georgia:</b> working for international or large corporations in Georgia</p>	<p><i>"I was in the plane from Turkey to Germany and there were a lot of baby's in the plane, [...] and this mothers they were still on the chair and just enjoying the flight and the fathers they had the baby's with them all the time and they are walking like on the corridor of the plane and (...) helping the child to sleep. They were feeding them and I was so shocked that in Georgia you cannot find fathers doing like that." (FG 2)</i></p> <p><i>"However, I would also say that more and more companies in Georgia, [...] they also start the understating of diversity and they try to some kind of adapt to it and yes, I think that maybe majority of the companies, big companies they have this high understanding and high standards of diversity and accepting the difference." (FG2)</i></p>	<p>Intercultural and diversity experiences are gained by Georgian students through study abroad and through contact with international students and ethnic minorities in their own country. During or after their studies, activities in international companies, especially in Tbilisi, contribute to the development of intercultural and diversity competences.</p>



<p><b>Discourses on ethnic minorities in Georgia</b></p>	<p><b>Underrepresentation</b> of ethnic minorities in public discourse</p> <p><b>Mentioned ethnic minorities in Georgia:</b> Azeri, Armenians, Russians</p> <p><b>Few contact situations in everyday life</b>, first contacts were mostly made at university or in the workplace</p> <p><b>Ethnic minorities living in specific regions</b></p> <p><b>Immigration of refugees is critically discussed in public</b></p>	<p><i>"The first thing that comes in my mind [...] is ethnic diversity, because there are many minorities in Georgia and their usually kind of underrepresented in public discourse and political sphere."</i> (FG 3)</p> <p><i>"We don't talk about diversity that much ... [minorities] try to stay quiet."</i> (FG3)</p> <p><i>"It is difficult of integrate minorities, like ethnic Armenians and Azerbaijanis, who traditionally live in different regions."</i> (FK2)</p> <p><i>"Most people are against to accept some immigrants. For example, from Afghanistan. It was so that lots of people have to come first to Georgia and then from Georgia to other European countries or the US. So (...) there was a truly high discussion that we should not accept any like the immigrants from Afghanistan."</i> (FG2)</p>	<p>Students and graduates reflect different discourses on ethnic minorities. While the arrival of international refugees was discussed rather negatively in Georgian society, the attitude towards ethnic minorities in the country, such as Azeris, Armenians or Russians, was described as rather reserved. All in all, the social and political discourse on minorities is described as rather critical to distanced.</p>
<p><b>Discourses on Gender roles in Georgia</b></p>	<p><b>Traditional role expectations of women and men</b></p> <p><b>Poorer career opportunities for women</b></p>	<p><i>"There is some kind of pressure against, I guess because maybe in Georgia still people consider that women should be in the families, they should not work hard or be manager or something like that."</i> (FG1)</p> <p><i>"Right now, I am learning computer engineering ... coding. In addition, all the time I hear from man and women, that this in only man's job. In addition, women do not have enough brain for this ..."</i> (FG1)</p> <p><i>"It is fact that the salary of men is much higher. (...) In general, men are more appreciated at the highest career in general, not for all company."</i> (FG2)</p>	<p>Young people see themselves caught between the traditional role expectations of society and their own role concepts which are also oriented towards ideals specific to international peer groups. They describe barriers living their own role models, both in their own families and in the Georgian working environment.</p>
<p><b>Discourses on generational gaps</b></p>	<p><b>Disruptions of political systems causes different value orientation between generations</b></p>	<p><i>"Its a difference between my mother and me because I'm 25. In addition, I just got married right now. In addition, my mother was only 14."</i> (FG1)</p> <p><i>"If you look in georgian history ... approximately 20 years ago the country was part of the USSR ... and it was communist ... and in communism we had such kind of different thinking, that I cannot understand today. In addition, in communism, our parents were raised and they lived in communism. Therefore, this has also a meaning for them."</i> (FG1)</p>	<p>Students and graduates show understanding for intergenerational differences, explaining them with the disruptive experiences of their parents' and grandparents' generation. Their orientation towards values that were taught in the Soviet Union differs significantly from their own values.</p>
<p><b>Differences between urban and rural areas</b></p>	<p><b>Rural population is more conservative</b></p>	<p><i>"Georgian people are more conservative, so and in the past ages we truly had men-oriented families. We do not have it right now; I mean just in big cities. In villages unfortunately still there are such kind of families. Therefore, everything is under males' supervision and under men's commands."</i> (FG3)</p>	<p>Not only between generations but also between urban and rural areas, students and graduates perceive large differences in value orientations.</p>

Participants reflect on different diversity discourses (between Georgia and other countries), situate them in the specific traditional, historical and cultural contexts of the country and derive specific challenges for themselves.

Using the example of a participant, referred to as Natela, this case aims to illustrate the significance of diversity skills within international corporations. Natela holds a Bachelor's degree in Business Administration from Georgia and has secured a position within a transnational corporation located in

Tbilisi. This organisation globally espouses a commitment to diversity values and annually publishes Diversity and Inclusion reports, emphasising its dedication to nurturing a diverse workforce and creating a collaborative, equitable, and inclusive environment where every individual, regardless of their appearance, origin, or whom they love, is afforded a voice. Natela expresses appreciation for the support she receives as a young woman within the company but also finds it disconcerting when an older male colleague does not receive similar support. She reasons that the older colleague has a family to support, while she herself still resides with her parents. Additionally, Natela highlights discrepancies between societal and corporate values, citing the treatment of homosexuality as an example. She notes that openly acknowledging one's homosexuality in Georgia is challenging and is rarely tolerated by society. Simultaneously, she observes the company's commitment to accepting diverse sexual orientations through its statements. At times, she finds it challenging to navigate the boundary between her professional and personal life.

### Quantitative survey

The results of the qualitative exploratory study were utilised and expanded upon to create a questionnaire. The survey was conducted using Google Forms and was available online from August 1, 2022, to September 7, 2022. The survey access link was sent to approximately 100 students from faculties of different universities of Tbilisi, including those in Bachelor's, Master's, and PhD programs, along with a brief explanation and a request for their participation. The total number of responses received was 46, which could be included in the evaluation.

The questionnaire consisted of 37 questions.

Key characteristics of the respondents:

- The age distribution was as follows: 15% were between 18 and 23 years old, 57% between 24 and 30 years old, 24% between 31 and 39 years old, and 4% between 40 and 45 years old.
- Regional distribution: Most of the participants were from the capital city of Tbilisi (68%), 13% from Imereti, 7% from Shida Kartli, 4% from Kvemo Kartli, and 2% each from four other regions of Georgia.
- Educational qualifications: 31% of the participants held a Bachelor's degree, 52% held a Master's degree, and 17% held a PhD.
- Enrolled at Universities: 83% of all participants either currently study or have studied at TSU (Tbilisi State University). The remaining participants were distributed across seven other universities in Georgia. In total, 87% were associated with business and economics disciplines.
- Experiences abroad: Only half of the respondents had been abroad, 63% of them in Germany. The maximum duration of their stay abroad was 2 years, and the minimum was one week.
- Job experience: 87% of the respondents worked for a company, and 80.4% had a job during their studies.

Interestingly, after graduation, 93.5% of the respondents found a job. However, only 87% had a job in their field of study or in a position corresponding to their qualification.

In response to the question “Did you experience barriers in accessing the labour market?”, 43.5% answered “yes”. While 10 respondents awarded 5 out of 10 possible points to assess the difficulty of accessing the labour market, 18 participants indicated higher values and thus greater barriers (Fig.5).

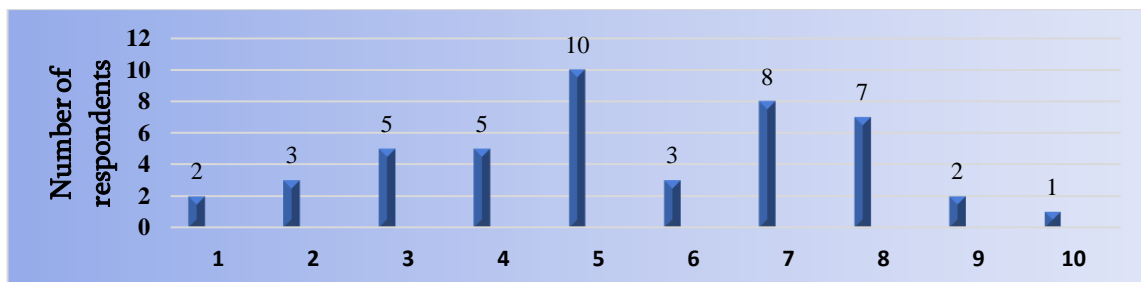


Figure 5. The scale of difficulty accessing the labour market

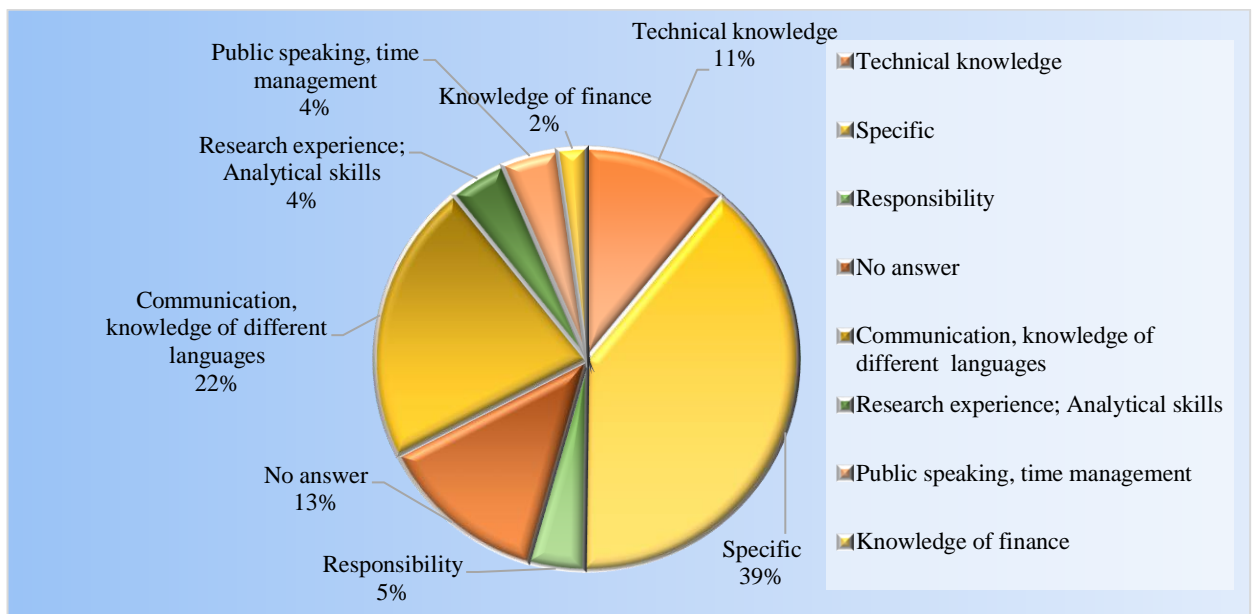
When asked why they were unsuccessful in finding a job, respondents gave different answers: 60.4% reported a lack of experience, 4.3% a lack of computer skills, 4.3% language barriers and 11% nepotism.

It is important to consider the responses in the context of the survey period, which was the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, more than half made a connection with the economic situation caused by the pandemic. Fifty-two percent of respondents thought that COVID-19 impacts made it more difficult to find a job because there were fewer vacancies than before, many small companies and businesses no longer existed, many companies had financial problems, and they reduced their costs, so they fired some employees. A total of 10.9% of the respondents lost their job due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

We asked the participants if they were informed about the reasons for rejections of their job application. Thirty-seven percent answered that they lacked specific competences, 10.9% were told that they were not qualified, and 6.5% answered that they lacked networks.

A total of 73.9% of the respondents had been invited to job interviews 5-10 times, and 95.7% thought that they met the expectations of the interviewer.

When asked “Which competences did the interviewer investigate in?” most of the interviewees indicated job-specific competences, communication and technological skills (Fig. 6).



*Figure 6.*

According to their self-assessment, 95% of respondents think that they meet the competence expectations of the national labour market, and only 76.1% think that they meet the competence expectations of the international labour market. Approximately 30.4% think that they lack knowledge of foreign languages, 17.4% think that they lack computer programming skills and 6.5% think that they do not have enough knowledge in finance. The participants attribute this to their study programs, which did not provide sufficient skills.

When asked to compare Georgian students with those from other countries, 52.2% of the respondents are convinced that students from other countries are better qualified for international jobs. In their opinion, other students gain more practical experience in the framework of their education. In addition, Georgian respondents consider students from other countries to be better trained in analytical and critical thinking and more independent in what they do. Interestingly, another 47.8% expected no differences in the knowledge level of the students from other countries.

Most of the interviewees think that specific disadvantages for Georgian students are the lack of EU residence permission, insufficient funding and support from government.

In addition to focusing on perceived deficiencies, 63% of the respondents feel that Georgian graduates have skills that are not valued or recognised in international companies, including better

communication skills than students from other countries, being more open minded, and ready to work hard.

Almost all respondents answered that they take measures to improve their knowledge and skills in different ways to be more competitive not only for the regional but also for the global market.

## **Discussion**

The results show that students and graduates from Georgia describe strengths and weaknesses compared to international peer groups. This became evident during the focus group discussions where participants highlighted varying discourses on the topic of diversity in transnational and Georgian companies. They attribute these differences to distinct historical developments and traditional value orientations. They view Georgian society as being in transition in this regard. While the older generation is still influenced by their experiences in the former Soviet Union, the younger generation increasingly aligns with European values. However, participants do not describe coherent processes of change but emphasise the coexistence of different currents. They point out significant disparities between rural and urban regions, between conservative, church-oriented values, and liberal attitudes, even among young people, as well as among ethnic groups.

According to the participants, growing up in a so-called transitional society leads to a positioning between traditional roots and cosmopolitan curiosity and openness. On the one hand, they value this as social and cultural capital that enables them to acquire competencies such as mediation skills, empathy, and flexibility for an international work environment. However, they are also aware that this tension can require them to take positions and may lead to breaks with tradition or rejection of so-called "modern" lifestyles.

The quantitative survey also indicates that Georgian students and graduates perceive different competency expectations between the national and international job markets. While 95% feel well prepared for the national job market, only 76% believe they are adequately equipped for the international job market. This is attributed to the lack of specific competency development in their education, which is more focused on knowledge dissemination.

The empirical study confirms that Georgian graduates perceive limitations in their competitiveness in the global labour market. They believe that the skills and competencies expected there are not acquired through their education and experiences in the national labour market. The higher education system is primarily called upon to prepare young graduates for the international labour market. It becomes crucial to ensure that young people receive qualifications that correspond to the demands of the labour market. This applies not only to Georgian universities. As mentioned at the beginning, the education system is also undergoing transformations in employee-labour markets that are aligned, for example, with concepts such as Ehlers' Future-Skills approach. This significantly stronger focus in university education, which is less centred on the imparting of factual knowledge and more on developing personality-, world-, and organisation-oriented competencies, enables young individuals to cultivate more flexible and future-oriented skills.

As the study also shows, international mobility plays a major role in the acquisition of skills. This was emphasised by the students in the focus group interviews, in which they referred to important experiences during a study or project abroad. This points to the question of whether increasing circular labour migration in general may not also be an important prospect for young graduates in Georgia. This offers the chance of a qualified job and the acquisition of important professional skills, and it contributes to the reduction of unemployment rates in Georgia. Here, however, the risk of brain drain must be considered, which requires well-managed circular migration programs. It can be assumed that many people from Georgia, who currently live and work in Germany or in other countries, have the desire to return to their country of origin at some point to make a contribution there. For example, the German Society for International Cooperation has launched the Migration & Diaspora program, which assists migrants in Germany in returning to their home country. This programme also encourages businesspeople with migration histories to invest in their home countries. Entrepreneurs create jobs and contribute to the economic and social development of their communities by using the knowledge and creative business concepts acquired abroad. Therefore, maintaining and improving Georgian-German economic and political relations can have positive impacts for both countries. However, Georgia should

take measures to make the return of labour and education migrants as attractive as possible so that they can bring back the expertise they have acquired abroad.

Finally, the survey also highlights that participants believe they possess competencies that are not valued in international companies. This is also confirmed by Liu-Farrer and Shire for Germany, since they describe from the employers' perspective that "foreign" cultural capital appears to be perceived more as a disruptive factor. This reveals that both employers and globally mobile professionals must develop an awareness of specific cultural capital. Only by doing so can diversity be actively harnessed for the benefit of the organisation, and individuals can be valued.

## **Conclusion**

The starting point of this work was the significantly differing labour market conditions for young people with academic degrees in Germany and Georgia and approaches to concepts of employability. While students from economics and business-related fields in Germany represent a coveted and scarce resource in an employee market, this group experiences extreme obstacles in an employer market in Georgia in regard to finding a position corresponding to their qualifications. As a result, Georgian university graduates exhibit a high willingness to seek employment in the European or international job market.

Therefore, the question arises of how well Georgian universities prepare their students for the international job market and/or how a so-called "skills fit" is represented beyond formal degrees. How do the skills of Georgian graduates match the skills expectations of international employers? This question was discussed in this paper with reference to the employability concept and the consideration of social and cultural capital in employer competency expectations, using the German job market as an example. The results from empirical research conducted by the authors with students and graduates from Georgia were included.

In the literature review, the authors primarily focused on critical perspectives on employability approaches that construct employability skills as a global norm. Their detachment from the social and cultural specifics of living and working environments is seen as a disadvantage for graduates from the Global South. Furthermore, it became apparent that companies also implement ethnocentric recruitment measures. Liu-Farrer and Shire reveal that recruitment and training practices in Germany display homophilous tendencies, expecting foreign graduates to possess the same skill sets or act exactly as native workers do. [52]

To understand the perspective of employees, an empirical study was conducted with Georgian graduates. In both the qualitative and quantitative parts, it became clear that differences were perceived between the local and international labour markets, especially in the area of soft skills. While graduates felt sufficiently equipped for the national labour market, they see deficits with regard to competence expectations of employers in other countries or transnational companies. Additionally, some skills were identified as culturally specific competitive advantages but were not recognised as such by international companies.

Employability concepts in the context of global skilled migration cannot ignore culture. They must first acknowledge that education, whether at the primary, tertiary, or vocational levels, does not occur in a culture-neutral space but is always embedded in societal value systems. Even in an increasingly internationalised work environment, country-specific peculiarities persist and must be incorporated into concepts of employability. Only then can cultural capital be recognised and valued as a resource of mobile professionals. Finally, the authors strongly believe that young people in particular, who experienced social and economic transitions and uncertainties in their lives, definitely gained pronounced components of future skills and are equipped for highly emergent contexts of action.

Regarding the challenges described for young graduates in Georgia, the following educational and labour policy recommendations can be made.:

- Reinforcing circular migration for young graduates from Georgia to avoid brain drain but to grant a return on investment for the Georgian government
- Equipping students with qualifications and competences needed in the international labour market
- Strengthening international labour mobility of young Georgians with economic funding

Since the authors agree with McGrath's idea of interactive employability, they also believe companies that hire international professionals have an obligation to adjust their skills expectations. They recommend an increased awareness of cultural capital that can function as a resource for their company culture.

Finally, we will briefly discuss the limitations of this work. Empirical qualitative and quantitative research was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic. These particular conditions of uncertainty and changing global conditions certainly had an impact on the participants' responses. The qualitative group discussions could only take place via videoconference and not in person. For the survey, e-mails were sent to students who were mostly with their families at the time of the survey. Here, repeating the survey under nonexception conditions would certainly be useful. In addition, supplementary studies at the direct interface between employers in Germany and applicants from Georgia would provide further insights.

### **Competing interests**

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

### **Authors' contribution**

M.S. and S.D. conceived of the presented idea. M.S. and S.D. performed the analytic calculations. M.S. took the lead in writing the manuscript. All authors provided critical feedback and helped shape the research, analysis and manuscript.

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