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Student-Centered Learning in a Post-Soviet Context: Insights from Georgian Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explores the approach to Student-Centered Learning (SCL) within higher education institutions in the Republic of Georgia, employing heuristic inquiry as the research methodology. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with academic staff from various universities. The study reveals that while the principles of SCL—such as personalization, active learning, practical relevance, and the lecturer's role as a facilitator—are well understood, their implementation remains inconsistent across institutions. Private universities tend to be more advanced in adopting SCL due to flexible structures and better resources, whereas public universities face practical difficulties. Advantages of SCL include enhanced personal development, increased motivation, and improved transferable skills. However, challenges persist, such as weak collaboration with the labor market, infrastructural deficits, traditional academic culture, and unequal student preparation levels. The research underscores the importance of institutional support, technological integration, and modern student services in ensuring the success of SCL.

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სტუდენტზე ორიენტირებული სწავლება პოსტსაბჭოთა სივრცეში საქართველოს უმაღლესი განათლების მაგალითზე

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სტატიის შესახებ

საკვანძო სიტყვები:

სტუდენტზე ორიენტირებული სწავლება (SCL) უმაღლესი განათლება ევრისტიკული კვლევა ბოლონიის პროცესი საქართველო

აბსტრაქტი

წინამდებარე თვისებრივი კვლევა იკვლევს სტუდენტზე ორიენტირებული სწავლების (SCL) მიდგომას საქართველოს უმაღლეს საგანმანათლებლო დაწესებულებებში და იყენებს ევრისტიკულ კვლევას, როგორც მეთოდოლოგიას. მონაცემები შეგროვდა სიღრმისეული ინტერვიუების მეშვეობით სხვადასხვა უნივერსიტეტის აკადემიური პერსონალისგან. კვლევა აჩვენებს, რომ SCL-ის ძირითადი პრინციპები — როგორიცაა პერსონალიზაცია, აქტიური სწავლება, პრაქტიკული აქტუალობა და ლექტორის, როგორც ფასილიტატორის როლი — კარგად არის გაგებული, თუმცა მათი განხორციელება დაწესებულებებს შორის არათანმიმდევრულია. კერძო უნივერსიტეტები SCL-ს უფრო წარმატებულად ახორციელებენ მოქნილი სტრუქტურებისა და უკეთესი რესურსების წყალობით, ხოლო საჯარო უნივერსიტეტები ჯერ კიდევ პრაქტიკული სირთულეების წინაშე დგანან. SCL-ის უპირატესობები მოიცავს პიროვნული განვითარების გაძლიერებას, მოტივაციის ზრდასა და ტრანსფერული უნარების გაუმჯობესებას. თუმცა, გამოწვევები კვლავ არსებობს, მათ შორის შრომის ბაზართან სუსტი თანამშრომლობა, ინფრასტრუქტურული ხარვეზები, ტრადიციული აკადემიური კულტურა და სტუდენტთა არასათანადო მომზადების დონე. კვლევა ხაზს უსვამს ინსტიტუციური მხარდაჭერის, ტექნოლოგიური ინტეგრაციისა და თანამედროვე სტუდენტური სერვისების მნიშვნელობას SCL-ის წარმატების უზრუნველსაყოფად.

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1. Introduction

Georgia, together with other Eastern Partnership countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Moldova, and Ukraine), joined the Bologna Process at the Bergen Summit in 2005. This step represented a strategic commitment to align the national higher education system with European standards, thereby enhancing degree comparability, student mobility, and international recognition (Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia (MES), 2012).

The Bologna reforms have fundamentally transformed Georgia's higher education landscape over the past two decades (Lejava, Amashukeli, & Chitashvili, 2022). While early efforts focused primarily on structural changes—such as the introduction of the three-cycle degree system (bachelor's, master's, doctorate), the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), and quality assurance mechanisms—the process gradually shifted emphasis toward the core of education: teaching and learning practices (Bologna Process Implementation Report, 2018). This evolution reflects a broader European priority, where SCL emerged as a key pillar (Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Communiqué, 2009; Bologna Process Implementation Report, 2018).

Higher education institutions are expected to design programmes that equip students with essential academic and practical skills, preparing them to become active citizens and competitive professionals (Fülöp, et al., 2022; Fernández, Ryan, & Begeny, 2023; Wood & Olivier, 2004). Within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), learning-outcomes-oriented approaches, particularly SCL, constitute one of the main policy directions (Bergen Communiqué, 2005; Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Communiqué, 2009). Consequently, assessing the extent of SCL adoption in Georgia is both timely and significant. Such an examination allows evaluation of how well international frameworks have been integrated into the Georgian higher education system and identification of areas requiring further improvement.

Although specific SCL techniques (e.g., goal-setting, project-based learning, adaptive math software) have received scholarly attention, comprehensive research on SCL implementation remains limited (Kaput, 2018). In Georgia, scholars have highlighted a persistent lack of institutional encouragement for SCL (Khabeishvili, 2023) and an absence of a consistent, shared understanding of the concept among academic staff (Gibbs, et al., 2022). These gaps underscore the necessity of investigating how SCL is perceived and enacted in practice.

This qualitative study explores how academic staff in Georgian higher education perceive, experience, and navigate SCL. Rather than focusing solely on formal declarations, the research examines lecturers' actual engagement with SCL in their daily work—what it means to them, what supports or hinders its implementation, and how they interpret it within their professional and institutional contexts. Academic staff are the key actors translating SCL policy into classroom reality; therefore, their perceptions and experiences are crucial for meaningful reform.

While similar research has been conducted in Georgia, such as Khabeishvili and Tvalchrelidze (2021), which quantitatively surveyed lecturers from three Georgian universities and found that less than two-fifths fully integrate SCL methods, with significant gaps between conceptual understanding and practical

application, and identifying barriers such as limited resources, insufficient staff training, and institutional challenges (Khabeishvili & Tvaltchrelidze, 2021; Tvaltchrelidze & Aleksidze, 2019), this study addresses a key gap. By employing a heuristic (interpretive/qualitative) research approach, the present study goes beyond surface-level statistical findings and delves deeper into the nuanced, subjective, and contextually embedded experiences of academic staff. Heuristic research, with its emphasis on in-depth exploration of personal meanings, tacit knowledge, and experiential understanding (Moustakas, 1990; Douglass & Moustakas, 1984), allows for a richer and more holistic insight into how lecturers make sense of SCL in their everyday practice, how they navigate institutional constraints, and how they reconcile policy expectations with their professional realities. This methodological specificity provides several key benefits, such as uncovering hidden patterns, emotional dimensions, and contextual nuances that quantitative methods often miss, and enabling a more authentic representation of the subjective realities (Douglass & Moustakas, 1984) of academic staff.

Given the complex and context-dependent nature of SCL, a qualitative and exploratory research approach is particularly appropriate for examining how this concept is understood and enacted in practice. SCL does not represent a single, universally defined model but rather a flexible pedagogical orientation shaped by institutional cultures, disciplinary traditions, and individual teaching philosophies (Attard, Ioio, Geven, & Santa, 2010; Kaput, 2018; Schweisfurth & Elliott, 2019). Therefore, its implementation cannot be fully captured through predefined indicators or standardized measurement tools.

In transitional higher education contexts such as Georgia, understanding SCL requires close attention to academic staff's subjective experiences, interpretations, and everyday practices. Academic staff are not merely implementers of policy but active agents who negotiate, reinterpret, and adapt educational reforms within their professional environments.

The study is guided by the following open and flexible research question, which fully aligns with the heuristic phenomenological approach by allowing participants' voices, meanings, and experiences to organically shape the findings (Moustakas, 1990):

- How do Georgian academic staff perceive, experience, and navigate SCL in the context of policy enactment, institutional conditions, and everyday teaching practices?

2. Literature review

2.1. Conceptualisation and Principles of SCL

SCL is a pedagogical approach and institutional culture that positions students as active participants rather than passive recipients of knowledge. It fosters meaningful teacher–student interaction, empowers learners through autonomy and responsibility, and cultivates transferable skills such as problem-solving, critical thinking, and reflection (Todorovski, Nordal, & Isoski, 2015; Gegelashvili & Charaia, 2024; McCabe & O'Connor, 2014).

Rooted in constructivist principles, SCL integrates social, emotional, motivational, and cognitive dimensions while adapting instruction to students' prior knowledge, experiences, and individual needs

throughout the learning process (Tangney, 2014; Maclellan, 2008; Wulf, 2017; Schweisfurth & Elliott, 2019; Bada & Olusegun, 2015). The approach emphasises active student engagement and individualisation, shifting from standardised models to personalised instruction that incorporates students' own goals and interests (Attard, Ioio, Geven, & Santa, 2010; Kaput, 2018; Lea, Stephenson, & Troy, 2003).

Empirical evidence demonstrates that SCL strategies enhance student achievement by increasing engagement, motivation, self-efficacy, and collaborative skills (Lea, Stephenson, & Troy, 2003; Gelişli, 2009; Kassem, 2019; Gordon, Bolwell, Raney, & Zepke, 2022; Sikharulidze, Kikutadze, Lekishvili, & Tkhelidze, 2024). From the student perspective, engagement in learning is influenced by their expectations of higher education. In post-Soviet Georgia, students often view university primarily as a pathway to employment ("learning for earning"), with 92% initially expecting it to lead to a job, though this drops dramatically to around 27% after enrollment due to unmet expectations around practical skills and market relevance (Gorgodze, Macharashvili, & Kamladze, 2020). This consumer-oriented mindset shapes their perceptions of teaching quality, relevance, and value for money, prioritising practical skills (e.g., internships and professional simulations) over research skills, which only 11% see as primary (Gorgodze, Macharashvili, & Kamladze, 2020). This consumer-oriented mindset highlights the need to consider student voices in SCL implementation to bridge gaps between expectations and actual pedagogical practices.

2.2. SCL within Quality Assurance Frameworks

SCL is embedded in European quality assurance standards, particularly in the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) (ESG, 2015). SCL is positioned as a key indicator for internal quality assurance, requiring institutions to ensure active student roles in learning processes and assessment (Gover, Loukkola, & Peterbauer, 2019; EUA, 2018). In practice, incorporating SCL methods enhances overall quality in higher education institutions by shifting from teacher-centered to more flexible, student-responsive approaches (Khabeishvili & Tvaltchrelidze, 2021). As evidenced by empirical studies in the Georgian context, the uptake of SCL among academic staff remains limited, with persistent gaps between theoretical awareness and actual classroom implementation (Khabeishvili & Tvaltchrelidze, 2021). Yet SCL integration is seen as essential for quality improvement, meeting 21st-century skills demands, and ensuring alignment with EHEA priorities (Khabeishvili & Tvaltchrelidze, 2021). To address these, modifications at the institutional level are recommended, such as enhanced training and resource allocation to promote SCL and boost educational quality for all students (Harris, Spina, Ehrich, & Smeed, 2013; Vavrus, Thomas, & Bartlett, 2011; Khabeishvili & Tvaltchrelidze, 2021)

2.3. Implementation in the Context of Eastern Partnership Countries and Georgia

Eastern Partnership countries inherited deeply rooted Soviet academic traditions that have made rapid higher education reform challenging (Oleksiyenko, 2023; Sikorska, 2023). Additional barriers include limited funding, resistance to change, linguistic shifts from Russian to other languages in academia, and political instability (Sikorska, 2023). In Georgia, two coexisting academic generations—the older Soviet-

educated and the younger internationally trained—initially created tensions; however, their collaboration is gradually reshaping academic culture (Jibladze & Glonti, 2020; Oleksiyenko, 2023).

Georgia's accession to the Bologna Process served as the pivotal catalyst for systemic changes (Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia (MES), 2012; Sikorska, 2023; EACEA, 2016; Darchashvili, 2021). These changes have profoundly affected not only the structural and institutional organization of higher education institutions but also their operational objectives and strategic development plans (Lejava, Amashukeli, & Chitashvili, 2022), enabling Georgia to align its higher education sector more closely with European standards and to enhance overall quality over the past twenty years (Jibladze & Glonti, 2020).

However, the commercialization of knowledge and market logics increasingly influence higher education, particularly in social sciences. In Georgia, factors such as limited funding and institutional pressures drive attempts to commercialize academic knowledge, often with mixed success due to macro (policy) and micro (institutional culture) barriers (Tabatadze & Dundua, 2022). This commercialization trend can reshape SCL pedagogies by prioritizing employability and "value for money" over deeper constructivist principles, potentially turning students into consumers rather than active co-creators of knowledge. In line with this, Georgian students perceive university functions as primarily knowledge transfer (44%) or new knowledge creation (39%), but with a strong emphasis on practical, employment-oriented skills to meet market demands (Gorgodze, Macharashvili, & Kamladze, 2020).

3. Methodology

3.1. Heuristic Inquiry

The study is a Heuristic Inquiry, a method selected for its focus on personal experiences and insights (Patton, 2002). This approach enables an in-depth exploration of meaning, capturing the subjective and lived experiences of participants, and is particularly well-suited for examining complex, personal perceptions (Moustakas, 1990), such as how academic staff engage with SCL in Georgian higher education.

Heuristic methodology, developed by Clark Moustakas (Moustakas, 1961) derives from the Greek *heuriskein*, meaning "to discover" or "to find" (Moustakas, 1990). This approach seeks to understand the essence of a phenomenon through self-reflection, exploration, and clarification, prioritizing human experiences over quantitative data and fostering a subjective, creative engagement between the researcher and the phenomenon (Douglass & Moustakas, 1984; Sela-Smith, 2002). By adopting a compassionate approach and engaging in open dialogue with self and co-researchers, the researcher employs systematic self-reflection, observation, and in-depth interviews to ensure that the heuristic inquiry remains both scientifically rigorous and emotionally connected (Anderson, 2000; Lewis-Beck, Bryman, & Liao, 2003).

Heuristic research differs from other methodologies by positioning the researcher as an active participant, enabling them to fully experience the intensity of the phenomeno (Moustakas, 1990; Douglass & Moustakas, 1984). Heuristic inquiry within the broader phenomenological framework emphasizes that the researcher must have personal experience with and a deep interest in the phenomenon under investigation, while co-researchers who share an intense experience of the phenomenon actively

participate in the inquiry (Douglass & Moustakas, 1984). Heuristic inquiry remains a vibrant and evolving qualitative research methodology, actively utilized by scholars across various disciplines (Ings & Tudor, 2024; Mihalache, 2019; Butcher, 2024; Kawka, 2024).

3.2. Six Phases of Heuristic Research

The heuristic inquiry process follows systematic steps that reveal the experiential essence of a phenomenon, including *initial engagement, immersion, incubation, illumination, explication, and creative synthesis* (Moustakas, 1990).

Initial engagement is the beginning phase of heuristics. It involves identifying a topic of personal and social significance (Moustakas, 1990; Djuraskovic & Arthur, 2010). In *Immersion*, the researcher lives with the question, engaging in reflective self-dialogue and intuitive exploration (Moustakas, 1990). *Incubation* allows a temporary detachment, enabling tacit knowledge and intuition to clarify understanding (Moustakas, 1990). Polanyi (1964) argued that discovery does not occur through deliberate searching, but rather emerges when one steps back from intense effort and enters the incubation phase (Polanyi, 1964). During *Illumination*, insights and new awareness emerge, revealing the essence of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1990). *Explication* entails focused analysis, self-exploration, and the identification of themes, patterns, and alternative interpretations (Djuraskovic & Arthur, 2010; Moustakas, 1990). Finally, *Creative Synthesis* integrates the findings into a holistic representation of human experience, often conveyed through narrative, art, or other expressive forms rather than mere summarization (Djuraskovic & Arthur, 2010; Moustakas, 1990). In this study, the *creative synthesis* reflects the conceptualization of the journeys of academic staff in engaging with SCL. Co-researchers contributed indirectly by providing ongoing feedback on whether the narrative accurately represented their experiences. While heuristic research centers on the researcher, the perspectives and stories shared by co-researchers were carefully incorporated into the creative synthesis, ensuring that their experiences informed the final representation.

3.3. Limitations of Heuristic Methodology

While heuristic methodology offers numerous strengths, it also presents certain limitations. One notable aspect is that its procedures typically involve minimal control or formal constraints. As Frick (1990) noted, although the creative freedom inherent in heuristic research can be advantageous, it may also result in researcher irresponsibility or insufficiently developed findings (Frick, 1990). Heuristic methodology necessitates that the researcher possess a thorough understanding of its philosophical foundations, which can pose a challenge for those with limited experience (Creswell, 1998). A second potential limitation of heuristic methodology is its emphasis on the researcher's subjective experience, which may introduce bias. The interpretation of the phenomenon and the selection of co-researchers rely on the researcher's perspective, potentially favoring individuals whose experiences align with the researcher's own (Djuraskovic & Arthur, 2010). Third, heuristic methodology, as a qualitative approach, does not rely on quantitative measures of validity, which cannot be determined through statistics or correlations (Moustakas, 1990). Instead, validity is assessed through the meaning derived from the data, with the researcher serving as the primary judge, revisiting the collected material multiple times to ensure accurate

representation of co-researchers' experiences (Djuraskovic & Arthur, 2010). While heuristic methodology is subjective, it is also structured, and the challenges can be managed by those prepared to engage fully with the depth of work required (Moustakas, 1990; Djuraskovic & Arthur, 2010).

3.4. Sample

Participants for the study were selected using a non-probability sampling technique, specifically the snowball sampling method. This approach, a type of convenience sampling, is effective for hard-to-reach populations, as initial participants recruit others who meet the study criteria until data saturation is reached (Burns & Grove, 1993). This method is time-efficient and fosters trust, as new participants are usually connected to the researcher through mutual contacts (Polit & Beck, 2017), and is particularly useful for accessing individuals who prefer anonymity or are hesitant to disclose information (Hejazi, 2006). Widely used in social science research, especially in education, it allows researchers to study hidden or socially sensitive groups, such as students, teachers, and parents, with flexibility and effectiveness (Pasikowski, 2023).

For this study, snowball sampling was chosen for its effectiveness in reaching populations difficult to access through conventional methods. This approach facilitated the recruitment of well-connected academic staff, ensuring diverse perspectives and experiences. Overall, it enhanced recruitment efficiency while maintaining adequate representation of key stakeholders.

3.5. Data collection

For the present study, data were gathered through twelve in-depth, face-to-face interviews, specifically in the form of *informal conversational interviews*. This approach created space for a natural flow of information and enabled the co-researchers to share their experiences openly within an authentic dialogue (Djuraskovic & Arthur, 2010). This method of data collection is consistent with the rhythm and flow of heuristic inquiry and its pursuit of meaning (Moustakas, 1990).

Given the interpretive and heuristic nature of this inquiry, data saturation was not predetermined by a fixed numerical threshold but rather assessed iteratively through ongoing analysis during data collection. Saturation was operationalized as the point at which (a) no substantially new themes, codes, or interpretations emerged from additional interviews, (b) existing categories were sufficiently dense and supported, and (c) further data yielded only confirmatory or minor variations rather than novel insights (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006; Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2019). For instance, the analysis involved repeated reading of transcripts, constant comparison across interviews, identification of emerging themes, and refinement of the coding framework after every 3–4 interviews. Alternative interpretations of the data were actively considered through member checking (where feasible), peer debriefing, and reflexive journaling to ensure the findings reflected participants' meanings rather than researcher bias. This process aligns with empirical evidence from Guest et al. (2006), who demonstrated — in a purposive sample study involving in-depth interviews — that data saturation is typically achieved within the first 12 interviews, with core themes and metathemes stabilizing even earlier (around 6–9) (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006).

In the present study, saturation was reached at 12 interviews, despite deliberate heterogeneity in the sample (varying years of teaching experience, representation from both public and private universities, and inclusion of staff with dual roles in program authorization/accreditation at the National Center for Educational Quality Enhancement). This professional diversity deliberately enriched the data by capturing a broader spectrum of perspectives on SCL within the Georgian higher education context, while the shared professional domain (academic staff involved in teaching and quality assurance) provided sufficient commonality to allow thematic convergence at a comparable sample size. The attainment of theoretical saturation was confirmed by the absence of new substantive insights in the final interviews, the redundancy of emerging patterns, and the ability to fully develop and support the key interpretations without requiring further data collection.

4. Results

4.1. Definition of SCL

Drawing from the heuristic phenomenological analysis of the 12 interviews, Georgian academic staff described SCL as an active, relational, and transformative approach that shifts responsibility toward students while positioning the lecturer as a guide. This perception aligns with constructivist views of learning, where students co-construct knowledge through personalized engagement and practical application (Wulf, 2017; Schweisfurth & Elliott, 2019). Six core principles emerged as shared essences (see Figure 1), illustrated below through convergent and overlapping excerpts from participants with diverse backgrounds (e.g., varying experience, public/private institutions). These recurrent passages demonstrate thematic density and the lived navigation of SCL.

1. Personalized and individualized approach: The majority of respondents stressed that true SCL must be tailored to the unique abilities, interests, learning styles, and needs of each individual student. Achieving this level of personalization requires lecturers to invest significant time and effort in getting to know their students well — not in a formal, superficial way, but through genuine, ongoing interaction. Lecturers described the need to actively observe participation in class, assess strengths and weaknesses, collect information about individual learning preferences, and maintain regular dialogue with students. This dialogue helps them understand students' values, motivations, and preferred ways of learning, which in turn allows the entire learning process to be adapted effectively. A particularly recurring theme was the importance of taking into account students' prior knowledge and life experiences when designing a course. By determining what students already know and what they bring to the classroom, lecturers can avoid unnecessary repetition, prevent confusion with overly complex material presented too early, and build new knowledge on existing foundations. As one experienced lecturer explained: "Getting to know students should not be formal. You should get to know the students and make adjustments to the curriculum accordingly" (Interview 2). Another participant echoed this view, noting that "There should be consideration of students' individual needs and interests" (Interview 5). These similar ideas appeared repeatedly across interviews, highlighting how central personalization is to the lived experience of implementing SCL in Georgian universities.
2. Active learning and student engagement: A central and strongly emphasized feature of SCL according to the interviewees is the active role students play throughout the entire learning

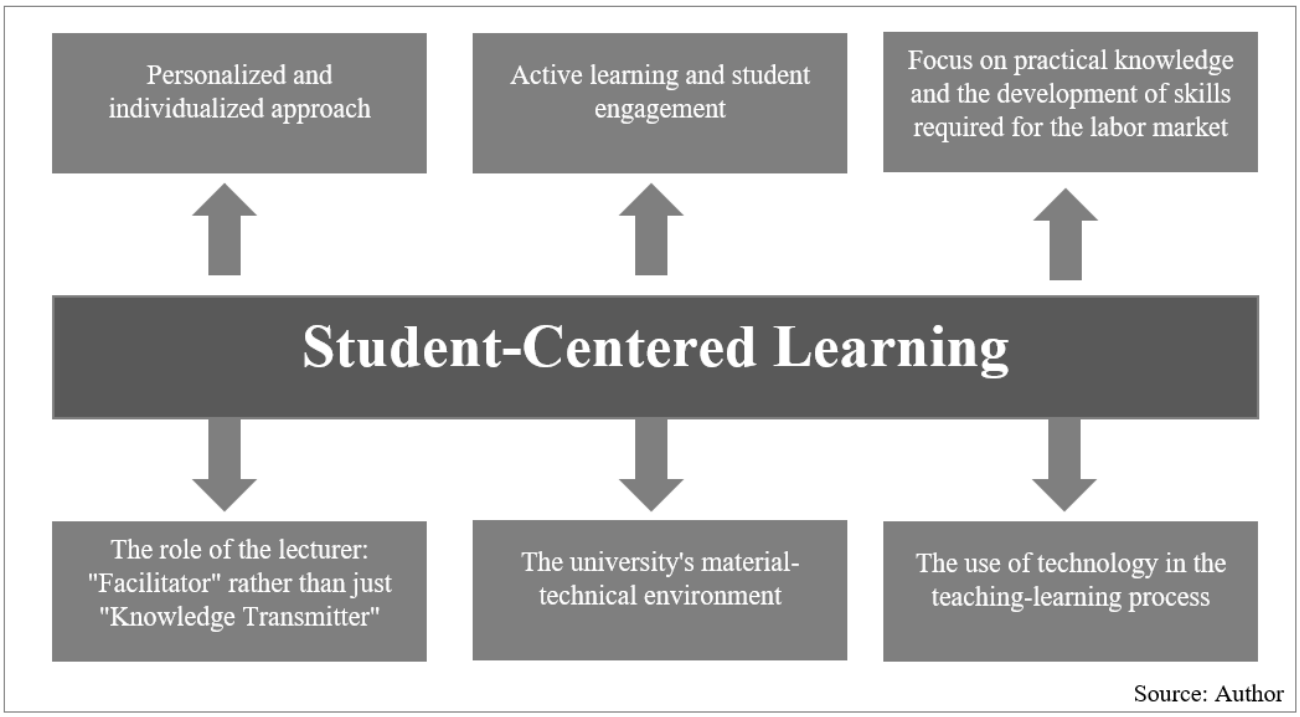
process. Rather than simply listening to lectures, students are expected to engage deeply at every stage. In SCL, engagement is achieved through learner autonomy, collaborative activities, and methods that encourage students to take ownership of their learning. One participant captured this idea very clearly by saying: “Student-centered learning is when we build knowledge together” (Interview 11). Another reinforced the same point: “Every student should be actively involved in the teaching-learning process” (Interview 8). This recurring emphasis on active participation reflects how lecturers perceive SCL as a fundamental change in the dynamics of the classroom — from one-way transmission to shared construction of understanding.

3. Focus on practical knowledge and the development of skills required for the labor market: Participants highlighted that SCL goes well beyond transmitting theoretical content — its strength lies in connecting theory to real-life application and developing skills that are directly relevant to the labor market. Lecturers noted that while theoretical understanding remains valuable, traditional teaching often prioritizes abstract concepts over practical use. In contrast, student-centred methods encourage critical thinking, problem-solving, analytical abilities, and active engagement with real-world challenges. This prepares students not only for professional settings but also for everyday decision-making. Several respondents stressed the importance of explaining the purpose behind tasks and linking course content to current market demands. One lecturer put it this way: “You should explain to the student why they are doing what they are doing, why they are studying. Also, you should introduce them to the market demands. It's not only about subject knowledge, but also other skills that the market requires” (Interview 6). Another added: “The practical component is essential, where engagement is maximally ensured, and where students can see how what they are learning is applied in practice” (Interview 12). These overlapping statements show a shared perception that SCL must bridge the gap between university education and the professional world.
4. The role of the lecturer: "Facilitator" rather than just "Knowledge Transmitter": One of the most frequently mentioned shifts in SCL is the changed role of the lecturer. Instead of being the sole authority who delivers ready-made information, lecturers now see themselves as mentors, motivators, guides, coaches, and facilitators of the learning process. Their primary task is no longer to “tell” students what is correct, but to support students in discovering, questioning, and developing their own competencies and skills. This transformation helps prepare students for real-life challenges and personal growth. Some participants reflected on their own student experiences to contrast past and present: “When I was a student, we almost never had the opportunity to ask questions during the lecture” (Interview 4). Another described the new role vividly: “The lecturer is one of the participants in this discussion, so to speak, a facilitator, whose main purpose is not to tell the student that this is how it is, but to present a perspective and say, here’s my viewpoint, now let’s critique it, so that many ideas can emerge around it and your mind can be opened as much as possible” (Interview 9). These personal reflections illustrate how deeply lecturers experience this role change.
5. The university's material-technical environment: Almost all respondents agreed that the physical and technological infrastructure of the university plays a decisive role in whether SCL can be effectively implemented. Beyond pedagogical innovation, SCL requires comfortable, flexible, and well-equipped learning spaces. The arrangement of classrooms, movable furniture,

availability of resources, and overall design should support interactive teaching, group work, discussions, and critical thinking. Modern higher education also depends heavily on access to digital libraries, scientific databases, and up-to-date research materials.

The use of technology in the teaching-learning process: Closely related to infrastructure, technology itself was seen as an integral part of SCL. Tools such as Learning Management Systems (LMS), platforms like Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and Google Meet increase interactivity, student motivation, and real-time collaboration — regardless of location. One participant summed up this widespread view: “Technology and equipment play a very significant role. Otherwise, you won't be able to implement or use these innovative methods and approaches, which are more student-centered than traditional methods, because innovative methods require technology” (Interview 7).

Figure 1: Core Principles of Student-Centered Learning



4.2. Implementation of SCL in Georgia

The interviews revealed a marked divide in how SCL is implemented across Georgia's higher education landscape, with perceptions of effectiveness varying significantly between public and private institutions. Respondents assessed SCL implementation on a scale of 1 to 10, and public universities typically received lower scores of 4 to 5, reflecting deep-rooted systemic barriers such as larger class sizes, limited resources, bureaucratic structures, and a lingering legacy of traditional, lecturer-centred pedagogy inherited from the Soviet era. These constraints make it difficult for lecturers in public settings to fully personalize instruction, foster active engagement, or adopt innovative methods consistently.

In contrast, private universities were generally rated higher, around 6 to 8 out of 10. Participants attributed this stronger performance to greater institutional flexibility, better resource allocation, and a more market-responsive orientation. Smaller class sizes in private institutions allow lecturers to engage directly with each student, tailoring assignments, discussions, and feedback to individual interests, abilities, and needs — a key element of SCL that is often challenging in overcrowded public settings. Private universities are also more likely to invest in faculty professional development, including workshops on innovative pedagogies, active learning techniques, and technology integration, which equips lecturers to implement student-centred approaches more effectively. Furthermore, many private institutions maintain up-to-date facilities, such as interactive classrooms equipped with modern digital tools and platforms, creating environments that naturally support group work, discussions, and skill development. While some respondents acknowledged that student-centred practices in private universities can be influenced by commercial interests — where prioritizing student satisfaction and well-being serves as a competitive advantage in a crowded market — the high level of competition among private institutions overall drives the adoption of modern teaching methods and high-quality student services. Respondents also noted that smaller universities (often private) tend to offer more flexible and personalized teaching processes due to their scale.

This divide was a recurring theme in the interviews. One participant explained the difference bluntly: “In private universities, the score is high because they operate as profit-oriented businesses. They strive to be student-centered and to promote student well-being” (Interview 8). Similar views were echoed by others, who highlighted the competitive pressure in the private sector: “Student-centered practices are likely more prevalent in private universities than in public ones. In private institutions, there is a stronger push to cater to students’ interests and keep pace with today’s competitive environment” (Interview 1). These overlapping sentiments underscore how economic and structural factors shape the lived experience of SCL implementation.

Beyond the public-private divide, some respondents pointed to variations at the program level, where SCL is implemented more effectively in certain fields or departments while remaining limited or superficial elsewhere. One experienced participant described this unevenness vividly: “There are also differences at the program level. What we’re seeing are isolated, ‘island-like’ experiences. Across the whole country, I can name maybe twenty programs where I can confidently say that student-centered teaching is actually taking place — mostly in private universities” (Interview 3). This suggests that pockets of strong SCL practice exist, but they are not yet widespread or systemic.

Overall, SCL in Georgia remains in a developmental and formative stage. Despite national-level declarations of commitment to student-centred values — influenced by Georgia's integration into the Bologna Process since 2005, which emphasizes learner autonomy, quality assurance, and modern pedagogies — large-scale and consistent implementation is still limited. Private universities appear more agile and responsive to contemporary educational trends, but even here, some respondents noted that this responsiveness is often driven by commercial motives rather than purely pedagogical ideals, with student well-being sometimes viewed as a strategy for maintaining market competitiveness. In public institutions, progress is slower due to entrenched traditions, resource constraints, and the need for broader

systemic support. These perceptions reflect the ongoing tension between declared policies and practical realities in Georgia's higher education system.

The patterns identified here provide important context for understanding the challenges to SCL implementation, which are explored in detail in the final section, General Challenges to Implementation.

4.3. Integration of SCL into Daily Practice

The interviews highlighted that effective integration of SCL into everyday university life requires coordinated efforts across both administrative and academic directions. Participants emphasized that SCL is not limited to classroom teaching but must be embedded in the overall institutional culture, support systems, and daily operations (see Figure 2 for a visual summary of these directions). This dual approach reflects the experience of Georgian lecturers, who perceive SCL as a holistic shift that involves not only pedagogical innovation but also institutional commitment to student well-being, flexibility, and real-world relevance.

Administrative Direction

From the administrative perspective, respondents described several practical ways in which universities demonstrate a student-centred orientation in day-to-day operations. These include providing smart, personalized student services that respond to individual needs — for example, offering tailored information on any issue, flexible payment plans for semester fees, and timely communication with parents when necessary. One participant captured this early and ongoing focus: “From an administrative perspective, once the semester starts and before the student is enrolled, the focus on the student begins” (Interview 5). Another reinforced the same idea, noting: “We try to offer all services in such a way that they are supportive and as tailored to their needs as possible” (Interview 7).

Creating an inclusive environment was another recurring priority, particularly for students with disabilities and international students who may face additional challenges. Lecturers described active efforts to help international students integrate, acknowledging their stress from being far from home, the intensity of studies, and the need for extracurricular support. One respondent explained this responsibility personally: “One of the important factors of student-centered learning is also the integration of international students. They are often stressed because they are far from their home countries, are in an intense study environment, and require extracurricular activities. I help them integrate properly into the university environment and ensure that they feel as comfortable and well-supported as possible” (Interview 4).

Regular feedback mechanisms were also frequently mentioned, including confidential surveys, formal and informal meetings, interviews, and ongoing analysis of student needs. This two-way communication was seen as essential for continuous improvement. A participant described it in practical terms: “Communication with students, both formal and informal. This includes, for example, conducting surveys and meeting with students in an informal setting, involving both lecturers and faculty members, as well as higher-level staff” (Interview 2).

Other administrative elements that support SCL include flexibility in academic processes (such as discussing syllabus changes at program meetings and encouraging idea-sharing among staff), as well as efforts to provide diverse learning experiences through guest speakers, field lectures, and incorporating lecturers' own research into the curriculum. One lecturer illustrated this: "That means, out of the 15 weeks, one is dedicated to either a guest speaker or we take the students somewhere. We might take them to a company, or a representative from the company could come to us... The key is that students should have some exposure to professionals in the field so they can understand the practical aspects" (Interview 5).

Finally, building connections with employers through career days, employment forums, internships, and involving professionals in the educational process was viewed as a vital administrative contribution to SCL. As one respondent noted: "We hold career days, employment forums, to provide additional information about labor market demands and directly connect them with employers" (Interview 1).

Academic Direction

In the academic sphere, SCL integration manifests primarily through the adoption of modern, interactive teaching methods that prioritize student engagement, autonomy, and skill development. Respondents described a range of practices that they actively use in their daily teaching:

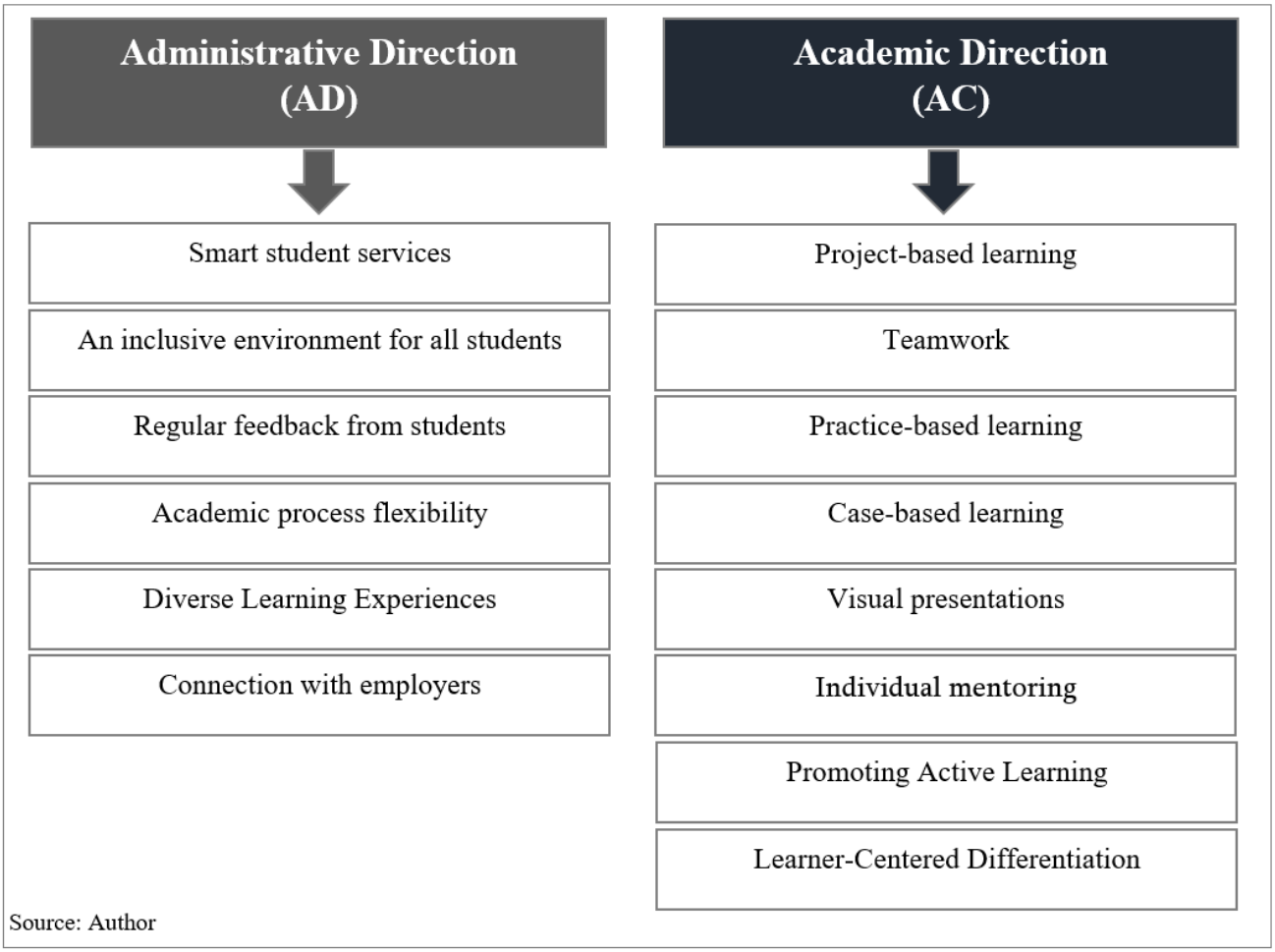
- Project-based learning — where the focus is on students creating tangible outputs rather than merely completing assignments. One lecturer expressed this strongly: "My main goal is for the student to create something. For me, it's unacceptable for a student to just write something or follow instructions throughout the semester and that's it. What's important to me is that the student works on a project or carries out some kind of activity" (Interview 2).
- Teamwork — used regularly to build collaboration and communication skills, with group presentations being a common feature. A participant shared: "I try to encourage them to motivate each other and achieve success together. It's rare to have a course without a group presentation" (Interview 9).
- Practice-based learning — incorporating hands-on assignments and interactive lectures to develop analytical and critical thinking. One respondent explained: "I teach a practical subject and conduct interactive lectures. I always try to incorporate practical elements. Student engagement is essential, and I prefer less traditional lectures. My approach emphasizes interactive learning and the involvement of every student" (Interview 12).
- Case-based learning and visual presentations — to help students apply theory to real-life situations and improve retention through multiple sensory channels. A lecturer noted: "They like it more and concentrate better when you're explaining and showing something visually at the same time. Their visual memory works better, and they tend to remember things more effectively" (Interview 7).
- Individual mentoring — through informal communication and additional meetings, especially for introductory courses: "I often hold additional online meetings, especially for introductory courses, to provide guidance and orientation" (Interview 3).
- Promoting active learning — by encouraging shy or less active students to participate: "When I see that a student is not being active or is shy during the lecture, I try to encourage them and

provide motivation... We need to try to open up such students as much as possible, so they feel comfortable and their motivation to attend lectures and learn increases" (Interview 12).

- Learner-centered differentiation — adapting methods, materials, and tasks to individual needs and offering choices in the process. One example given was: "During classroom activities, I provide information on the same topic in different forms. The assignments are also differentiated. I also give them choices, they have the right to choose. Should we discuss this today or not? Should we do it this way or that way?" (Interview 7).

These academic practices were consistently described as deliberate, daily choices that lecturers make to shift the classroom dynamic from teacher-centred to student-centred, fostering deeper engagement and personal growth.

Figure 2: Integrating Student-Centered Learning into Daily Practice



4.4. Advantages and Limitations

The interviews illuminated a largely positive perception of SCL among Georgian academic staff, with respondents consistently highlighting its transformative potential while acknowledging a few important challenges that require careful management during implementation. Overall, the majority of participants viewed SCL as having no major inherent drawbacks; instead, they described it as a

beneficial shift that enhances both student and lecturer experiences. The key advantages and limitations are presented below, with participant voices naturally integrated to illustrate the shared experiences.

The most frequently mentioned benefit was personal development — the idea that SCL creates a university environment where students grow not only professionally but also personally. By encouraging active participation and self-expression, the approach helps students develop the confidence to articulate their thoughts clearly, present themselves with dignity, and engage authentically in discussions. This personal growth, in turn, supports their long-term career development and self-assurance. Lecturers repeatedly described how SCL turns the university into a space for holistic maturation, beyond mere knowledge acquisition.

Closely related was the increase in motivation — for both students and lecturers. The interactive and enthusiastic nature of student-centred methods energizes the classroom, making learning more engaging for students and turning teaching into a dynamic, reciprocal process rather than a one-way monologue. Lecturers noted that involving students in decision-making and discussions significantly boosts their own professional satisfaction. This mutual motivation was a recurring theme, with participants emphasizing how SCL revitalizes the teaching-learning relationship.

Finally, the development of transferable skills emerged as a core strength. SCL was seen as particularly effective in fostering analytical, creative, critical thinking, and research abilities, as well as logical reasoning, argumentation, communication skills, teamwork and in-depth analysis. These skills were viewed as essential for students' future employability and adaptability in a rapidly changing world. Respondents often linked these outcomes directly to the active, practical, and collaborative nature of SCL methods.

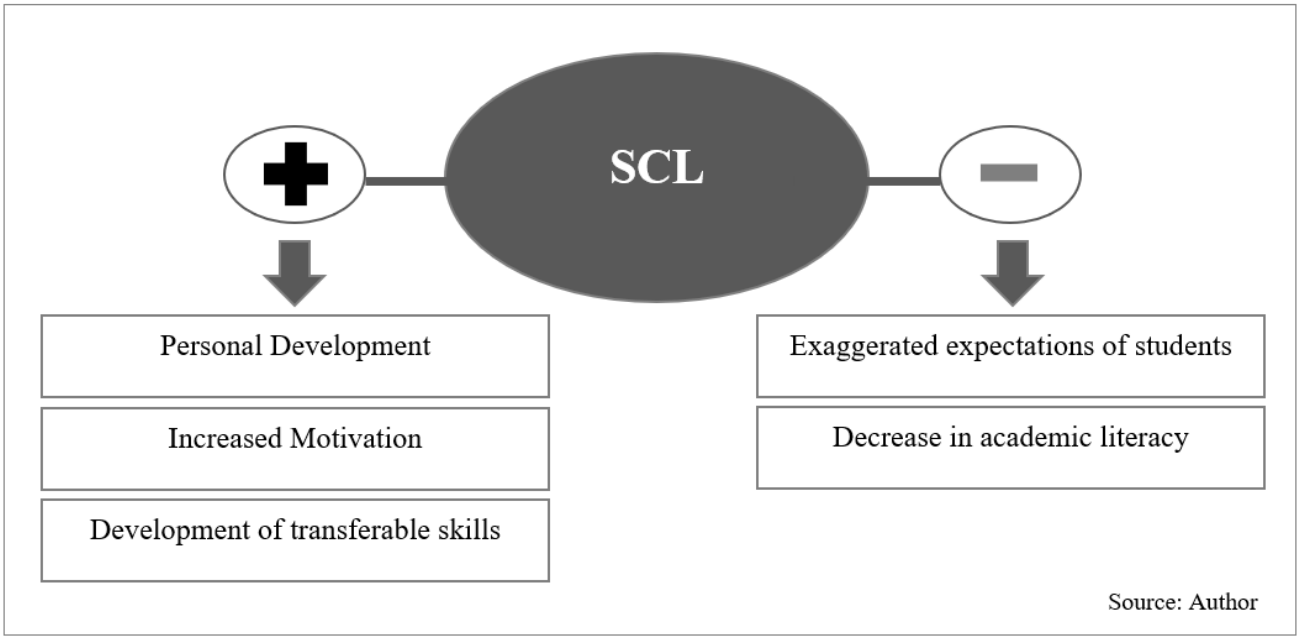
While SCL was overwhelmingly regarded as advantageous, participants identified two important aspects that must be carefully addressed to avoid unintended negative effects. These were not seen as fundamental flaws in the approach itself, but rather as risks arising from implementation challenges, particularly in a context where SCL is still relatively new in Georgia.

The first was exaggerated expectations on the part of students. Several lecturers expressed concern that some students misinterpret SCL as meaning unlimited flexibility or constant availability, without understanding the corresponding responsibilities. This misunderstanding can lead to unrealistic demands that disrupt university processes and place excessive pressure on staff. One respondent described this vividly: "Unfortunately, they often misunderstand this concept. The term spread among students, and for them, student-centered learning means that if they call me at 3 a.m., I am obligated to answer and provide consultation and assistance for as long as needed, 24/7" (Interview 12). This sentiment was echoed in other interviews, highlighting the need for clear communication about boundaries and mutual responsibilities from the outset.

The second limitation concerned a potential decrease in academic literacy or depth of engagement. Some lecturers observed that the emphasis on freedom of expression and active discussion can sometimes lead students to rely primarily on lecture content and personal opinions, without seeking out additional academic sources or deeper reading. In these cases, discussions may become superficial, based on simple reasoning rather than evidence-based arguments or professional knowledge. One participant explained this risk: "Often, when we tell students to express their opinions and engage in discussions, it ends up with them no longer reading the book, and when they talk about a topic, they speak in their own words,

which leads to the other extreme" (Interview 6). This observation appeared in several accounts, underscoring the delicate balance between encouraging participation and maintaining scholarly rigour.
In summary, Georgian academic staff perceived SCL as a highly valuable approach with significant advantages in personal growth, motivation, and skill development. The few limitations identified were practical rather than conceptual — stemming from misinterpretations of the concept and the need for greater student responsibility — and were seen as manageable through better guidance, clear expectations, and ongoing dialogue. These balanced views reflect the participants' nuanced navigation of SCL in the Georgian higher education context.

Figure 3: Advantages and Limitations of Student-Centered Learning (SCL)



4.5. General Challenges to Implementation

While the section - Implementation of SCL in Georgia described how SCL is implemented in different institutional contexts, this section moves beyond descriptive comparison and focuses specifically on the underlying structural, cultural, and systemic barriers that hinder its consistent and large-scale adoption across Georgian higher education.

The interviews consistently showed that while SCL is more advanced and visible in private universities, the majority of respondents believe the approach remains underdeveloped across the country as a whole. Despite commitments to modern pedagogy (influenced by Georgia's participation in the Bologna Process), large-scale, consistent implementation faces multiple interconnected barriers. Participants described these challenges as structural, cultural, and resource-related, reflecting the complex transition from traditional systems to more learner-focused practices in Georgian higher education.

Weak Collaboration Between the Business Sector and Universities: This emerged as the most frequently mentioned and most significant obstacle. Respondents repeatedly emphasized that despite some formal partnerships, genuine, practical cooperation between universities and employers is still limited. This gap prevents SCL from achieving its full potential, particularly in terms of connecting academic content to real-world applications and labor market needs. One lecturer expressed this frustration clearly: “As long as there is such a large gap between the business and academic sectors, student-centered learning remains somewhat superficial” (Interview 12). Similar views were echoed throughout the interviews, underscoring that without stronger, ongoing links to industry — such as joint projects, internships, and curriculum co-design — SCL often stays theoretical rather than truly transformative.

Academic Culture and Traditional Approaches: Several participants pointed to the persistence of traditional, lecturer-centred teaching methods, especially in public universities, as a major cultural barrier. Entrenched practices, hierarchical classroom dynamics, and a long-standing academic culture rooted in knowledge transmission continue to resist change. Even in institutions that officially promote SCL, these deep-seated habits create a disconnect between declared goals and everyday reality. Respondents described this as a slow process of cultural shift, where innovative, interactive methods struggle to gain widespread acceptance.

Lack of Infrastructure and Resources, Especially in Public Universities: A recurring concern was the inadequate material-technical environment, particularly in public institutions. Many classrooms lack modern technological equipment, flexible furniture, high-speed internet, and other resources needed for interactive, group-based, and digital-enhanced teaching. Participants noted that outdated infrastructure hinders the adoption of active learning methods and limits the quality of student engagement. This resource gap was frequently contrasted with the better-equipped facilities in private universities, reinforcing the perceived divide.

Student Passivity and Lack of Motivation: Respondents observed that not all students are prepared or willing to embrace active, self-directed learning. Some prefer a more passive, low-effort approach, viewing university primarily as a path to obtaining a diploma rather than an opportunity for deep personal and intellectual growth. This passivity makes it difficult for lecturers to fully implement SCL methods that rely on student initiative, participation, and responsibility.

Differences in Students' Preparation Levels: A strongly shared view was that many students arrive at university with insufficient foundational knowledge and skills from secondary education. This mismatch between school-level preparation and university expectations was described as a fundamental obstacle. One participant summarized the consensus: “Until prepared students come from school, we will not have the opportunity to fully implement student-centered learning.” This challenge was mentioned repeatedly, highlighting how systemic issues in the broader education pipeline limit the feasibility of SCL at the higher education level.

Lecturer Overload and Lack of Retraining: Finally, academic staff overload was identified as a critical practical barrier. Many lecturers work at multiple universities simultaneously to supplement income, leaving little time for professional development, reflection, or the extra effort required to redesign courses in a student-centred way. Respondents also noted that universities rarely provide sufficient training, workshops, or institutional support for lecturers to acquire new pedagogical skills. This lack of retraining and time resources was seen as preventing the widespread adoption of SCL practices.

In summary, these challenges — from weak industry links and cultural resistance to resource shortages, student readiness, and lecturer workload — were described as interconnected and systemic rather than isolated issues. They reflect the broader transitional context of Georgian higher education, where SCL is progressing unevenly but is hindered by structural and historical factors. Participants viewed these obstacles as addressable through targeted policy support, investment in infrastructure, stronger partnerships, improved secondary education alignment, and dedicated faculty development programs.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The current study provides an in-depth exploration of how Georgian academic staff perceive, experience, and navigate SCL within the country's higher education system. Employing a heuristic phenomenological approach (Douglass & Moustakas, 1984; Moustakas, 1990), the research allowed participants' voices, meanings, and experiences to shape the findings organically, resulting in a rich, textured understanding of SCL in a post-Soviet transitional context.

While the heuristic inquiry approach is original in this specific Georgian higher education setting, the empirical insights largely confirm patterns already identified in previous research (see above). The originality of the study therefore benefits more from a clearer theorisation of why these barriers continue to persist, rather than from their mere existence. In the Georgian context, these enduring challenges can be understood as deeply rooted in a combination of historical legacies (the Soviet-era emphasis on hierarchical, lecturer-centred pedagogy), ongoing economic pressures (lecturer overload due to multiple employment, resource scarcity in public institutions), and incomplete institutionalisation of Bologna Process reforms (declarative commitment to student-centred values without sufficient structural support or cultural transformation). This deeper explanation highlights the structural inertia and path-dependency that continue to slow the transition to SCL, even as individual lecturers express strong personal commitment to its principles.

Georgian lecturers described SCL as a relational, active, and practical approach centred on personalized engagement, collaborative knowledge construction, and preparation for real-world challenges. Core principles — such as individualized teaching, active student involvement, facilitation rather than transmission, and the enabling role of infrastructure and technology — were consistently articulated, reflecting a growing alignment with European standards (Attard, Ioio, Geven, & Santa, 2010) yet tempered by local realities. Implementation remains uneven: private universities demonstrate higher levels of adoption due to flexibility, smaller classes, better resources, and market-driven incentives, while public institutions lag because of systemic constraints and entrenched traditions. Daily practice integrates SCL through personalized administrative services, inclusive environments, regular feedback, modern teaching methods (project-based, teamwork, differentiated instruction), and employer connections. The main advantages include enhanced personal development, mutual motivation for students and lecturers, and the cultivation of transferable skills (critical thinking, communication, teamwork). Limitations centre on exaggerated student expectations and occasional superficial engagement, both of which highlight the need for clearer boundaries and greater academic responsibility. These findings contribute to the existing literature by offering a context-specific, participant-led perspective on SCL in a post-Soviet higher

education setting — a perspective that remains underrepresented in international scholarship, which often focuses on Western or more mature systems.

This study extends the heuristic phenomenological tradition by applying it to an under-explored cultural and institutional context, demonstrating how personal and collective meanings of pedagogical change are shaped by historical legacies, policy influences, and economic pressures. It provides empirical evidence that SCL is not merely a methodological shift but a deeply, often paradoxical experience involving tension between tradition and transformation, vulnerability and empowerment. The research also bridges the gap between declared Bologna-inspired reforms and on-the-ground realities in Georgia, offering insights into the implementation challenges of European higher education standards in transitioning systems.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The sample, while heterogeneous in terms of experience, institution type, and accreditation roles, was limited to 12 participants, all from higher education institutions in Georgia. Although theoretical saturation was reached, a larger or more geographically diverse sample might have revealed additional nuances. The study relied on self-reported perceptions and experiences, which may be influenced by social desirability or individual biases. Finally, the focus remained on academic staff; incorporating student voices could provide a more comprehensive picture in future work.

The findings carry important implications for practice, policy, and further research. At the institutional level, universities — particularly public ones — should prioritize investments in modern infrastructure, faculty professional development in relation to SCL, and workload management to enable meaningful adoption of this approach. Stronger, practical collaboration between universities and the business sector is urgently needed to make SCL less superficial and more relevant to labour market demands. At the policy level, national authorities and quality assurance bodies should address the public-private divide through targeted support for public institutions and clearer guidelines on balancing student autonomy with academic responsibility. For students, early orientation and cultural preparation (starting from secondary education) are essential to reduce passivity and exaggerated expectations.

Future research could extend this work by including student perspectives, conducting longitudinal studies to track changes in SCL implementation over time, or employing mixed-methods designs to quantify the impact of SCL on student outcomes in the Georgian context. Comparative studies with other post-Soviet or transitioning countries would also enrich understanding of how global pedagogical models are adapted locally.

In conclusion, this study illuminates SCL in Georgia as a promising yet challenging pathway toward more engaging, relevant, and student-empowering higher education. While progress is evident — especially in private institutions — systemic barriers continue to limit its depth and scale. Addressing these challenges through sustained institutional effort, policy alignment, and cultural shift will be essential to realizing the full transformative potential of SCL in the Georgian context.

Ethical considerations

All stages of this research were conducted in accordance with ethical standards, ensuring participants' rights were protected and data were used responsibly. Ethical approval was obtained from the Ethics Committee of East European University prior to data collection. Participants received a detailed Participant Information Sheet outlining the study's aim, voluntary participation, right to withdraw, confidentiality and anonymity assurances, audio recording options, data protection measures, and potential benefits. Consent was obtained through signed forms. Data were securely stored following Georgian regulations: electronic files on a password-protected computer and encrypted external hard drive, and printed documents in a locked cabinet. Access was restricted to authorized personnel, and all data were deleted after the study concluded. Overall, the research upheld ethical principles, safeguarding participants' dignity, ensuring data reliability, and reflecting the researcher's professional responsibility (Babin, Carr, Griffin, & Quinlan, 2015; Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2019).

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Statement on the Use of Artificial Intelligence

This manuscript has benefited from the use of OpenAI ChatGPT (GPT-5) for language improvement purposes. The tool was used to refine grammar, clarity, and fluency of the text, without affecting the scientific content or interpretation.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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