



## Sustainable Development of Higher Education in Georgia: ‘A Disability Path’<sup>1</sup>

Liya Kalinnikova Magnusson,<sup>2</sup>

Khatia Khatiashvili<sup>3</sup>

Gvantsa Chanturia<sup>4</sup>

Kakhaber Kordzaia<sup>5</sup>

### ABSTRACT

This study conducts a comprehensive policy analysis of Georgian higher education (HE) in relation to Sustainable Development Goal 4, specifically target 4.5 on inclusive education for persons with disabilities, spanning the post-independence period from 1991 to 2024. Employing the transformative paradigm in disability research (TPDR), the analysis conceptualizes a “disability path” within HE through axiological, ontological, epistemological, and methodological lenses across three distinct governance periods. Using a retrospective inquiry approach, key policy documents—including the Constitution, education laws, and ministerial directives—were treated as “texts in formulation” to examine their origins, formulation processes, and engagement with inclusive education goals. The second governance period (2003–2012) marked the foundational platforming of legal inclusion, characterized by decentralization efforts and alignment with Bologna Process reforms. The 2005 enactment of separate Laws on General and Higher Education formally established state responsibility for ensuring equitable, lifelong access to education and delegated HE institutions the mandate to foster inclusive environments. This period institutionalized the legal recognition of disability inclusion,

<sup>1</sup> The present article represents the research project titled Inclusive Higher Education in the context of Sustainable Development – central theoretical concepts through cross-case analysis internationally (Georgia and Sweden)

<sup>2</sup> PHD in Special Education, Associate Professor, Institute of Russian and Eurasian Studies, Uppsala University, Sweden

<sup>3</sup> PHD in Philology, Tbilisi State University, Georgia

<sup>4</sup> PHD student in Educational Science, Tbilisi State University, Georgia

<sup>5</sup> Professor, Caucasus International University, Georgia

supported by accreditation and quality assurance mechanisms. The third period (2012–2024) expanded governmental responsibilities across education, social protection, health, and accommodation sectors. Significant legislative advancements included the 2014 Law on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination, interministerial cooperation, infrastructural adaptations, and enhanced resource allocation. Key milestones, such as the 2018 constitutional inclusion of social assistance provisions and the 2020 Law on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, consolidated comprehensive governmental accountability. Overall, the study reveals a progressive, albeit complex and uneven, evolution of inclusive education policy in Georgian HE, reflecting both international commitments and internal socio-political dynamics aligned with SDG 4.5.

---

**Keywords:** *sustainable development in education, higher education, disability research, policy education studies, inclusion, Georgia*

# საქართველოს უმაღლესი განათლების მდგრადი განვითარება: 'შეზღუდული შესაძლებლობების გზა'<sup>6</sup>

ლია კალინიკოვა მაგნუსონი

ასოცირებული პროფესორი, რუსეთისა და ევრაზიის კვლევის ინსტიტუტი,

უფსალას უნივერსიტეტი, შვედეთი

ხატია ხატიაშვილი

ფილოლოგიის დოქტორი, თბილისის სახელმწიფო უნივერსიტეტი, საქართველო

გვანცა ჭანტურია

განათლების მეცნიერებების მიმართულების დოქტარნტი,

თბილისის სახელმწიფო უნივერსიტეტი, საქართველო

კახაბერ კორძაია

პროფესორი, კავკასიის საერთაშორისო უნივერსიტეტი, თბილისი, საქართველო

## ა ბ ს ტ რ ა ქ ტ ი

აღნიშნული კვლევა ახორციელებს საქართველოს უმაღლესი განათლების ყოვლისმომცველ პოლიტიკურ ანალიზს მდგრადი განვითარების მე-4 მიზნის, კერძოდ 4.5 ამოცანის - შშმ პირთათვის ინკლუზიური განათლების კონტექსტში, რომელიც მოიცავს დამოუკიდებლობის შემდგომ პერიოდს 1991 წლიდან 2024 წლამდე. შეზღუდული შესაძლებლობების კვლევის ტრანსფორმაციული პარადიგმის (TPDR) გამოყენებით, ანალიზი აყალიბებს "შეზღუდული შესაძლებლობების გზას" უმაღლეს განათლებაში აქსიოლოგიური, ონტოლოგიური, ეპისტემოლოგიური და მეთოდოლოგიური ხედვების მეშვეობით სამი განსხვავებული მმართველობის პერიოდის განმავლობაში. რეტროსპექტული კვლევითი მიდგომის გამოყენებით, ძირითადი პოლიტიკური დოკუმენტები - მათ შორის კონსტიტუცია, განათლების კანონები და სამინისტროს დირექტივები - განიხილება როგორც "ფორმულირების ტექსტები" მათი წარმოშობის, ფორმულირების პროცესების და ინკლუზიური განათლების მიზნებთან ჩართულობის შესაფასებლად. მეორე მმართველობის პერიოდში (2003-2012) აღინიშნა იურიდიული ინკლუზიის საფუძვლიანი პლატფორმის შექმნა, რომელიც ხასიათდებოდა დეცენტრალიზაციის ძალისხმევითა და ბოლონის პროცესის რეფორმებთან შესაბამისობით. 2005 წელს ზოგადი და

<sup>6</sup> წინამდებარე სტატია წარმოადგენს საკვლევ პროექტს სახელწოდებით "ინკლუზიური უმაღლესი განათლება მდგრადი განვითარების კონტექსტში - ცენტრალური თეორიული კონცეფციები საერთაშორისო შედარებით ანალიზის მეშვეობით (საქართველო და შვედეთი)".

უმაღლესი განათლების ცალკე კანონების მიღებამ ოფიციალურად დაამყარა სახელმწიფოს პასუხისმგებლობა განათლების სამართლიან, უწყვეტი ხელმისაწვდომობის უზრუნველყოფაზე და უმაღლესი განათლების ინსტიტუტებს მისცა მანდატი ინკლუზიური გარემოს ხელშეწყობისთვის. ამ პერიოდმა ინსტიტუციური სახე მისცა შეზღუდული შესაძლებლობების ინკლუზიის იურიდიულ აღიარებას, რომელიც დაფუძნდა აკრედიტაციის და ხარისხის უზრუნველყოფის მექანიზმებზე. მესამე პერიოდმა (2012–2024) გააფართოვა მთავრობის პასუხისმგებლობები განათლების, სოციალური დაცვის, ჯანმრთელობისა და განთავსების სექტორებში. მნიშვნელოვან საკანონმდებლო მიღწევებს შორის იყო 2014 წელს “დისკრიმინაციის ყველა ფორმის აღმოფხვრის შესახებ” კანონი, უწყებათაშორისი თანამშრომლობა, ინფრასტრუქტურული ადაპტაციები და რესურსების გაძლიერებული განაწილება. ძირითადად მიღწევებმა, როგორცაა 2018 წელს კონსტიტუციაში სოციალური დახმარების დებულებების ჩართვა და 2020 წელს შშმ პირთა უფლებების შესახებ კანონი, განამტკიცა მთავრობის ყოვლისმომცველი ანგარიშვალდებულება. მთლიანობაში, კვლევა ავლენს ინკლუზიური განათლების პოლიტიკის პროგრესულ, თუმცა რთულ და არათანაბარ განვითარებას საქართველოს უმაღლეს განათლებაში, რაც ასახავს როგორც საერთაშორისო ვალდებულებებს, ისე შიდა სოციო-პოლიტიკურ დინამიკას SDG 4.5-თან შესაბამისობაში.

---

*საკვანძო სიტყვები: განათლების მდგრადი განვითარება, უმაღლესი განათლება, შშმ პირთა კვლევები, საგანმანათლებლო პოლიტიკის კვლევები, ინკლუზია, საქართველო*

## 1. Introduction

Education is a public good, a global common welfare, guaranteeing and realising basic human rights against discrimination. The national policy of any state is a key factor in mainstreaming this global challenge and appeals to modern international authoritative agencies and consultative forums, such as UNDP, UNESCO, UNICEF, UN, and World Bank, for the development of national strategies, governing policymaking, and analysing a progression in its implementation at each stage of the education process. Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the UN agenda are navigating and constituting this progression. Being initially conceptualised and defined by the World Commission on Environment and Development in 1987 (Brundtland Report, 1987), Sustainable Development (SD) became the United Nations' centrepiece of soft governing, targeting a better future globally as a 'pathway for humanity' in a new millennium (United Nations, 2015; Kushnir et al., 2024). From 2015 up to 2030, SDGs in education became an international development agenda for '*ensuring inclusive, equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all*' (the Global Goals, article 4) on all levels within *illuminating all types of discrimination in education towards equal access, to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university* (the Global Goals, article 4). Moreover, Salamanca (UNESCO, 1994), the Bologna movement (Bologna declaration, 1999), and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) (UNCRPD, 2006) are rightfully considered predecessors of the 'disability path' agenda in higher education (HE), significantly contributing to national dimensions in equity education, - in general, and in HE, - in particular. Even though moving SD forward in HE all through these documents, scholars are witnessing that national/international levels of policymaking of SD are just at the beginning of its formation, and there is a tangible gap in explanations of its targets and indicators, which include insufficient focus on HE, unclear definitions of inclusion, and a lack of detailed indicators to measure progress (Argyrou and Hummels, 2021). The SD agenda in HE of European countries is a rather representative example of its striking scarceness (Kushnir et al., 2024).

Despite international treaty adoption and policy commitments, a significant research gap exists regarding how Georgian HE policy documents have evolved to address inclusion, how these policies enact the SDG framework—especially Target 4.5—and what priorities guide their implementation. This study aims to fill this gap by analyzing the formulation and evolution of Georgian HE policies from 1991 to 2024 through the lens of the "disability path" conceptualized within the transformative paradigm in disability research (TPDR).

Referring to SD in HE in Georgia, it is important to emphasize that since 1991, the Georgian state transition was challenged by the acquisition of independence and experienced a long-term period of a broad spectrum of political reforms, including reforms in education. Intensifying them as country-wide reforms, especially after the Revolution of Roses in 2003, governmental power manifested the Western course of the country (Lezhava and Amashukeli, 2015) and aimed for the modernisation of the Georgian HE system. These reforms led to the adoption of the new law of HE in 2005 and coincided with the European initiatives in HE across the Bologna Process development and implementation. Georgia joined the Bologna process, signing and ratifying it in May 2005. Moreover, Georgian HE became a member of the European HE Area (EHEA), officially starting the Europeanisation of the national HE system (Jibladze and Glonti, 2018; Amashukeli et al., 2020). By that, the HE dominantly challenged its structure and determined a complicated framework of transferability, quality assurance, academic mobility, etc., as well as recognising diversity and equity in education. Since 2006, inclusive education has been declared as one of the proprieties of the state policy in education in Georgia (Parliament of Georgia, 2005, 2007; MES, 2013) Tchintcharauli and Javakhishvili, 2017); recognised a variety of conceptual positions of implementing these reforms, pronounced by the Salamanca Declaration (1994), the Prague Communiqué (Ministerial, 2001), etc. Currently, the required regulations of the system of education in Georgia are based on three main laws: the Law of General Education (The Law, 2005), the Law of Higher Education (The Law, 2005), the Law of Vocational Education (The Law, 2007), several relevant normative documents, strategic development plans, etc.

‘Disability path’ across studies of the Georgian system of education emphasises that it was deeply embedded in a highly structural differentiation from the Soviet education (Tchintcharauli and Javakhishvili, 2017; Kalinnikova Magnusson, and Rosenqvist, 2021). Reforms in education are a part of its continuity from the past, perceiving a sustainable transition towards the contemporary enactment in the field. In Georgia, like other former Soviet states, the pattern of the educational structure was inserted in compulsory special school education with obligatory vocational training as a part of the school curriculum, as well as in special secondary and professional institutions (professional areas in industry, technologies, and art) (Diachkov, 1967). The challenge of reforms in education for students with different types of disabilities in these states, and particularly in Georgia, has undergone its incremental process of governmental priorities to order a provision of development of equitable, inclusive education primarily on the levels of general school education and vocational training. This process has not lost its relevance till today. The level of HE was left behind in this order.

These aspects are key in understanding the 'Disability path' in HE of Georgian policy reforms. *From one side*, there are tangible gaps in the SD conceptual framework in HE nationally/internationally, *from another*, - governmental initiatives in the adoption of international treaties in HE (Bologna process in HE, UNCRPD, etc.) set high standards of education and are considered as an essential precondition for the country's social development, and *promoting further on* an incremental process of national policy reforms in education to ensure equal quality education through inclusion and promotion of lifelong learning opportunities for all, represent the unravelling of a symbolic 'knot', contributing to deeper understanding of policy transition tracking the national 'disability path' in HE.

The overall purpose of the study is to make a policy analysis of Georgian HE to SD in education across the national policy priorities, specifically impacting the target 4-4.5 of SDGs '*...to ensure equal access to all levels of education... for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities...*' (UN, Goal 4, Target 4.5, 2015), following the state transition period since its independency 1991 till 2024. The applied period has its historical point of view on the formation of the legal policy response to democratic processes assuming progress towards inclusion in HE. The achievement of the purpose will be ensured by answering the following questions: RQ1: How are these policy documents originated and how are they emerging? RQ2: How does policy formulate the engagement in SDG-4 performing a disability path' in HE, and RQ3: what are the priorities to conduct this performance?

## **2. Conceptual framework: 'Disability path' in a policy of HE**

The conceptual frame of the study is based on the transformative paradigm in disability research (TPDR), taking into account four basic assumptions arguing, a disability path in HE policy transition axiologically, ontologically, epistemologically, and methodologically (Mertens et al., 2011). The axiological assumption considers the furtherance of social justice for more equitable and inclusive HE, where a disability path is linked to a more diverse minority group in education, solely or by the intersection (disability/SEN, ethnicity, gender, age, social class, etc.). Ontologically, the study refers to the disability social ontology in education from the late modernity era retrospectively, originating and uncovering the nature of reality against oppression through applied meanings in the national education policy context. The epistemological assumption frames the process of SD in HE as a response to SDG-4 , for' and of' its implementation in HE policy (Spangenberg, 2011) with respect to cultural context, supported by the sufficient grounding in the culture for further recognition and understanding of the ongoing development of sustainability in HE, targeting a disability path. Methodologically, this study assumes that contextual

reality has a double identity generated out of complexities in the formulation and realisation of educational reforms (Lindensjö and Lundgren, 1986; 2000).

The 'disability path' in HE policy could refer to its history across national histories of progression and transformation of HE systems, witnessing a manifestation of the emergence of sustainability challenges. This historical path could be indicated as a raised social ontology of disability (Spivakovsky et al., 2003), signifying ongoing debates around fundamental and ethical concepts from the relational perspective between environmental and individual conditions. Obviously, these debates refer to the institutional missions of HE and require their response to meet this challenge. Theoretically, the historical turn ('a disability path') of a current HE is rooted in its humanistic contexts of late modernity internationally, leading to the appearance, among others and chronologically latest, HE missions to reinforce democratisation through educational policy, to craft and refine a balance between academic tradition and societal change (Scott, 2006).

Assuming that national policies in education determine the HE 'disability path' entity and is under regular substantial change in its global response, this study stands on the premise that HE policy *to sustainable challenge* frames sustainability as a more nuanced and holistic understanding of university education with great variation in the capacity of HE imagine, design, implement, and promote the links between curriculum and individual development (students with disabilities)<sup>7</sup> to achieve social change (Chankseliani and MacCowan, 2020). The HE responds to individual development, legitimises and ensures the quality of educational performance, and treats all students as valuable school members in a common educational context. Following what Spangenberg (2011) emphasises, this study frames HE policy in its subdivided initiatives '*of sustainability*' and '*for sustainability*', accordingly focusing on the emergence of sustainability issues in HE policy evolutionary (Governance level (Hueske and Pontoppidan, 2020) and on the provision of possible solutions to sustainable challenges/transition in HE (Operational level (Hueske and Pontoppidan, 2020)).

HE national policy has its contextual frames: Context of formulation and Context of realisation. Both theoretically underpin educational reform processes (Lindensjö and Lundgren, 1986; 2000). These two

---

<sup>7</sup> Students with disabilities: the study refers to the definition 1) The HEI provide appropriate learning conditions for students with disabilities (Law of Georgia on Higher education, ch1-A3/d); 2) a) a person with substantial physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which, when combined with various barriers, may hinder his/her full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others; b) disability- the lack of capacity for the personal development and self-actualization of a person with physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which, when combined with various barriers, may hinder his/her full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others and that is conditioned by a combination of environmental, attitudinal and other factors (Law On the Rights of persons with disabilities, 2020, ch1-A2)

‘Contexts’ represent the discrepancy between two different realities of central-level politics and policymaking (Context of formulation) and implementation processes into the concerned institutions of the decisions made earlier (Context of realisation). Scholars call it ‘the paradox of reproduction’, defined as a clear distinction between goals and content of educational reforms and methods for achieving these goals. The appearance of a double identity splits the applied Contexts into two separate spheres, political and administrative, influencing the understanding of the whole set of complexities in educational reforms.

As referred to above, the scope of this paper is to examine the HE policy for students with disabilities in Georgia. Policy in education is defined as a plan aiming to bring changes and meet challenges in the educational system through its further implementation. The current article focuses on the formulation of applied assumptions in the state-level documents (laws, reports, strategies, developmental plans, etc.) placed in its ‘Context of formulation’. Policy is defined as ‘a statement of intent – something, which is written down in a policy document’ (Forrester and Garratt, 2016: 2), or, narrowing Ball’s definition of policy, what is formulated in ‘text’ as ‘intended’ action (Ball, 1993) by governmental agencies. Representation of the ‘Context of formulation’ adopts its discursive nature of educational policy development, as being shaped by ideas, interacting with the larger context (political, social, economic, etc.) (Ozga, 2000; Allan et al., 2009).

### **3. Context of the study (SEN)**

The current roots of a policy formulation of ‘a disability path’ in HE could be contextualised within the transition to democracy and market economy, but also could be linked to highly original issues of Georgian geolocation (strategically important crossroads where Europe meets Asia), culture, history of ‘disability’ issues in HE, and contemporary ‘disability moment’ in Georgian HE. In 1991, Georgia gained its independence, and the development of HE policy became an integral element of the political challenges (Table 1) within complicated conditions of economic decline and recovery, high rate of migration, accompanied by the existential crisis of identity, etc. (Tsikhistavi-Khutsishvili, 2014; Sartania, 2021). Between 1991 and 2024, Georgia carried out three waves of various commitments to democracy and a pro-Western policy orientation towards educational reforms (Tsikhistavi-Khutsishvili, 2014).

Since 1991, the HE Institutions (HEIs) have been in the process of transformation and continuous change towards decentralisation and contributed to the spectacular growth of private HEIs without governmental regulations, especially between 1993 and 2003. This tendency, controversial by its nature (growing

corruption), expanded HEIs in regions that witnessed the germination of HEIs and vocational education throughout the country (Chakhaia and Bregvadze, 2018). As an example, the existing evidence of this tendency of dissection regarding professional training manifested itself in a dramatic decrease in the number of students in the state professional educational sector seventy times: from 210027 in 1995 to 3420 in 1999 (Otchet, 2002). This data holds uncertainties about the destiny of students with disabilities on the scale of ‘continued education’ after the dissolution.

It is evident that since 2005, central challenges tracking ‘a disability path’ in the current HE policy of Georgia were met by governmental initiatives to align educational reforms according to the Bologna processes (Bergen Summit, 2005). Governmental regulations were strengthened, providing a new order for HEIs’ based on their autonomy defined through accreditation and quality assurance procedures, growing requirements to competencies of university staff, and students’ self-governing, etc. From 2012, the government of the new political party of ‘Georgian Dream’ formulated National Goals of General Education to educate a new citizen- a free personality with national and universal values (National Goals of General Education, 2024), supporting further reforms in HE sectors. According to the statistical data from 2023-2024, there are 62 HEIs, from which 19 are public (been running since the Soviet period) and 43 private universities with more than 177.800 students in total (Indicators of HE, Department of Statistics of Georgia, 2023-2024). In 2015, inclusion in HE was primarily introduced (Kitiashvili, 2016; Chanturia et al., 2020). In 2019, the Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University established Disability Research Center (DRC) to create research-based evidence for the development of different services encouraging social inclusion of persons with disabilities in Georgia and capacity building Curriculum Innovation in HE for further improvement of preparation of specialists in the special education area (Disability Research Center (tsu.ge).

Table 1. Governance periods and policy reforms in HE

Governance period	Policy challenges	Legalisation of national priorities and adoption of international documents and
1991-1992: ‘Round Table - Free Georgia’ governance period	During this period were raised civil war, organised crime, and violence (Sartania, 2021).	The first steps to decentralisation in HE (Chanturia et al., 2020)
1993-1995-2003 ‘Union of Citizens of Georgia’ governance period	The education system became independent from central control, privatisation of HE; the spectacular growth of private HEIs without governmental regulations as a response to the growing demand for higher education, the growing disciplinary diversity of HE, and the ranking of HEIs (Gvishiany and Chapman, 2002); expansion of HEIs into the regions, etc.	<b>National documents:</b> Constitution of Georgia (COG), (Constitution, 1995); Law of General Education of Georgia (LGEG), (Law, 2005) <b>International documents:</b> Joining the United Nations;

<p>2003-2012 'United National Movement' governance period (Dominioni, 2014).</p>	<p>The orientation towards Western educational standards took over: a typology of Georgian HEIs (8 types of HEIs [Chakhaia and Bregvadze, 2018]); high level of autonomy; institutional accreditation and quality assurance; standardised examinations and quota system in HE; a students' self-governing body and the protection of students' rights, etc.</p>	<p><b>National documents:</b> The Law of Georgia on General Education (LGGE) (Law, 2005), The Law of Georgia on Higher Education (LGHE) (Law, 2005), The Law of Georgia on Vocational Education (LGVE) (Law, 2007), several relevant normative documents, strategic development plans, etc. <b>International documents:</b> Georgian HE is a member of the European HE Area (EHEA), 2005. Bologna declaration ratified and processed in 2005 (Declaration, 1999). UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities was signed in 2009 (UNCRPD) (Convention, 2006).</p>
<p>2012-2024 'Georgian dream' governance period.</p>	<p>Formulation of National Goals of Education priorities to educate a free personality with national and universal values (Bochorishvili and Peranidze, 2020): depoliticisation of education; Integration of the Georgian educational space with European one; Continuity of funding, but public funding of HEI is still low; Raising number of students; Growth of private institutions (Bochorishvili and Peranidze, 2020); simplified enrollment for ethnic minorities in HE (Pignatti, 2019); Increasing number of students with disabilities; introduction of inclusive education in HE; Vocational Institutions (Chanturia et al., 2016)</p>	<p><b>National documents:</b> The approval of National Curriculum (NC) (Approval, 2016); The Law of Georgia on Vocational Education (LGVE) (Law, 2018); The approval of the rules for the introduction, development and monitoring of inclusive education, as well as the identification mechanism of students with special educational needs (ARIDMIEIMSSEN?) (Approval, 2018); The Law on the rights of persons with disabilities (LGRPD) (Law, 2020); Several amendments were made to the existing laws <b>International documents:</b> UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (Formal confirmation(c), Accession(a), Ratification), 2014; Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities: signed 2009, ratified 2021.</p>

Representing the Caucasus Region, the Georgian system of HE is significantly performed internationally. It could be tracked as an issue of a gradual growing inclusion in HE contributing to the *intersectional* construction of 'a disability path' based on the approach of *additional language support*, a *unified national exam* for entering HEIs, and a *quota system* in HE for ethnic minorities. Historically, students from ethnic (Armenia and Azerbaijan) minorities are the most representative in HE (Amiredjibi and Gabunia, 2021). As an example, from the 2018 data, there were about 1170 Armenian and 2595 Azerbaijani students (Amiredjibi and Gabunia, 2021), influencing 'language' implications in the HE system in the form of additional support for these students. The Georgian language is a cultural heritage, one of the ancient world languages with its unique alphabet, which is the pride of the Georgian nation. Historically, all political attempts to question the status of the Georgian language failed. The latest

request was undertaken by the Soviet Government in 1978 and was refused as a result of the strong protest reaction of the population (Kartsivadze and Vatcharadze, 2020). That could explain the initiatives from the Ministry of Education and Science to establish training language programs in HE for students of ethnic minority groups entering HE since 2006 and since 2009- the introduction of the quota system as the most radical form of preferential ethnic minorities policy in HE (LGHE, A51-A52; Tabatadze and Georgadze, 2016).

To better examine ‘a disability path *solely*’ in Georgian HE, we must refer to the Soviet segregation policy towards disability minorities in social and educational areas (Chanturia et al., 2020). Even though the Soviet special education system provided compulsory professional secondary education for students with disabilities, networking special institutions for that reason across educational stages (Diachkov, 1967), the HE level for these students was mostly like individual and scientific character. Confirming that it would be of interest to this study to mention one of the successfully designed and implemented experiment for four deaf-blind individuals who were allowed to get access to HE at Moscow State University (faculty of psychology), which got its name “Zagorsky experiment for four/Zagorskaya chetverka” in 1970s (Pushaev, 2013). This experiment gave hope that HEIs would develop this experience further for different groups of students with disabilities. For various reasons (ideological, absence of qualified teachers at HEIs, undeveloped inclusive HE infrastructure, etc.), this experimentally tracked ‘a disability path’ never became an adopted approach across the Soviet countries, and attempts to get HE for individuals with disabilities existed as a single, driven by family initiatives, cases of these individuals.

Currently, official sources of data about students with disabilities in HE are very scarce and, in a way, are not pointed out in any national statistics. We could say that they do not exist formally on the HE level. Both the ministries of Health and Education have different approaches to recognising ‘disability’. As of November 2020, there are 126,851 persons with disabilities, but the statistics are given to determine the state of health and not the level of education (Matcharashvili, 2020). It is not possible to find such data through non-governmental organisations either; their number in Georgia is very small and less active due to a lack of funding. The most well-known of them are the Union of the Deaf of Georgia, the Support Library, the Cultural Centre for People with Disabilities, the Union of people who need special care, the Union of the Blind and Deaf of Abkhazia, The Union of Son’s of God- Association of persons with disabilities, Iron Cross-Union of War veterans and Disabled persons, First Step Georgia. In Table 2, some unsystematised data between 2020-2021-2022 are presented. These data were collected ‘manually’

(through direct contact with a study department of each university) and provided a very fragmented ‘quantity’ of these students, exploding new requests (for example: who are these students? etc.) and emphasising how ‘invisible/non existing’ is knowledge about this group of learners in Georgian HE.

Table 2. Unsystematised ‘quantity’ of students with disabilities in Georgian Universities  
(The data were collected ‘manually’ within 2020-2021-2022)

University	Year	Degree	Number of students
Tbilisi State University, TSU	2020-2021	Bachelor	5
		Master	1
		Doctorate study	1
Ilia State University	2020-2021	Totally	30
Art Academy	2020-2021	Bachelor	1
Batumi Maritime Academy	2020-2021	Bachelor	1
Sulkhan-Saba State University	2020-2021	Totally	10
Caucasus International University	2020-2022	Totally	2

The selection of universities and data included in the table was based on the following criteria:

- Availability of Officially Reported Data- Only HEIs that provided accessible and verifiable data - either through official institutional reporting, national statistics, or Ministry of Education data - on enrolled students with disabilities during the 2020–2022 academic years were included.

- Representation of Institutional Diversity-The selection includes a diverse range of HEIs in terms of Geographical location (Tbilisi, Batumi), Institutional type and profile (research universities, specialized academies, private and public institutions).

- Relevance to the National Context of Inclusive Education- Institutions were selected based on their public engagement or participation in inclusive education reforms, involvement in national or international inclusive education projects, or evidence of disability support services.

- Time Frame-Data is limited to the academic years 2020–2021 and 2021–2022, which coincide with the most recent period of the study’s retrospective policy analysis and reflect the current stage of inclusive education implementation.

- Level of Study - Where available, the data distinguishes between different levels of study: Bachelor’s, Master’s, and Doctoral programs. In cases where only aggregated numbers were reported, the category “Totally” was used.

#### **4. Methodology (Design and Method)**

To target the study methodologically, we emphasise that the education policy transition was challenged by three governance periods accompanied by policy shifts in education accordingly (Table 3), and that applies an original legal pattern of ‘a disability path’ in Georgian HE. The conceptual framework defined a unity of dimensions (Mertens et al., 2011) for further analysis of the impact of national policy education on the target 4.5 of SDGs, making requests to each governance period. Taking these dimensions together methodologically, attention was paid to the analysis of the national documents legalising rights on HE in the Constitution, Laws in education, Directives of the Ministry of Education, etc. (Table 3) and how these legal rights are formulated *axiologically*: as an issue of equitable and inclusive education for students with disabilities (citizenship and diversity as a value, etc.); *ontologically*: as an issue of a foundation of HE reality to meet students with disabilities; *epistemologically*: as an issue of how documents originate and nuance cultural representations of ‘a disability path’ in Georgian HE across these periods.

The study is retrospective and interpretative (Patton et al., 2012), based on text analysis of the central policy documents, particularly addressed to HE in their historical ‘momentum inside the state... when purposes and intentions are re-worked and re-oriented over time’ (Ball, 1993: 11). The temporal sequence of the study supports Gale’s historiographic research methodology in education that ‘... particular historical and geographical moment defines specific policy production’ (Gale, 2001: 386). The undertaken investigation problematises ‘a disability path’ formulation at the levels of TPDR assumptions conceptualised above, considering political priorities in the national HE context.

The unit of analysis in this study is the national-level higher education policy documents of Georgia, specifically those that address inclusive education and the rights of students with disabilities from 1991 to 2024.

The study's evidence is based on multiple primary and secondary data sources. Policy documents represent primary sources of data. These data were gathered in the form of retrospective inquiry and were

analysed interpretively. These data were questioned in a form of inquiry, and they directly addressed the agenda of this investigation. Methodologically, secondary sources were treated as supplemental sources or Existing Statistics of data (Babbie, 2011) to broaden the understanding of the study phenomenon and contextualisation reasons, such as statistical data from the National Statistics Office of Georgia, international documents signed and ratified by the government, etc. Some secondary sources were collected through ‘manual’ procedures, signifying ‘pre-requisites’ of the undertaken research intention (students with disabilities across the HEIs nationally, Table 2). The ethical aspect of the analysis was held by acknowledging contestations about identity-first and person-first language and choosing a person-first language for clarity of understanding the ‘policy text’.

Table 3. Central documents, legal for the Georgian educational system  
(Many amendments were made to the Law on General Education and to the Law on HE,  
but not all amendments concern our study)

General Georgian Laws on Education (Indexed)	Directives of the Ministry of Education and Science (Indexed)
<b>1995-2003</b>	
Soviet Law on approval of the fundamentals of the Soviet Republic legislation on Public Education (GLE) 1975 (reduction 1985) Constitution of Georgia (CG), (Constitution, 1995); Law of Georgia on Social Protection of Persons with Disability (LGSPD) (Law, 1995), expired in 2021	
<b>2003-2012</b>	
Law of Georgia on General Education (LGE), (Law, 2005)	The approval of the National Curriculum (ANC), (Approval, 2011)
Law of Georgia on General Education (LGE), (Law, 2005)	The approval of the National Goals of General Education (ANGGE) (ANC) (Approval, 2011)
The Law of Georgia on Vocational Education (LGVE) (Law, 2007) expired in 2018	
<b>2012-2024</b>	
Constitution of Georgia, (CG), (Constitution, amendments 2017, 2018)	The approval of the rules for the introduction, development and monitoring of inclusive education, as well as the identification mechanism of students with special educational needs (ARIDMIE) (Approval, 2018)
Law of Georgia on Vocational Education (LGVE) (Law, 2018)	amendments: 2020, 2024

Law of Georgia on the rights of persons with disabilities (LGRPD) (Law, 2020)	
Law of Georgia on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination (LGEFD), (Law, 2014)	The approval of the National Curriculum (ANC) (Approval, 2016);

The study employed a qualitative, interpretative policy analysis approach, grounded in the transformative paradigm in disability research (TPDR). The analysis was conducted through the following techniques and tools:

- Retrospective Document Analysis: The core technique used was retrospective inquiry, examining how policy documents were formulated and evolved over time (1991–2024). Historical sequencing allowed analysis within three governance periods, identifying shifts in policy orientation toward inclusion and disability rights.

- Textual and Discursive Analysis: Drawing on Ball’s (1993) concept of policy texts as discursive constructions, the study analyzed documents not as static legal texts, but as historically situated narratives shaped by changing political, social, and economic contexts. Focus was placed on how disability and inclusive education are represented linguistically and symbolically, using discourse analysis techniques to uncover ideological shifts and implicit assumptions.

- Thematic Coding (Manual): Texts were manually coded based on the TPDR’s core dimensions: Axiological (values and priorities such as equity and diversity), Ontological (underlying assumptions about the reality of inclusive HE), Epistemological (knowledge construction and representation of disability), Methodological (policy strategies and legal mechanisms). Coding was organized chronologically by governance period, enabling the identification of shifts and patterns across time.

- Historiographic Analysis: This technique helped contextualize the policy texts within specific historical-political moments, showing how intentions and meanings of policies were reconfigured in response to broader governance transitions.

- Triangulation with Secondary Data Statistical data from the National Statistics Office of Georgia and international organizations (UNESCO, UN, etc.) were used for triangulation, supporting interpretation and validating patterns observed in the texts.

## 5. Findings and analysis

Three main shifts containing these documents (Table 3) were accordingly identified across each governance period. Overall, representations of the unity of dimensions of the conceptual framework in policy documents allow for the retrospective discovery of a certain pattern of TPDR in policy formulation.

The first period (1991-2003) - *'Inertia of transition: initial recognition of 'persons with disabilities' in HE'*. The initial challenge had 'an inertia nature', drifting it on reproduction of Soviet legacy patterning fundamentals for understanding 'a disability path' in HE from three main documents interdepartmentally (Table 3). Declared statements formulated a general right to education (CG, 1995); a definition of "persons with disabilities" and environmental response to their needs (LSPPD, 1995); an extension of placement of an educational provision for 'persons with disabilities' on the level of secondary education (SLE, 1975/1985). Primarily, the recognition of 'persons with disabilities' in HE was formulated in the Law on Social Protection of Persons with Disabilities (LSPPD, 1995), in its amendment, issued in 2001 (Amendment, 2001). Article 11 of the CG enshrined the right to equity and freedom for diverse minority groups as a subject of general regulations of citizenship (Table 4.1, CG, 1995: Ch2/A11-1, A14).

Corresponding to the LSPPD, the term 'handicapped/invalid persons' was replaced by the term 'persons with disabilities' in all documents (LSPPD, amendment 2001: C9/A33), emphasising a recognition of the social impact in an individual's life. The LSPPD ordered that governmental bodies are obliged to create a proper environment for persons with disabilities (LSPPD, 1995: C2/A9-A10), ensuring inclusion and regulating non-discriminative environment (LSPPD: C1/A1-A2), providing necessary conditions for education and professional learning in secondary specialised education and HE to persons with disabilities, according to their individual rehabilitation program (Table 4.1, LSPPD, 1995: C4/A17.1-A17.2).

The Law of Education, as a Soviet model of education, aimed to advance Soviet society towards communism, acceleration of development, and preparation of highly educated citizens (SLE, 1975/1985). The provision of education for students with disabilities was primarily programmed in segregated settings for educable and non-educable students, specifically arranged for each category of students with disabilities (Kalinnikova and Trygged, 2014). On the level of secondary education, boundaries of segregation were softened by expanding the educational environment through vocational training in

specialised professional institutions (SLE, 1975/1985: A26, A28, A29), being *scientifically* approached as a format of ‘continuous education’ since 1967 (Diachkov, 1967).

Table 4.1 Policy documents in ‘formulation’ (1991-2003)

Document	Main statement	Target groups	Key meanings
Soviet Law on approval of the fundamental laws of the Soviet republics’ legislation on Public Education SLE, 1975 (Edition of 1985)	C1/A1: ‘Citizens of the USSR have the right to education.....secondary specialized and HE based on the connection of the education with life and production’. C4/A26: ‘Certain types of general education. Boarding schools and orphanages: For children and adolescents with physical or mental disabilities that prevent them from studying in a regular comprehensive school, and prepare them for socially useful work.’ C4/A28: ‘A certificate for incomplete secondary education gives the right to continue education in a secondary comprehensive school, to enroll in a secondary vocational school, or a secondary specialized educational institution’. C4/A29: ‘Secondary specialized educational institution: Secondary specialized education is carried out in technical schools... with the established procedure as secondary specialized educational institutions’.	Every person living in the USSR	All citizens have the opportunity to receive an education, the right to free choice, the future advancement of Soviet society towards communism, the acceleration of development, and the preparation of highly educated citizens.
CG Constitution (1995)	C2/A14: ‘Everyone is born free and equal in front of the law regardless of race.....national, ethnic and social affiliation’. C2/A11/1: ‘The right to equality: 1. Any kind of discrimination on the grounds of race, sex, origin, ethnicity, language, religion, political or other views... or any other grounds shall be prohibited’.	Every person living in Georgia	Referring to equity and freedom.
LSPPD, Law,1995 Expired 2021	C1/A1/2: ‘Discrimination against persons with disabilities shall be prohibited and shall be punishable by law’. C4./A17/1: ‘The State shall provide persons with disabilities with the necessary conditions for education and professional learning.’ C4/A17/2: ‘Educational institutions... also to provide secondary specialized education and HE to persons with disabilities according to their individual rehabilitation program’. C9: Transitional provision; A33 ‘Government agencies shall be asked to replace the term ‘handicapped/invalid persons’ with the term ‘persons with disabilities’ in all subordinate acts’’(2001).	Every person with disabilities, Governmental bodies	Ensuring the inclusion and regulation of a non-discriminative environment.

The second period (2003-2012) - ‘*Platforming a legality for inclusion in HE: originating and borrowing ideas.*’ This period shifted ‘a disability path’ in HE notably. The gradual emergence of governmental obligations for openness and inclusiveness in HEIs found itself originating across governmental amendments to challenge the existing laws and establish new ones. These initiatives acted towards the decentralization of governmental structures responsible for providing these initiatives, coordinating them with Bologna reforms in HE. By joining, aligning and signing the Bologna declaration, Georgia adopted its proper new Laws of Education in 2005, where LGGE and LGHE were formulated autonomously, becoming separated from each other, deeper specifying responsibilities of the involved actors (issued in 2004, published in 2005, Table 4.2). The state declared responsibility for open and equal access to

education for all throughout life, delegating to HEIs to create conditions and environment needed for inclusive education (LGGE, 2005, C5/A33; C1/A2).

The new LGHE specified establishing a new system for access to HE for minorities towards the provision of Inclusion in HEIs (LGHE, 2009.17.11-C1/A1/A35; C10/A66/6). All that meant was that ‘a disability path’ got its underlying link to HE, which could be seen as a legal step and an original achievement towards a direct response to sustainable development in the area. Inclusive education was also supported by the Ministry of Education and Science order ‘On approval of authorization fees and authorization regulations for educational institutions’ (Order, 2010.01.10, C4-A10-e/2010) and ‘The Law on education quality improvement’. These documents determined the activities of several structural units established for the coordination of the implementation of these new regulations in HE. The provision of appropriate learning conditions and learning opportunities for students with disabilities in HE turned towards accreditation and authorisation of educational institutions in the country (LGHE, 2005: C1/A3/d; C4/A10; C6/A43/3), delegating them to the National Center for Accreditation (2005) and the National Center for Educational Quality Enhancement (2010).

Table N4.2 Policy documents in ‘formulation’ (2003-2012)

Law	Chapters and articles (direct quotations of the statements)	Targets	Key meanings
LLGE, Law (2005)	C1/A3: ‘The State provides openness and equal access to general education for all throughout life’ (2005). C1/A2: ‘Terms definition: Inclusive education: Inclusion of persons with disabilities in the general education process together with other pupils’ (2005/28/10). C1/A3: ‘The main goal of general education is to establish inclusive education’. C5/A 33: ‘Rights and Duties: Create conditions for inclusive education’. C1/A5/2: ‘The National Curriculum also provides for modified curricula for students with special educational needs’. C5/A33/z: ‘Benefits for creating environment needed for students with special education needs (SEN)’ (2005/08/04).	Different levels of administrators, teachers, and pupils	Education shall be open and accessible Formation of a free person with national and international values Lifelong learning values Adoption of inclusive principles and recognition of pupils’ diversity.
LGHE, Law (2005)	C1/A3: ‘Goals of HE: The HEI cares for creating learning conditions for students with disabilities’ (2005). C1/A2: ‘Definition of terms: Educational program of preparation in Georgian language – accredited special program for Azerbaidjanis, Armenian, Abkhazian and Ossetians... knowledge of Georgian language at the level necessary to continue studying in Georgian HEIs’ (2009.17.11). C6/A43/3: ‘The HEI provides benefits for students with disabilities in order to create necessary conditions for their full-fledged education, which is determined by the applicable legislation, the charter of the HEI and the regulations of the relevant faculty’ (2005).	Different levels of administrators, teachers, and students	The HE shall be accessible to all persons who have the ability to receive it New system for access to HEI for national minorities.

AAFRE I, Order (2010)	C4/A10 Material resource of HEIs: e) 'The institution has an adapted environment for students with special educational needs'.	Georgia's educational institutions	Ensures special resources and equipment for persons with disabilities New approach for persons with disabilities to access educational institutions.
-----------------------	--	------------------------------------	---

The third period (2012-2024) - *'Widening and enhancing governmental responsibilities for further progression of inclusion in Georgian HE'*. Following this path, new laws were created, and old ones were continuously amended. The given priority widened areas of inclusion towards all fields of life – education, social protection, health assistance, and accommodation (LGEFD, 2020 A2/3). Noteworthy attention was paid to strengthening the cooperation of governmental bodies (interministerial/interagency regulations) to facilitate hand-in-glove new infrastructural perspectives of inclusion for students with disabilities (LGEFD, 2020 A2/3; LGGE, 2024, C4/A26/k/1). The starting point should refer to a new law on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination (LEAFD, 2014) intended to realise equity and position against all forms of discrimination in all fields of the social life of persons with disabilities. Corresponding changes followed the adoption of this law in other normative acts, including the Labor Code of Georgia (LCG, C2), The Laws on Health Protection and General Education. Thus, regulations affected the standards for the construction of buildings, requiring interconnection between general educational institutions and relevant ministries and agencies (2024). The voucher system in education (2024) promoted a free presence and created suitable infrastructural conditions for these students in HEIs. All these changes contributed to the improvement of necessary qualifications and opportunities to get appropriate resources for the educational needs of these students completely (GLRPD, 2020 A26/6; A27).

The study emphasises some central amendments in valuable documents to confirm these challenges. In 2018, a new Article 11-4 appeared in the Constitution of Georgia. It ensured the inclusion of individuals with disabilities, facilitating social assistance and developing services for students with disabilities. The amendment of LSPPD several times (2013 (A9), 2014 (A2), 2016 (C3-A17/2, A18/3), 2017 (C4/A17, A18), 2020 (A9-11-removed, A16, A27, A29)) brought the government to repeal it in 2021. As a result, the social and educational rights of individuals with disabilities were formulated in one Law on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (GLRPD), signed by President S. Zourabichvili in 2020. This Law confirms the responsibilities of governmental sectors to implement rights and conditions for persons with disabilities (GLRPD, 2020, Ch1-A3-1; A4/1; A4/5/f).

Table N4.3 Policy documents in ‘formulation’ (2012-2024)

Law	Chapters and articles (direct quotations of the statements)	Targets	Key meanings
LGEFD (Law of Georgia on elimination of all forms of discrimination), 2014	<p>C1/A1: ‘The law is intended to eliminate every form of discrimination...regardless of national, ethnic or social affiliation, profession, marital status, health status, disability...’ (2014).</p> <p>C1/A2/7: ‘Discrimination is not special and temporary measures designed to promote or achieve de facto equality, especially in relation to gender, pregnancy and maternity, as well as persons with disabilities’ (2014).</p> <p>C1/A2/3<sup>3</sup>: ‘In accordance with the Law of Georgia on the Rights of Persons with disabilities, the State takes all possible measures to ensure reasonable accommodation. Unreasonable refusal will be also considered as discrimination’ (2020).</p> <p>C1/A2/10/g: ‘The principle of equal treatment also applies to access to education’ (2020).</p>	Everyone living in Georgia, Ombudsman, Administrative bodies	<p>Realization of the equality and fighting against discrimination</p> <p>Ensuring all persons living in Georgia have equal rights established by the legislation;</p> <p>Raising awareness and discussion about discrimination as a social phenomenon in society contributes to establishing a tolerant environment towards vulnerable groups.</p>
GLR PD (2020)	<p>C1/A1: ‘This law defines the basic principles and mechanisms of accessibility for persons with disabilities to living independently and participating fully in all aspects of life without discrimination and on an equal basis with others’ (2020).</p> <p>C1/A3/1: ‘The State shall ensure the equality of a person with disabilities before the law and guarantees the exercise of his/her rights on an equal basis with others in all areas of public life’ (2020).</p> <p>C2/A8 Education/1: ‘By introducing appropriate and effective mechanisms and using technologies, techniques and educational resources relevant to the needs of persons with disabilities, the State shall ensure the introduction of an accessible and qualitatively inclusive education system that will allow persons with disabilities to obtain continuing education, develop their personality and creative skills, and realise their mental and physical abilities; C1/A3/2. The State shall provide access to technical and vocational orientation programs and vocational and continuing education for persons with disabilities’ (2020).</p>	Every person with disabilities, administrative bodies, Ministries	<p>Realization of human rights.</p> <p>Establishment of rights and conditions of persons with disabilities and responsibilities of governmental bodies.</p>
Amended existing laws			
LGSPPD (Created 1995, expired 2021)	<p>C2/A9: ‘Ensuring the needs and requirements of persons with disabilities in cultural and entertainment institutions and sports facilities’ (2013).</p> <p>C1/A2: ‘Persons with disabilities’ (2014).</p> <p>C4/A17/2: ‘Education and professional training of persons with disabilities: Creation of conditions for education and professional training of persons with disabilities, provision of early and pre-school upbringing and education of these persons’.</p> <p>C4/A18/3: ‘General secondary, secondary-special and HE of persons with disabilities, upbringing and teaching of this category of children at home’ (2016)</p> <p>C4/A17/A18 (2017).</p> <p>C2/A9: ‘Ensuring the needs and requirements of persons with disabilities in cultural and entertainment institutions and sports facilities’ (2020).</p>	Every person with disabilities	<p>Realization of social and health assistance for persons with disabilities</p> <p>The law determines the duties of governmental bodies.</p>

	C2/A11 is removed (2020). C3/A16: 'About the rehabilitation centers for persons with disabilities: In accordance with the requirements of the rehabilitation assistance of persons with disabilities and local conditions, the highest state authorities create a network of rehabilitation, including scientific and industrial centers...social and household services for persons with disabilities' (2020); C5/A22: 'Working conditions of persons with disabilities' (2020); C6/A27: 'Rights of persons with disabilities in boarding houses and other institutions of social assistance' (2020). C6/A29: 'Sources of funding for social assistance' (2020).		
LGGE, 2024	C4/A26/k): '... determines the standards for construction of buildings and structures of general educational institutions together with relevant ministry and agencies' (2024). 'Together of Ministry of Finance of Georgia, establishes the procedure for issuing and transferring the voucher' (2024).	Educational institutions	Assistance in developing the infrastructure of educational institutions The article determines the coordination of different ministries and agencies.
LGHE, 2018	C1/A2/v: 'Individual Educational program-A program designed according to the student's interests and level of academic preparation' (2018/18/04).	Students	Facilitates the education process It is seen that great attention is paid to the student's interests.
CG, 2024	C2/A11/4: 'Ensures the inclusion of Persons with Disabilities, facilitates some social assistance, and develops some services for students with special educational needs'.	Persons with disabilities	Ensuring the inclusion The needs and requirements of persons with disabilities are taken into account.

## 6. Discussion and conclusion

This study reveals that the formulation and evolution of Georgian higher education policy regarding Sustainable Development Goal 4, specifically target 4.5 on inclusive education for persons with disabilities, has unfolded within a complex and often challenging political and social context. The Georgian policy agenda has been shaped by periods of profound national transition, which made the integration of inclusive education principles particularly difficult, both globally and nationally.

Despite these challenges, the research highlights a steady and important normative shift toward embedding democratic values within Georgian HE policy. The inclusion of persons with disabilities has progressively become a significant and growing concern within the policy agenda. This emerging "disability path" is visible through an evolving constellation of rights, representations, and commitments in national legislation and policy texts over the past three decades.

The study's axiological analysis uncovers that Georgian HE policies initially situated individuals with disabilities within a broader minority rights framework, anchored constitutionally since 1995. Early

legislation, such as the 2001 amendment on social protection, reflected a growing recognition of environmental and social responses to disability needs. However, this was layered upon a legacy of invisibility and limited access within the Soviet-influenced education system, where rights to higher education for students with disabilities were marginal and mostly implicit.

The pivotal moment came with the 2005 Laws on General and Higher Education, which formally introduced inclusive education and lifelong learning as state priorities. Further constitutional reforms in 2018 and the 2020 Law on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination strengthened the policy framework by explicitly protecting students with disabilities from discrimination and mandating appropriate resource provisions. Collectively, these developments demonstrate a clear axiological progression toward equity, inclusion, and recognition of diversity as foundational values in Georgian HE.

The epistemological perspective reveals how the conceptualization of disability and inclusion in Georgian policy has shifted from a medical or deficit-based model to a more relational and rights-based understanding. This evolution is evidenced by changes in terminology—from “handicapped/invalid” to “persons with disabilities,” and later to “students with special educational needs (SEN).” This linguistic transition signals a deeper cultural and ideological shift within policy discourse, aligning with international human rights norms.

Moreover, the study highlights the nuanced intersectionality of educational support needs, recognizing that disability-related barriers intersect with socio-economic status, health, and migrant backgrounds. This has prompted more adaptive curricular and environmental regulations in HE, which mark a critical move toward quality improvement and broader social justice goals.

Ontologically, the research identifies a significant gap between the legal existence of rights and the lived reality within HE institutions. Although policies legally affirm the right of students with disabilities “to exist” and access HE since 2005, these rights remain inconsistently recognized and enacted at institutional levels. Reports from ministries and voices within the HE community often underrepresent or fail to acknowledge students with disabilities fully.

This ontological dissonance underscores that legal policy formulation alone is insufficient without effective enactment mechanisms and institutional transformation. The study calls attention to the need

for HEIs to balance tradition with innovation by actively realizing inclusive education policies through concrete practices, infrastructure development, and attitudinal change.

The policy trajectory examined across three governance periods reflects a gradual and uneven progression toward embedding inclusive education in Georgian HE. Each period exhibits distinct patterns of policy borrowing, adaptation, and innovation, influenced by shifting political priorities, international pressures, and internal capacity.

While early reforms focused largely on legal frameworks and rights recognition, later periods have expanded attention to holistic challenges—including infrastructural accessibility, interdepartmental coordination, and resource allocation. This layered evolution points to an increasingly complex policy ecosystem that moves beyond rhetoric toward practical implementation, albeit at an incremental pace.

In conclusion, the study’s findings illustrate that Georgian HE policy’s response to SDG 4.5 reflects a historically situated, multi-dimensional “disability path.” This path is marked by gradual normative shifts in values, evolving cultural understandings of disability, and ongoing struggles to bridge legal frameworks with institutional realities. The policy agenda’s development evidences both progress and persistent challenges in ensuring equitable and inclusive higher education access for students with disabilities.

This research underscores the importance of continued policy attention, multi-stakeholder engagement, and institutional capacity-building to translate inclusive education commitments into lived experiences within Georgian HE. The evolution of this “disability path” thus remains a critical indicator of Georgia’s broader democratic and sustainable development trajectory.

## **7. Limitations of the study**

This research has framed some divergent limitations that did not allow the presentation of the emergence of SDG-4.5 in Georgian HE ‘policy formulation’ tracking ‘a disability path’ in its more holistic retrospection. As noted, the lack of data necessary for a more complete representation of the relevance of this study was one of such limitations. That issue could have been supported methodologically for portraying the ‘context of formulation’ from the perspective of stakeholders involved in HE policy formation or enriched by the analysis of the governmental reports collected from the national archives. This access to the data was limited by the political situation in Georgia at the time of the study. Another aspect of understanding the integrity of the study achievements was limited by its framework, which, in

a way, left behind the ontological aspects of the conceptual framework as a reason for the research intention itself. The study aimed to provide an initial overview of the disability pathway by analysing policy texts and to advance this research in the next phase by exploring SDG-4.5 in the context of policy implementation as part of higher education's mission to support the needs of individuals with disabilities.

## **8. Acknowledgement**

This work was supported by the Shota Rustaveli National Science Foundation of Georgia (SRNSFG) [grant number: FR-22-6797].

## Bibliography

1. Allan EJ, Iverson S, and Ropers-Huilman R (2009). *Reconstructing Policy in Higher Education: Feminist Poststructural Perspectives*. New York: Routledge.
2. Amashukeli M, Lezhava D, and Chitashvili M (2020) “Conditioned” *Quality Assurance of Higher Education in Georgia: Talking the EU Talk*. Journal of European Studies Tallinn University of Technology, 10: 2(31) pp.76-95.
3. Amendment to the Order N 91 of the Minister of Georgia on making amendments of the Minister of Education of Georgia dated May 21, 2003, on the criteria and rules for the attestation of students of general educational institutions of Georgia, N102/სსმ 66 (2004). Available at: <https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/58168?publication=0>
4. Amiredjibi R and Gabunia K (2021) *Minorities of Georgia, Destruction of existing barriers on the way of integration*. Carnegie Europe: The Future of Georgia Project.
5. Approval of the rules for the introduction, development, and monitoring of inclusive education, as well as the identification mechanism of students with special educational needs, N165 (2018). Available at: <https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/4007539?publication=0>
6. Approval of the National curriculum, N365, Order of the Ministry of Education, Science and Youth (2011). Available in: <https://www.mes.gov.ge/uploads/griphireba/4%20%E1%83%91%E1%83%A0%E1%83%AB%E1%83%9C%E1%83%94%E1%83%91%E1%83%90%20N36%E1%83%9C.pdf>
7. Approval of the National curriculum, Order of the Minister of Georgia N40/5 (2016). Available in: <https://www.mes.gov.ge/uploads/files/files%202023/40.pdf>
8. Ball S-J (1993) *WHAT IS POLICY? TEXTS, TRAJECTORIES AND TOOLBOXES*, Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education, 13(2), pp. 10-17. DOI:10.1080/0159630930130203.
9. Babbie E (2011) *The practice of social research (11th ed.)*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
10. Bergen Summit (2005) Ministerial Declarations and Communiqués. Ministerial Conference. Available at: <https://ehea.info/cid101762/bergen-2005.html>.
11. Bochorishvili E and Peranidze N (2020) *Georgia’s Education Sector*. Galt and Taggart, July 28, 2020. Available at: <https://api.galtandtaggart.com/sites/default/files/2021-05/25610.pdf>.

12. Bologna process, National Center for Education Quality Development, European higher education area, 2020. Available at: <https://www.eua.eu/our-work/topics/bologna-process.html#:~:text=The%20Bologna%20Process%20is%20an,of%20European%20organisations%2C%20including%20EUA.>
13. Bologna Declaration (1999) The Bologna Declaration of 19 June 1999: *Joint Declaration of the European Ministers of Education*. European Higher Education Area. Available at: [https://ehea.info/Upload/document/ministerial\\_declarations/1999\\_Bologna\\_Declaration\\_English\\_553028.pdf](https://ehea.info/Upload/document/ministerial_declarations/1999_Bologna_Declaration_English_553028.pdf).
14. Chakhaia L and Bregvadze T (2018) *Higher Education in Georgia at the Time of Independence*. J Huisman et al. (eds.), *25 Years of Transformations of Higher Education Systems in Post-Soviet Countries*, Palgrave Studies in Global Higher Education, pp. 175- 197. Available at: [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-52980-6\\_7](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-52980-6_7).
15. Chankseliani M and MacCowan T (2021). *Higher education and the Sustainable Development Goals*. *Higher Education* (2021) 81:1–8. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-020-00652-w>.
16. Chanturia G, Kadagidze M and Melikidze G (2020). *History of school education 1990-2020*. Tbilisi: Color Group.
17. Chanturia R, Gorgodze S and Chkhaidze T (2016). *Practice of inclusive education in Georgia, Implementation of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with disabilities (education sector)*. Tbilisi: Alternative report, Civic development institute.
18. Diachkov A (1967) *Osnovnie etapi razvitiya sovetskoi sistemi vospitaniya i obucheniya anomalnih detei [Main stages of the development of the Soviet system of upbringing and educating of abnormal children]*. *Spetsialnaya shkola*, n5 (125), s.5.
19. Disability Research Center in Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University. Available at: <https://www.tsu.ge/ka/legalakad/16153>(accessed 13 september 2024).
20. Dominiononi S (2014) *Consolidating a hybrid regime: the case of Georgia under Shevardnadze and Saakashvili*. Società Italiana di Scienza Politica (SISP), University of Perugia, Sep. 2014, Pérouse, Italy. fhal-03647230f. Available at: <https://sciencespo.hal.science/hal-03647230v1>.
21. [European Higher Education Area and Bologna Process. \(ehea.info\)](https://ehea.info).
22. Forrester G and Garratt D (2016) *Education policy unraveled*. 2nd ed. London, UK: Bloomsbury.

23. Gale T (2001) *Critical policy sociology: historiography, archaeology and genealogy as methods of policy analysis*, Journal of Education Policy, 16:5, 379-393, doi: 10.1080/02680930110071002.
24. Gvishiany N and Chapman D (2002). *Republic of Georgia Higher Education Sector Study*. Prepared for World Bank, Washington, DC. <http://hdl.handle.net/10986/33189> License: CC BY 3.0 IGO.
25. Hueske A-K and Pontoppidan CA (2020) “GEROCO: a model for integrating sustainability in management education at HEIs”, in Sengupta E, Blessinger P and Mahoney C (eds), *Leadership Strategies for Promoting Social Responsibility in Higher Education, Innovations in Higher Education Teaching and Learning*, Emerald Publishing Limited, Bingley, England, Vol. 24, pp. 93-109, doi: 10.1108/S2055-364120200000024009.
26. Argyrou A and Hummels H (2021) *Planetary demands: Redefining sustainable development and sustainable entrepreneurship*. Journal of Cleaner Production, Vol 278, 123849. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2020.123849>.
27. Jibladze E and Glonti L (2018) ‘*Higher education systems and institutions, Georgia*,’ in P Teixeira and JC Shin (eds.) *Encyclopedia of International Higher Education Systems and Institutions*, Dordrecht: Springer. [org/10.1007/978-94-017-9553-1\\_393-1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-017-9553-1_393-1).
28. Kalinnikova L and Trygged S (2014) *A retrospective on care and denial of children with disabilities in Russia*. Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research, 16 (3), pp. 229-248.
29. Kalinnikova Magnusson, L, and Rosenqvist Aulin J (2021) . *Development of special needs education in the Republic of Moldova: Paradoxes as to inclusion*. N Bahdanovich Hanssen, S-E Hansén, and K Ström (eds.) *Dialogues between Northern and Eastern Europe on the Development of Inclusion: Theoretical and Practical Perspectives*. Routledge. pp. 168-187.
30. Kartsivadze M and Vatcharadze A (2020) *The events of April 1978 in Tbilisi and excerpts from the western press*. Open Society Foundations, Institute for freedom of information and development. Epub ahead of print 14 April 2020.
31. Kitiashvili Z (2016) *General Education Reform in Georgia 1991–2013*. PhD Thesis, Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University, Georgia.

32. Kushnir I, Agbor E-E, Marcellus F-M, and Kennedy Ch-R (2024), *The Orchestration of a Sustainable Development Agenda in the European Higher Education*. *Area International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education* 25(1) pp. 143-160.
33. Labor Code of Georgia (2024/17/09), N4113 ობ, Chapter 2 and Chapter 5, articles 26, 27. Available at: <https://matsne.gov.ge/en/document/view/1155567?publication=26> (accessed 10 August 2024).
34. Lezhava D and Amashukeli M (2015) *Boloniis Procesis Shephaeba Sakartveloshi: Dzirjadi Mightsevebi da Gamotsvevebi* [Assessment of the Bologna Process in Georgia: major achievements and challenges]. Tbilisi: Center for Social Sciences.
35. Lindensjö B and Lundgren U.P (1986) *Politisk styrning och utbildningsreformer (Political Steering and Educational Reforms)*. Helsingborg: Schmidts Boktryckeri.
36. Lindensjö B and Lundgren U.P (2000) *Utbildningsreformer och politisk styrning (Educational Reforms and Political Steering)*. Stockholm: HLS Förlag.
37. Matcharashvili R (2020) *Statistical data on persons with disabilities in Georgia and challenges in this regard, Coalition for Independent Living*.
38. Mertens D-M, Sullivan M, and Stace H (2011) *Disability Communities: Transformative research for Social Justice*. (eds) Denzin N-K and Lincoln Y-S. *Qualitative Research, The Sage Handbook*, pp. 227-241.
39. Ministerial Conference in Prague (2001). *Prague Communiqué, 18-19 May*. Available at: TOWARDS THE EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION AREA.
40. National Statistics Service of Georgia (2024). *Indicators of higher and professional educational institutions 2023-2024* (accessed 10 august 2024).
41. Otchet, Evropeiskii Fond Obrazovania (2002). *Professionalnoe obrazovanie I obucenie v Gruzii* [Vocational Education and Training in Georgia]. National Observational Programs of the European Fund of Education: Report.
42. Ozga J (2000) *Policy research in educational settings—Contested terrain*. Buckingham, UK: Open University Press.
43. Patton C, Sawicki D, and Clark J (2012) *Basic Methods of Policy Analysis and Planning*. 3rd ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson, p. 28.
44. Pignatti N (2019) *Higher Education Reform in Georgia: Challenges and Opportunities*. Policy Report. Available at: <https://iset-pi.ge/storage/media/other/2021-10-06/f801cce0-2673-11ec-bd97-25fa0095a319.pdf>.

45. Pushaev U (2013) *Istoriya i teoriya Zagorskogo experimenta [The history and the theory of Zagorsky' experiment]* Voprosi Filosofii, 3:132-147.
46. Sartania K (2021) *The Future of Georgia Project. Struggle and Sacrifice: Narratives of Georgia's Modern History*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.
47. Scott John C (2006) *The Mission of the University: Medieval to Postmodern Transformations*. The Journal of Higher Education. Special Issue: Moving into the Next 75 Years. 77(1), pp. 1-39.
48. Spangenberg JH (2011) *Sustainability science: a review, an analysis and some empirical lessons*. Environ Conserv 38 (3), pp. 275-287. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0376892911000270>.
49. Spivakovsky C, MacVilly K, Zirnsak M T-M, Ainsworth S, Graham L, Harrison M, Sojo V, Gale L, and Genat A (2023). *The ontology and epistemology shaping our understanding of inclusion: A critical review of the research literature on disability and inclusion*. Journal of Policy and Practice in Intellectual Disabilities, 20(3), pp. 273–288. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/jppi.12461>.
50. Tabatadze S and Gorgadze N (2016). *Study of the effectiveness of a one-year training program in the Georgian language*. Center for Civic integration and interethnic relations.
51. Tchintcharauli T and Javakhishvili N (2017). *Inclusive education in Georgia: current trends and challenges*. British Journal of Special Education. 44 (4). pp. 465-483.
52. *The Constitution of Georgia (1995)* N786/31-33, articles 11, 14. Available at: <https://matsne.gov.ge/en/document/view/30346?publication=36> (accessed 1 August 2024).
53. *The Law of Georgia on General Education (2005)* 1330 LHG, 20, articles 3,5,6,7,9,13,21. Available at: <https://matsne.gov.ge/en/document/view/29248?publication=68> (accessed 1 August 2024).
54. *The Law of Georgia on Higher Education (2005)* N688 LHG, 2, articles 1,2,43. Available at: <https://matsne.gov.ge/en/document/view/32830?publication=56> (accessed 1 August 2024).
55. *The Law of Georgia on vocational education (2007)* N4528/15. Available at: <https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/23608?publication=17>(accessed 1 may 2024).
56. *The Law of Georgia on the Rights of persons with disabilities (2020)* N 6823-6b, articles 1,3,8. Available at: <https://matsne.gov.ge/en/document/view/4923984?publication=0>(accessed 9 may 2024).
57. *The Law of Georgia on Social Protection of persons with disabilities (1995)* N756, articles 1, 17. Available at: <https://matsne.gov.ge/en/document/view/30316?publication=8> (accessed 9 may 2024).

58. *The Law of Georgia on Vocational Education (2018)* N3442-Il, articles 2,3,4. Available at: <https://matsne.gov.ge/en/document/view/4334842?publication=0> (accessed 9 August 2024).
59. *The Law of Georgia on Elimination of all forms of Discrimination (2014)* N2391-III, articles 1,2. Available at: <https://matsne.gov.ge/en/document/view/2339687?publication=0> (accessed 10 August 2024).
60. *The Law of Georgia on Education Quality Improvement (2010)* N3531, chapters 3,4. Available at: <https://matsne.gov.ge/en/document/view/93064?publication=10> (accessed 9 August 2024).
61. *The order on approval of authorization fees and authorization regulations for educational institutions*'' (2010) 995, article 10/᠑. Available at: <https://matsne.gov.ge/en/document/view/1031755?publication=0> (accessed 9 August 2024).
62. *The Ordinance on the approval of the rules for the introduction, development, and monitoring of inclusive education, as well as the identification mechanism of students with special educational needs,* (2018) N166. Available at: <https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/4007539?publication=0>.
63. *The Ordinance of the government N84 on the approval of National goals of education, (2004),* LHG 122, Available at: [matsne.gov.ge/en/document/view/11098?publication=0](https://matsne.gov.ge/en/document/view/11098?publication=0).
64. *The Resolution of the Parliament of Georgia - On the approval Of national goals of general education, Parliament of Georgia, (2024)* 4261-XIV᠔᠖-X᠔3. Available at: <https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/6193624?publication=0> (accessed 17 June 2024).
65. Tsikhistavi-Khutsishvili N (2014) *Conflict Resolution and Peace-building*. Historical Archive of Georgia by the International Center on Conflict and Negotiation (ICCN) pp. pp21-94.
66. UNESCO (1994), *The Salamanca Statement and framework for action on special needs education.* Salamanca. Spain: UNESCO. Available at: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000098427> (accessed 12 July 2024).
67. United Nations: Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2015) *Sustainable Development. Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.* Available at: <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal4> (accessed 13 June 2024).
68. United Nations (2006) *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.* Available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hrbodies/crpd/pages/conventionrightspersonswithdisabilities.aspx> (accessed 13 June 2024).

69. United Nations (2015) *Research Guides: UN Documentation: Development: 2000-2015, Millennium Development Goals*. Available at: <https://research.un.org/en/docs/dev/2000-2015> (accessed 24 July 2024).
70. United Nations (1987) Brundtland Report. Available at: <https://www.are.admin.ch/are/en/home/media/publications/sustainable-development/brundtland-report.html> (accessed 15 July 2024).