

Recruitment Agents in International Higher Education: An Ambivalent Actor

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Abstract: This paper examines the ambivalent role of international student recruitment agents in the rapid internationalization of higher education in Georgia. Drawing on the original dataset and national statistics, the study analyzes how recruitment agents have become central intermediaries in attracting international students, particularly to private medical programs. While agents facilitate access to higher education by providing linguistic, cultural, and procedural support, especially for students with limited social capital, their commission-based model also introduces significant ethical and academic risks. The Georgian case illustrates how recruitment practices can become highly commercialized in contexts of limited regulation, prioritizing volume and revenue over academic fit and quality assurance. The paper further discusses the implications for emerging education hubs in Central Asia, notably Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, where similar dynamics are unfolding. It argues for nuanced, student-centered governance frameworks that recognize recruitment agents as indispensable yet risky actors in international higher education.

Keywords: ambivalence, corruption, Georgia, higher education, international agents

აბსტრაქტი: ნაშრომი საქართველოში საერთაშორისო სტუდენტების მოზიდვის აგენტების ორმხრივ როლს განიხილავს უმაღლესი განათლების სწრაფი ინტერნაციონალიზაციის პირობებში. პირველად მონაცემებსა და ეროვნულ სტატისტიკაზე დაყრდნობით, კვლევა აანალიზებს, თუ როგორ იქცნენ რეკრუტირების აგენტები საერთაშორისო სტუდენტების მოზიდვის მთავარ დამაკავშირებელ რგოლად, განსაკუთრებით კერძო სამედიცინო პროგრამების შემთხვევაში. კვლევის შედეგები მიუთითებს, რომ აგენტები უცხოელი სტუდენტებისთვის უმაღლესი განათლების ხელმისაწვდომობას ზრდიან, განსაკუთრებით ენობრივი, კულტურული და ადმინისტრაციული მხარდაჭერის უზრუნველყოფის გზით. ეს მნიშვნელოვანია შეზღუდული სოციალური კაპიტალის მქონე სტუდენტებისთვის, რომელთაც საგანმანათლებლო სისტემებში ორიენტირება დამოუკიდებლად უჭირთ. თუმცა, რადგანაც აგენტთა საქმიანობა ფინანსური სარგებლის მიღებას ეფუძნება, იქმნება განათლების კომერციალიზაციის ტენდენციები და სერიოზული ეთიკური და აკადემიური რისკები ჩნდება.

საქართველოს შემთხვევა ცხადყოფს, რომ სუსტი და ფრაგმენტული რეგულაციების პირობებში საერთაშორისო სტუდენტების მოზიდვის პრაქტიკა შეიძლება უკიდურესად კომერციალიზდეს, რის შედეგადაც რაოდენობრივი მაჩვენებლები და ფინანსური მოგება განათლების ხარისხზე მნიშვნელოვანი გახდება. ნაშრომში მაგალითებად მოყვანილია ცენტრალური აზიის ისეთი განვითარებადი საგანმანათლებლო ცენტრები, როგორებიცაა

ყაზახეთი და უზბეკეთი, რომლებშიც საქართველოს მსგავსი დინამიკა იკვეთება. კვლევა სტუდენტზე ორიენტირებული მმართველობის აუცილებლობაზე მიუთითებს. ამავდროულად, იგი რეკრუტირების აგენტებს საერთაშორისო უმაღლესი განათლების სისტემის მნიშვნელოვან, თუმცა პოტენციურად რისკის შემცველ აქტორებად განიხილავს.

საკვანძო სიტყვები: ამბივალენტობა, კორუფცია, საქართველო, უმაღლესი განათლება, საერთაშორისო სტუდენტების მოზიდვის აგენტები

Андатпа: Мақала Грузиядағы жоғары білімнің қарқынды интернационалдануы жағдайында шетелдік студенттерді тартумен айналысатын халықаралық рекрутинг агенттерінің екіұшты рөлін қарастырады. Бастапқы деректер жиынтығы мен ұлттық статистикаға сүйене отырып, зерттеу рекрутинг агенттерінің шетелдік студенттерді, әсіресе ақылы негіздегі медициналық бағдарламаларға тартуда қалайша негізгі делдалдарға айналғанын талдайды. Агенттер, әсіресе әлеуметтік капиталы шектеулі студенттерге тілдік, мәдени және рәсімдік қолдау көрсету арқылы жоғары білімге қол жеткізуді жеңілдеткенімен, олардың комиссияға негізделген жұмыс моделі елеулі этикалық және академиялық қауіп-қатерлер туғызады. Грузия мысалы реттеу тетіктері шектеулі жағдайда студент тарту тәжірибелері қаншалықты коммерцияланып кетуі мүмкін екенін көрсетеді және мұндай жағдайда академиялық сәйкестік пен білім сапасын қамтамасыз етуден гөрі студент санын көбейту мен табыс табу бірінші орынға шығады. Мақалада сондай-ақ Орталық Азиядағы, атап айтқанда Қазақстан мен Өзбекстандағы қалыптасып келе жатқан білім беру хабтары үшін ықтимал салдарлар талқыланады, өйткені бұл елдерде де осыған ұқсас үдерістер байқалуда. Авторлар халықаралық жоғары білім беру саласында рекрутинг агенттерін қажетті, бірақ тәуекелі жоғары қатысушылар ретінде мойындайтын, студентке бағдарланған сындарлы басқару тетіктерін қалыптастыру қажет екенін дәлелдейді.

Түйін сөздер: екіұштылық, сыбайлас жемқорлық, Грузия, жоғары білім, халықаралық агенттер

Introduction: Growth and Internationalization of Higher Education in Georgia

In recent years, Georgia has experienced a rapid expansion in its higher education sector. Between 2024 and 2025, total student enrolment increased by 5.6%, reaching 187,799 students (Geostat, 2025), a significant figure for a country with a population of approximately 3.7 million. Georgia is currently home to 62 higher education institutions—19 public and 43 private—many of which are relatively small and teaching-focused rather than research-intensive. Student admissions have also risen sharply, reaching a historic high of 50,128 in the 2022–2023 academic year and increasing further to 54,212 in 2024–2025 (Geostat, 2025). A central driver of this growth has been the rapid increase in international student enrolment. Since 2020, the number of international students in Georgian HEIs has tripled, reaching approximately 37,100 in 2024–2025, or nearly one in five students nationwide (Geostat, 2025). Georgia's appeal as a study destination is largely explained by affordable tuition fees, a relatively low cost of living, and its reputation as a safe country (Gazdeliani, 2021). International students have thus become a crucial source of revenue and sectoral growth.

International Students and Institutional Concentration

International student enrolment in Georgia is highly concentrated by field of study and institutional type. The vast majority of international students are enrolled in medicine and other healthcare-related programs, while participation in non-medical disciplines remains limited. Medical programs in Georgia typically span six years, effectively integrating bachelor's and master's-level training within a single

degree, in contrast to many international programs that last only three to four years. This extended duration generates additional tuition payments and provides more stable revenue streams for institutions. Approximately 80% of international students are enrolled in private universities, reflecting the central role of private institutions in medical education, the widespread availability of English-taught programs, relatively flexible admissions procedures, and targeted international marketing strategies. Students from India constitute the largest group (around 55%), followed by growing cohorts from Jordan, Israel, and Sudan (Titvinidze, 2025). This pattern underscores how internationalization strategies can become narrowly oriented toward revenue-generating disciplines, raising broader questions about diversification, academic balance, and long-term sustainability. Recent policy initiatives may further reshape this landscape. Proposed reforms would introduce stricter regulation of international students—including language requirements, participation monitoring, admission quotas, and tighter residence-permit rules—while directing most international enrolment away from public universities and toward private institutions. Although framed by the government as a response to migration-management and oversight concerns, these measures have raised questions about university internationalization, institutional autonomy, and Georgia's future attractiveness as a regional education hub (Civil Georgia, 2026; On.ge, 2025).

The rapid growth of international enrolment has been accompanied by the expansion of international recruitment agencies, which now play a central role in student mobility to Georgia. An international recruitment agency can be understood as a specialized company—or a dedicated division within a larger corporation—that facilitates the recruitment of international students on behalf of higher education institutions. These agencies typically operate under formal contractual agreements with institutions and generate revenue through commissions or referral fees for applicants or enrolled students (Salem, et al., 2025).

Recruitment agents therefore occupy an inherently ambivalent position within higher education systems (Denisova-Schmidt et al., 2020; Reisberg and Altbach, 2023). Following Ledeneva (Ledeneva, 2018, 2024), we understand ambivalence as the coexistence of supportive and problematic functions within the same practice. Recruitment agents can serve as practical shortcuts that help students and universities navigate linguistic, cultural, and administrative barriers, thereby facilitating access and mobility. At the same time, these shortcuts may generate new risks, including opacity, dependency, conflicts of interest, and weak quality assurance. In this sense, recruitment agents should be viewed neither simply as indispensable partners nor as unethical actors, but as powerful intermediaries whose benefits and risks must be governed together (Stecklow, et. al., 2016).

From a normative perspective, agents function as key facilitators of access. They often possess local knowledge, linguistic competence, and cultural familiarity that universities lack, particularly in contexts where official information channels or public advisory services are limited. They assist prospective students with applications, documentation, and visa procedures, thereby lowering barriers to international study, especially for students with limited social or cultural capital. From an institutional perspective, agents also provide a cost-effective recruitment strategy, allowing universities to scale international enrolment without investing in overseas offices or permanent staff. Given the financial significance of international students, agent-mediated recruitment has become integral to many institutional sustainability strategies.

From a critical perspective, however, this model introduces serious ethical and academic risks. Commission-based remuneration may incentivize recruitment volume over academic fit, potentially steering students toward programs or institutions that maximize agent income rather than student outcomes. Misleading marketing, exaggerated claims about employment or migration prospects, and

opaque agent–institution relationships can further undermine trust (Curtis and Ellis, 2025). In some cases, inappropriate assistance with application materials may blur the line between legitimate support and academic misconduct, jeopardizing admissions integrity and student preparedness.

Georgia provides a particularly revealing illustration of this ambivalence. Our national study on academic and research integrity, conducted in 2025 across public and private higher education institutions in Georgia (Denisova-Schmidt and Sitchinava, 2027), reveals that, in a context of limited global visibility and underdeveloped internationalization strategies, recruitment agencies have frequently operated as de facto promoters for private universities rather than as independent advisors. The study draws on 34 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with senior faculty members (n=12), university administrators (n=11), and early-career researchers (n=11). Participants were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling. Interviews were conducted in Georgian—the native language of both the interviewer and the interviewees—to preserve linguistic and contextual nuance. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and full anonymization was applied. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Although the broader project focused on academic and research integrity within Georgian higher education institutions, the role of recruitment agents emerged as an unexpected but important theme. One senior administrator explicitly identified their growing influence as a potential risk to the integrity of the sector. According to our respondents their influence increased substantially after 2022, when large numbers of international students—predominantly from India and the Middle East—transferred from Ukraine, many of them enrolling in medical programs (Turkmen et al., 2024). For these students, unfamiliar with the Georgian language and higher education system, agents became the primary intermediaries. *“Students mostly went to private universities [...] there are agents who bring these students, and it’s a big business, especially in the medical field”* as one senior interview partner revealed. On the one side, agents and universities facilitated the continuity of study for international students displaced from Ukraine, whose situation often remained under the radar of many decision-makers (Denisova-Schmidt and Marmilova, 2026; Ghimire, et. al., 2022).

By admitting these students at different stages of their studies, Georgian institutions enabled many of them to continue and complete their degrees. On the other side, recruitment increasingly resembled a highly commercialized “business,” with limited attention to academic level, preparedness, or quality assurance. This raises critical concerns about transparency, standards, and the dominance of financial incentives over educational values.

Implications for Central Asia: Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan

The Georgian case offers some important lessons for Central Asia, particularly Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, both of which are rapidly expanding their higher education sectors and positioning themselves as regional education hubs. The comparison is grounded in striking statistical parallels. In Kazakhstan, the number of international students reached an all-time high of 35,075 in the 2025 academic year—an 11% increase from the previous year—with Indian students forming the largest cohort, at 9,959 students (Birbayeva, 2025). Similarly, in Uzbekistan, 37,200 foreign citizens visited for educational purposes in 2025, representing a 54.3% increase, while Indian enrollment in medical programs alone rose from 3,500 to over 10,000 in a single year (Martin, 2026). Like Georgia, these countries are witnessing rising international student enrolment, increasing private-sector participation, and growing reliance on recruitment intermediaries to access global markets. As internationalization accelerates, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan face similar risks of over-commercialization, concentration in specific disciplines (such as medicine or engineering), and dependence on loosely regulated recruitment agents. The ambivalence observed in Georgia suggests that recruitment agencies should be treated as strategic actors requiring careful governance rather than neutral service providers. Without clear regulatory

frameworks, accreditation mechanisms, and transparency requirements, recruitment practices may undermine academic quality, student welfare, and institutional credibility. At the same time, the Georgian experience also demonstrates that recruitment agents are likely to remain indispensable, particularly in regions where public advising infrastructure is weak and global competition for students is intensifying. For Central Asian systems, the challenge is therefore not whether to use recruitment agents, but how to govern them responsibly—through clear disclosure rules, shared ethical standards, institutional accountability, and student-centered oversight mechanisms.

Conclusion: Governing Ambivalence in International Recruitment

Recruitment agencies represent an ambivalent but powerful force in the internationalization of higher education. They can expand access, facilitate mobility, and support institutional growth, while simultaneously posing risks to academic integrity, equity, and quality assurance. The Georgian case illustrates how quickly recruitment can become commercialized in the absence of robust governance and how financial imperatives may override educational considerations. For emerging education hubs such as Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, recognizing and addressing this ambivalence early is crucial. Rather than adopting binary positions that portray agents as either indispensable partners or inherently problematic actors, policymakers and universities should pursue nuanced, student-centered governance approaches. Transparent regulation, ethical oversight, and alignment with broader educational values are essential if recruitment agencies are to contribute positively to sustainable internationalization rather than undermine it.

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