

Barriers to Education and Career Choice for Young People with Incomplete Secondary Education in Georgia

Anastasia Kitiashvili
Associate Professor

Tamar Abashidze
Associate Professor

Irine Zhvania
Associate Professor
anastasia.kitiashvili@tsu.ge

Faculty of psychology and educational sciences Tbilisi State University, Tbilisi, Georgia, email id:

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Abstract – Students have to make important career decision after basic education (ninth grade), which is the last year of compulsory education in Georgia. Students have an option to complete secondary education (twelfth grade), or do a Vocational Education or leave school and try to find a job. Taking into account that students have limited access to career information and advice it is interesting to investigate if they make informed decision. The aim of this research was to identify the barriers to education that prevent students from education and their career choice after basic education. The survey was carried out with 320 young people who left school and focus groups were conducted with 24 participants. Participants were selected using convenience sampling. The findings show that young people had to make uninformed decisions after leaving school. Most made their decisions independently and had no relevant career counselling or labour market information. Although parents opposed their child's desire to stop learning, many youth decided to leave their studies, because of the poor economic situation of their families, which forced them to start working early to earn an income. Most of the respondents were unemployed, however, and those who were employed worked at low-level positions with low incomes. Although most of the participants regret their decision about leaving education, their future plans are little-related to continuing education. Students who want to continue their studies tend to express their positive attitudes towards VET. They believe that one of the main reasons for their unemployment is a lack of skills and competencies. It is important to implement relevant interventions for this target group to help them to return to education for improving their career opportunities.

Keywords – Barriers to Education, Young People, Attitudes Towards Education.

I. INTRODUCTION

Investment in education is beneficial in many ways, both for individuals and for society as a whole. Education has been shown to contribute to individual income as well as to overall economic growth (Stevens & Weale, 2003). It is associated with improved health, equity, and social inclusion. Education gives people an opportunity for self-realization and the development of intellectual skills related to their welfare. That's why completing secondary education and continuing at higher levels have become more common in EU countries (Green, Hodson, Sakamoto & Spoons, 1999).

Research findings suggest that income and employment opportunities increase with the level of education, and are positively associated with the percentage of the labour force in salaried employment (Rahman, 2006, Hanushek, 2013). An educated work force can more easily meet job requirements and develop innovative technologies that

promote their career advancement. The income of those with incomplete education is 23% less compared to secondary education graduates (OECD, 2012). Persons who lack educational opportunities are more likely to experience long periods of unemployment and a higher risk of poverty than those with a full secondary education background. They're also less likely to return to study later in life too (Bridgeland, Dilulio & Morison, 2006). EU political discourses emphasize the linkage between early school leaving, unemployment and social exclusion (Rocha, C, Macedo, M, Araújo, H.C., Clycq, N. & Timmerman, Ch, 2015). Leaving school without qualifications is also correlated with poor health and inactive citizenship (Vanttaja & Järvinen, 2006).

A number of countries have been strikingly successful in keeping youth unemployment low. These are for example Austria, Denmark, the Netherlands and Germany. In these countries labour market programmes take up a high share of GDP. For example, in 2008-09 they accounted for the following proportion of GDP - Austria (1.83%); Denmark (2.56%); Netherlands (2.31%) and Germany (1.91%) (Bell & Blanch flower, 2010).

Studies show that education levels positively correlate with factors that contribute to social inclusion. In both developed and developing countries there is a high correlation between education and health related issues including mortality rate, frequency of morbidity and healthy self-esteem (Cave, 2001). Interestingly, association is not directly dependent on income, race or social status (OECD, 2001a), but is mediated by the level of competence in processing information, which is a result of education (Cave, 2001).

Education also reduces social stereotypes. For example, women's education is considered a catalyst for gender equality. Investing in education also has a positive impact on women's success and well-being (Malhotra, Pande & Grown, 2003).

The level of education affects not only the individual's success but also the economic and social development of the country. The number of years spent on education correlates positively with the economic development of the country. Acquired skills and competences are directly related to economic growth (Hanushek, 2013). Citizens with an incomplete education are less likely to work, and are less productive, have less income, pay less taxes, or none at all. The countries where the participation of young people in education is high at all levels of education – secondary, VET and higher education – have a high level of economic development. Today's rapidly growing economies depend on the creation, distribution, and use of

knowledge that requires educated and skilled labour. In the developing world, the economic situation often forces young people to leave their studies and search for a job at early age. Accordingly, their contribution to the economic and social development of the country is reduced (Hanushek, 2013).

Education is a social act too – it promotes human capital development, the establishment of trust and tolerance between people, and the formation of social norms and values. It defines three important components of social capital: the establishment of trust, the development of social networks, and the formation of acts and behaviour that encourage inclusion in society (Balatti & Falk, 2002; Schuller, Bynner, Gree., Blackwell, Hammond, Preston., & Gough, 2001) Finally, education promotes citizens' participation in democratic institutions and politics (Dee, 2003; Milligan, Moretti & Oreopoulos, 2004).

In all countries, secondary education is acknowledged as an agent for nation building and social cohesion (Buckland, 2005). If well planned, secondary education has the potential to offer an environment where adolescents can gain the economic and social skills and knowledge as well as develop the necessary competences to avoid risky behavior and follow a more healthy life (UNESCO, 2010; World Bank, 2005b).

Research, that was conducted about the meaning that youths attribute to attending secondary education, shows that youths describe it as an important space for the full constitution and consolidation of life. None of the youths reported not to like to attend such a formal education environment (Tomazetti & Schlickmann, 2016).

Barriers to Education and Decision-Making processes

The decision to leave school is a process that lasts from one to three years, until the student actually drops out (Allensworth, 2005; Neild & Balfanz, 2006). It is known that students with a risk of leaving education are often influenced by certain socio-economic factors as well as their academic achievement. These factors constitute barriers to education for young people (Kilpatrick & Abbott-Chapman, 2002).

Socio-economic status is a complex phenomenon. It includes such factors as the education level of parents, family income (Williams, Long, Carpenter & Hayden, 1993), ethnic identity such as minorities, gender, etc.

One of the most important risk factors for leaving education is a low academic performance, which leads to low scores, missed lessons and difficulties acquiring the understanding of subjects (Roderick, 1994; Allensworth, 2005; Rumberger, 1973). Students who encounter difficulties with the curriculum leave earlier. This also includes persons with disabilities and ethnic minorities.

In addition, impact of being overage for grade during adolescence may explain a large proportion of the higher dropout rates among retained youth (Roderick, 1994).

Thus, education barriers are diverse. One of the well-known models that describes these barriers is a Cross model (Cross, 1992) that distinguishes three types of barriers: situational, institutional and dispositional.

Situational barriers include a lack of time, the extent of family responsibilities, transportation problems, etc. Institutional barriers include accessibility (distance, structural issues, etc.) to educational institutions, procedural issues and information lacuna on programs and procedures.

Dispositional barriers are related to attitudes, often negative, towards education, when education is considered to be an undesirable and unnecessary activity; it also includes low self-esteem by students. Thus, a student can have some control over dispositional barriers (Cross, 1992), while institutional and situational barriers are less subject to their control.

Students at risk of leaving school too soon often face such dispositional barriers as less involvement in school life, less interest in subjects, learning difficulties, and less motivation to attend lessons. They often think that parents and teachers have no expectations for them and their parents are often less likely to be interested in their education; teachers are also less motivated to teach them (Bridgel and et al., 2006). Situational barriers for rural students include fewer and smaller schools, with a less diverse curriculum. Students often have limited information on educational opportunities. (Abbott-Chapman & Kilpatrick, 2001; Kilpatrick & Abbott-Chapman, 2002).

The Context of Georgia

According to the Education Management System of Georgia (EMIS) data in 2015-16 academic year about 7880 pupils (3245 girls and 4635 boys) left the school at the grades of 9-12, that is about 6.9% of pupils of this age group; about 8252 pupils (3178 girls and 5074 boys) left the school in 2016-17 academic year that is about 7.4% of this age group.

According to recent data 9.4% aged 15-29 stopped studying in any of the educational institutions (general, vocational, higher educational institutions), and 4.3% left school (Geostat, 2016; UNICEF, 2013). Most youth who left education - 27% - cited financial problems for continuing, 9% mentioned family conditions, and 19% stopped for reasons of pregnancy (Generation in the Transition Period, Youth Study 2016 - Georgia, 2016). Thus the main barriers are situational.

Most youth (66.9%) have sufficient information about how to enrol in educational institutions and the curricula offered, however 17.7% are not informed (Geostat, 2016).

Problem of Research

The research literature widely recognises the importance of education in increasing likelihood for young people to enter and remain in labour market and enjoy opportunities for a higher quality of life. There is a lack of research in Georgia on how informed decision make young people about leaving school after the ninth grade, which is the last year of obligatory education. Similarly, there is a lack of information on motives and needs of young people to quite education, which is essential for policy planning and strategies to improve access to continues education or entering into labour market. The aim of this research was to identify the barriers to education and career choice of young students after basic education. Systematic research

is necessary for developing an evidence-based education policy for youth without basic education.

The main research questions were:

1. What are the main barriers to education and causes for young people for leaving education?
2. What are attitudes of young people towards education: General and Higher education, Vocational Education and Training (VET)?
3. What are the employment status of respondents and main employment-related difficulties?
4. What are the future career plan of the students?

II. METHOD

For data collection, a survey was carried out with youth. Researchers interviewed 320 respondents at home for face-to-face interviews. The survey interviews continued about 20-25 minutes. Before started the interview every potential participant was given an explanation of all salient features of the research as well as the opportunity to decline to participate in the research.

Three focus groups were conducted, involving a total of 24 young people. Focus groups continued about 75 minutes.

Research Sample

Both self-administered survey and focus groups were conducted in April-June 2016 in Tbilisi in compliance with ethical norms. Survey was conducted, with the participation of 320 young people who had already left education after the ninth grade. Respondents included 200 males and 120 females, with an average age of 21 ($SD = 3.68$; minimum-17, maximum. - 29). Respondents were selected using accessible sampling.

During the survey, three focus groups were conducted, involving a total of 24 participants. Informants included 12 males and 12 females, with an average age of 20 ($SD = 3$; min.-17, max. - 29).

Respondents were selected according to the following criteria: 1) age: 15-29 2) at least one full year had passed since leaving education; 3) had not attended any educational institution after leaving the ninth grade.

Instrument and Procedures

The survey used a targeted questionnaire with closed-ended questions and some open-ended ones. The questionnaire contained 25 variables that was divided into 4 broad sections: demographics/ family situation; reasons for leaving school and barriers to education; education and employment related issues. The questionnaire was piloted with a sample size of 25 persons.

The guidebook used in the focus groups included 10 questions concerning the termination of learning, evaluation of their decision, their attitudes towards the importance of education and their future plans.

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Data Analysis

Quantitative data was analysed using SPSS 23. The data were interned in SPSS and verified for accuracy and missing values. Descriptive statistics were tabulated for each of the respondent-type variables. Focus group data was analysed using content analysis.

III. RESULTS

Reasons for Leaving Education

The large majority of respondents (84%) said that they had to quit their education due to family reasons and/or to start to work. Only 6% of respondents stopped studying after ninth grade to attend VET, but then they changed their plans and did not continue studying. A smaller group (4%) indicated that they quit because they no longer wanted to learn. There were other various reasons (6%) such as marriage, living in a conflict zone, and peer pressure.

Almost all respondents (93%) say that they independently made their decision to terminate their studies. A small percentage stated that their decision was made with others (parent, boyfriend, school psychologist) (see Figure 1).

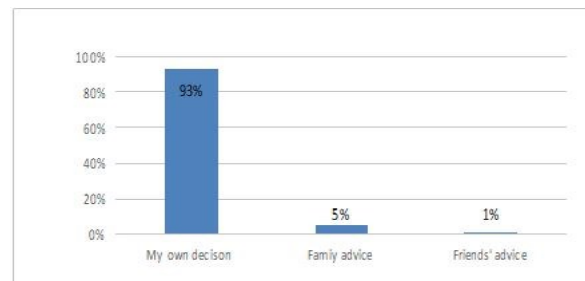


Fig. 1. Decision to leave education.

It appeared that students started considering leaving education much earlier, already in seventh grade, while the final decision was made at the end of the eighth or ninth grade. Despite the fact that most of the respondents decided independently to terminate their studies, most of them - 62.3% -thought they made a mistake and regretted their decision. However, 36.5% express the opposite opinion, and still believe they made a correct and relevant decision (see Figure 2).

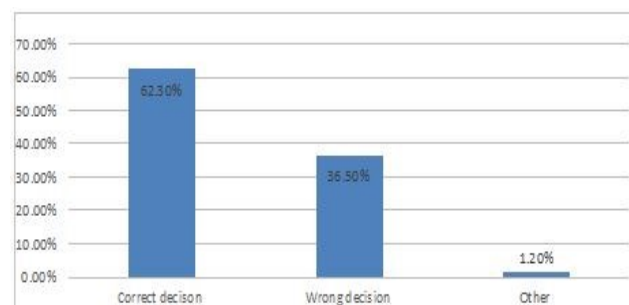


Fig. 2. Evaluation of decision to quit education.

Attitudes towards Education

Attitudes towards education are sometimes the motivator for education and reflected in future behaviour.

To understand young people's attitudes towards different steps of education - general, professional and higher we explored the subject. Respondents generally have a positive attitude towards education, the most positive attitude being towards VET, then higher education. The attitudes towards secondary education were "neutral" or "slightly positive".

Majority had a positive attitude towards vocational education (75%) or a neutral attitude 21.8%); for higher education 68.2% had a positive attitude and 27.5% had a neutral attitude; towards secondary education only 28.8% had a positive attitude and almost half of respondents (48.6%) had a neutral attitude. A small number of respondents had a negative attitude towards the various levels of education, but mostly towards secondary education (22.60%) (see Figure 3).

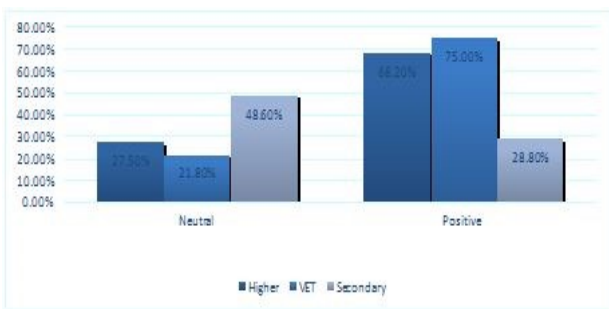


Fig. 3. Attitudes towards secondary, Vocational education and training and higher education.

Although most of the participants in the survey regret their decision about leaving education, their future plans are little-related to continuing education. Asking whether they intend to continue their studies in the future, nearly half of the survey participants (45.6%) responded negatively. However, 31.9% of respondents plan to continue their studies, mostly in vocational education. A small percentage of respondents planned to participate in different types of training (2.5%) or higher education (5.6%) (see Figure 4).

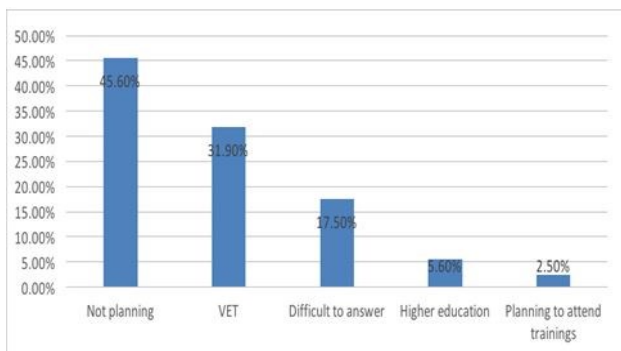


Fig. 4. Intention to continue education.

Barriers to Continuing Education

It was important to identify barriers that prevent young people from pursuing their studies. This issue is important in cases where students regretted abandoning their studies.

The main barrier was a perceived need to start work (83.1%). Most of these youth believed that work and study

cannot be carried out simultaneously, and they chose to work. A small number of respondents thought it is too late for them to continue their studies, or were not interested in continuing (see Figure 5).

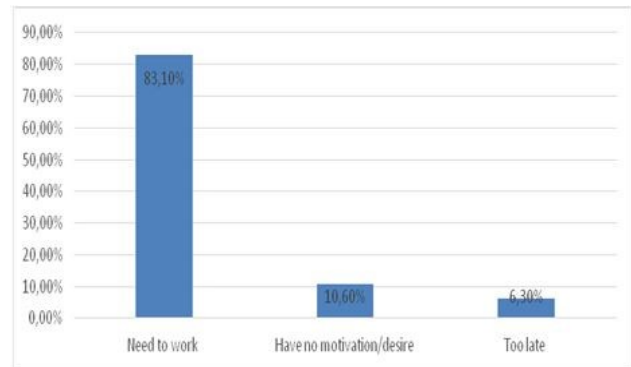


Fig. 5. Barriers to continuing education.

Young people who wish to continue their studies are slightly older ($M = 22.38$; $SD = 3.87$; Min.-18, Max.-29), than those who do not want to continue their studies ($M = 21.78$; $SD = 2.54$; Min.-18, Max.-29). Absolute majority of the members who want to continue their studies are man (92.7%), some part are employed - 27.9%. Majority of them assess family's economic situation as average (70.9%); Part as a short-handed (16.3%), only a small portion (12.8%) as wealthy.

Young students who wanted to continue their studies were much more likely to regret dropping out from school (64%) than those young people who do not plan to continue (6%) (Chi-square = 8.384; $P < .05$). Those who wanted to continue their studies had the most positive attitudes towards VET ($M = 4.14$; $SD = .66$), then towards higher education ($M = 4$; $SD = 0.5$; $X^2 = 8.384$; $P < .05$).

Employment Related Issues

Most participants left their education to start work. Thus it was important to investigate how they managed to solve problems related to employment after leaving the study, in particular, if they started working, what fields they were employed in and how satisfied they were with work.

The survey showed that 65.6% are unemployed and still looking for work. Only 34.4% managed to get a job, usually poorly-paid: construction or other worker, driver, salesperson, security guard, cleaner, etc. (see Figure 6).

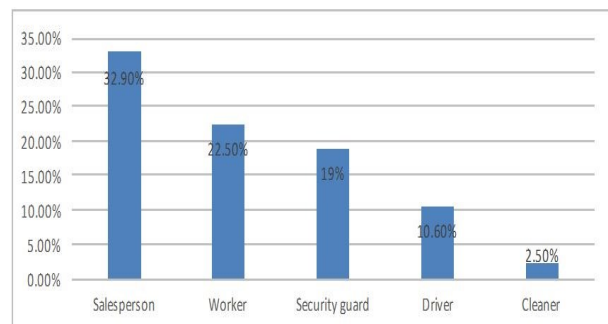


Fig. 6. Fields of employment

Despite the fact that young people with incomplete secondary education are mainly employed at low job

positions, they do not express dissatisfaction with their job. Most are satisfied (41.9% satisfied, 27.5% very satisfied), and 31.3% or less than a third, are more or less satisfied.

The majority of survey participants (65.6%) are unemployed, however. Nearly half of these said that the reason for having no work is the lack of jobs in the country (46.7%). Some respondents (26.7%) believed the main reason for unemployment is their own lack of education, and a small part named family conditions, the same reason as for the termination of learning. A few thought that the main reason of their unemployment is personal, laziness or health problems (see Figure 7).

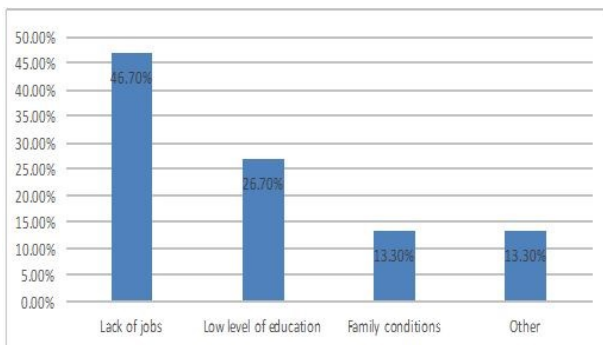


Fig. 7. Subjective reasons for unemployment.

Respondents often pointed to the economic situation of the family as the cause of their leaving school. Consequently most (72.1%) evaluated their economic situation as either poor or very poor, and 19% as average.

According to the results, employed and unemployed respondents differently perceived the economic situation of their families. Most of the unemployed respondents (83.5%) believe that their family is poor while less number of employed respondent (42.5%) think that their family is poor ($\chi^2 = 8.224; P < .5$).

Summary of focus Group Findings

Focus groups were carried out to gain depth information about views and experiences of youth and to triangulate qualitative and quantitative data from the same participants.

Most of the focus group informants (21 informants) mentioned that they decided to leave their studies because of family conditions; their families needed their help, and they started working to help them. Respondents evaluated their economic conditions as poor. Thus they could not contribute much to family economic conditions after leaving school and starting working.

Most of the focus group informants (16) believe they made wrong decision. Others (8 respondents) justified their decision, as they think that there was no sense in going to school, as they think they could not get knowledge or improve their competences. They think that on-job training is more effective than school education. Respondents who regretted their decision think that leaving school made them disadvantaged compare to young people with completed secondary education.

Youth would not advise others to abandon their studies. In their opinion, a student - good or bad - should stay in

school and finish secondary education, since people can only understand the importance of learning after several years. Young people think that they would not recommend to anyone to leave school, because completed secondary education gives a person better general skills and employment opportunities.

Although parents usually opposed their child's desire to stop learning, they eventually accepted, as they could not force them to change their decision. Youth think that parents' advice is not always useful or relevant to the modern developments on the labour market. As respondents pointed out, decision-making process was not easy and took long time. They would like to have more advice from professionals and employers during decision-making process.

According to focus group discussions, the respondent's express positive attitude towards all levels of education (17 respondents). They believe that education is an important prerequisite for employment and thus overall well-being of a person; education is not only associated with good employment opportunity or high income but education gives people the opportunity to communicate with people, to share their experience, to expand social networks, etc. (15 respondents). While learning people are more active and more positively involved in society. Respondents think that learning is about life experiences and cannot have any negative side.

Focus group data allowed insights as to why young people are "mostly satisfied" with their work. The reason most commonly mentioned by the respondents was that their salary is satisfactory considering the economic and living conditions in Georgia. Their jobs gave them a feeling of stability and independence. Their work allows them to help their families, though they worry that their could not improve much economic condition of their families. In addition to material satisfaction a factor of social satisfaction was also mentioned. Work allow respondents to meet many people in the workplace, which brings new contacts and socialization opportunities.

IV. DISCUSSION

This research aims to define the main barriers to education and career choice for youth who leave school after the ninth grade, which is the last year of obligatory education in Georgia.

Research findings showed that youth in Georgia leave education primarily because of their family's economic situation. Many young people were dealing with tight financial circumstances and placed great value on becoming employed. Only a few former students reported that personal factors were the reason for leaving education. Thus, it appears that based on Cross model, education barriers in Georgia can be categorized as more situational than personal, over which young people have little control (Cross, 1992).

Other research shows that young people leave school early for a range of reasons. Some actively choose to leave to take up employment or leave school because they see it as boring or not relevant to them, and many are responding

to a combined factors (Teese, Clarke & Polesel, 2007; Penman 2004; Dwyer & Wyn, 2001).

However, as this research suggests, Georgian youth have a less than positive attitude towards secondary education. They evaluate VET and Higher education more positively, although they do not have direct experience with these, so attitudes are not based on their own experience. They have had direct experience in primary and some secondary school and have evaluated secondary education negatively.

Therefore, it is important to take appropriate measures to address the issues so that youth have positive attitudes towards secondary education. Students do not immediately decide to quit education; they start thinking about leaving their studies during the preceding one or two years. Thus relevant interventions to address the dispositional barriers are crucial beginning in earlier grades, for example from the 6-7th grades or even earlier.

The vast majority of students independently made their decision to leave their studies, but did not have information on Labour Market or any concrete plans or counselling for employment. Therefore, most of them had to make uninformed decisions and remained unemployed. Most who remained outside the education system (and often the work force) regretted their decision to leave school. Students in the ninth grade were informed of the risks associated with leaving school during their classes in professional orientation and career planning, however overall they had limited access to concrete counselling services. That resulted in students having to make uninformed decisions. Raising awareness about the risks of dropping out of school should take place during earlier grades, and at least until students have attained their basic education. Before this point students should be made aware of the advantages of having secondary or vocational education, and where opportunities and career advancement are available if they do leave education during the early stages of secondary school.

Young people's attitudes towards education are generally positive and they consider it as important for economic and social well-being. Young people with an incomplete secondary education tend to express their positive attitudes towards VET rather than a university education. They think that learning a trade is more pertinent for them and more practical than a university education. This attitude is logical for the Georgian context; as Georgian legislation only allows university entrance for students who have completed 12 years of secondary education. Students who have finished through grade 9 can access VET however. According to the theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1975), the main motivation for behaviour is intention, which is formed by attitudes and subjective norms. The Georgian students in this study had positive attitudes towards education, and the subjective norm is that higher education is desirable. Most young people believed that everyone should complete the university, regardless of their personal interests and wishes (Generation in the Transition Period, Youth Study 2016 – Georgia, 2016). If a person encounters no obstacles that cannot be overcome, the positive attitudes and subjective

norms form an intention that leads to more appropriate behaviour. In this case such barriers are institutional and situational, which – if they can be overcome – would lead to youth continuing their studies. Thus it is important to include these positive attitudes and subjective norms when planning youth-targeted interventions.

The research revealed that most of the respondents are unemployed and that those who had jobs worked at poorly paid and insecure positions. Research shows that many students who leave school without completing secondary education earn less when they begin work, and are more likely to experience long periods of unemployment. They're also less likely to return to study later in life. Thus, it is also logical that ninth grade graduates have only limited access to employment since they lack the relevant knowledge and experience. This is one of their main barriers to employment, along with the lack of jobs in Georgia. Despite the fact that students work with low qualifications and their salaries are low, they remained satisfied that they are employed and preferred to work than to continue their education. It is important that ninth graders who leave school have an understanding of the importance of skills and competencies for employment and job searching to get more opportunities for employment and career development. Their failure to find employment reflects the collapse of youth employment policies and practices over the past decades, and not simply the lack of individual motivation, as some would suggest.

Approximately 65.5% of the respondents belong to the NEETS (do not pursue studies nor do they work) group. In Georgia, in the age group of 15-29, 26.6% (Household Survey Data, 2016) neither study nor work, while in developed countries this rate is 15.5%. NEET are the subject of continuing policy concerns and are considered to be one of the most vulnerable groups in the world. A number of interventions have been planned to support their return to the education and/or labour market. However, the result of constraints or a lack of opportunity means that socially or educationally disadvantaged young people are most affected. Being NEET is a negative experience which can cumulate disadvantages and lead to future unemployment and social exclusion. Research also indicates that people who have trouble finding employment by their mid-twenties continue to be disadvantaged, both financially and socially.

The research shows that students who want to continue their studies are most often those who regret the decision to stop learning. They think that one of the main reasons for their unemployment is a lack of education and that they were mainly forced to quit learning due to family conditions. They have positive attitudes towards VET and want to continue education in VET. It is important to target relevant interventions for this group, for example to offer flexible courses and programs, e.g. evening courses, weekend classes or online education.

Many young people leave education have had poor previous experiences during school. They need to be convinced of the relevance and benefit of learning to their own lives if they are to be encouraged to engage in

learning in the future. Good quality courses, information, advice and guidance is essential in supporting young people to identify and access appropriate education and training. There is a need for youth-focused services in Georgia that are readily identifiable and locally accessible. They must be relevant to the complexity of the young people's lives and offer a wide selection of employment and training options. To ensure that young people are not excluded from appropriate opportunities, new ways of working with them are needed – ways that creatively combine learning, skills development and employment.

V. CONCLUSIONS

Research findings showed that youth in Georgia leave education primarily because of their family's economic situation. Only a few former students reported that personal factors were the reason for leaving education. Thus, it appears that education barriers in Georgia are much more situational than personal.

Most of the respondents had to make uninformed decisions to leave school with the aim to start working but remained unemployed. The study revealed that most of the respondents are unemployed and that those who had jobs worked at poorly paid and insecure positions. Young people could not contribute much to family economic conditions after leaving school and start working. Young people who remained outside the education system (and often the work force) regretted their decision.

Although most of the participants regret their decision about leaving education, their future plans are little-related to continuing education. Students who want to continue their studies tend to express their positive attitudes towards VET rather than a higher education. Similarly, their plans are related to continue their studies in vocational education.

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AUTHORS PROFILE



Anastasia Kitiashvili, PhD, Associate Professor

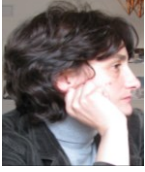
Anastasia Kitiashvili is an Associate Professor at Ivane Javakishvili Tbilisi State University (TSU) at the Department of Psychology, on the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences. In 2009 She established a new direction of applied social psychology at the department together with the MA and PhD Programs; she is mentoring MA degree students thesis's work and PhD students. Since November 2016 she is a member of Academic Board of TSU, since 2012 SPSP. She has about 15 year-experience in the field of psychology, Education and research; She has a solid experience working on the issue such as education and employment support of IDPs, ethnic minorities, woman, job-seekers, NEETs groups. She has a solid experience working with international organizations (UNDP, EU, ETF, IBF, MCA and etc.) as a consultant, senior expert or as a team leader. Her research interests are: Attitudes and social behavior, Social identity, Access to education and employment of vulnerable groups, Mental Health and disability; Social inclusion, Stress and well-being. As a doctoral and post-doctoral researcher she has earned several scholarships at different Universities: University of Lausanne, University of Porto, Central European University.



Tamar Abashidze, PhD, Associate Professor

Tamar Abashidze is an Associate Professor at Ivane Javakishvili Tbilisi State University (TSU) at the Department of Psychology, at the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences. Since 2004 she leads courses in BA and MA programs at the Faculty in different subjects: Fundamentals of Psychology, Research Methods in Psychology, Psychology of Emotions etc. Also she is mentoring MA degree students thesis's work and PhD students. Since November 2014 she is a member of Academic Board of TSU. Since 2006 she works at National Assessment and Examinations Center (NAEC) as a specialist of test development in the group of Magistracy Exams. Since 2005 she was actively involved in several national or international projects as expert/researcher. Some of them are: IFOA, GIZ, SIDA and etc. Her research interests are: motivation in education, evaluation in

education. As a doctoral and post-doctoral researcher she has earned several scholarships at different Universities: University of Saarbruecken, University of Lund, University of Rome.



Irine Zhvania, PhD, Associate Professor

Irine Zhvania is an Associate Professor at Ivane Javakhsishvili Tbilisi State University (TSU) at the Department of Psychology, at the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences. Since 2014 Irine Zhvania is a deputy-head of Disability Research Center of Tbilisi state University. She is also a member of the Representative Council of Tbilisi State University. Since 2005 she was actively involved in several national or international projects as expert/researcher. Some of them are: IFOA, GIZ, SIDA and etc. Since 2010 Irine Zhvania works as gender expert in the different projects of UNDP, UN Women and UNFPA. Since 2012 as a psychologist she works at the National Assessment and Examinations Centre. She is a head of the professional skills group. As a doctoral and post-doctoral researcher she has earned several scholarships at different Universities: University of Lund, University of Rome.