



Understanding Faculty Perspectives on Research Internationalization in Georgian Universities

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how academic staff at Georgian universities perceive and engage with the internationalization of research, drawing on 32 in-depth interviews with faculty across 16 institutions. The study revealed respondents' views on internationalization, along with their attitudes toward the factors that enable or hinder research internationalization, and the contexts in which they operate.

Key enabling factors identified include personal motivation, early international experience ("prior internationalization"), supportive supervisors, institutional funding mechanisms, and access to external grants. Respondents also highlighted the importance of long-standing collaborations and departmental traditions of internationalization, particularly in the natural sciences.

The study also reveals significant barriers at the individual (e.g., lack of English proficiency, caregiving responsibilities disproportionately affecting women, lack of experience), institutional (e.g., low salaries, inadequate funding, administrative overload), national (e.g., formalistic policies, economic challenges), and international (e.g., stereotypes about the region) levels. Contrasting notions of "selective" and "formal" internationalization also emerged. While the former refers to efforts to collaborate with well-established academics or institutions, the latter describes practices of internationalization that do not genuinely enhance research quality. The concept of "internationalization as burden" is also linked to the latter, capturing the negative perception of internationalization among faculty who, due to a combination of individual and structural constraints, are unable to engage meaningfully in international research collaboration.

Overall, the findings underscore that while there is a normative commitment to internationalization exists in Georgian higher education, meaningful implementation requires increased funding and targeted capacity-building. Without such measures, internationalization risks remaining a formal exercise rather than a transformative academic practice.

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Introduction

The internationalization of research should be examined within the broader context of the internationalization of higher education, as the former constitutes an integral part of the latter. The internationalization of higher education is one of the most pressing topics in higher education research, as evidenced by the large number of scholarly publications released each year on various aspects of internationalization.

De Wit and Altbach (2021) define internationalization as:

[t]he intentional process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions and delivery of post-secondary education, in order to enhance the quality of education and research for all students and staff and to make a meaningful contribution to society. (De Wit & Altbach, 2021, 35)

They also stress that internationalization is an intentional, planned process that should contribute to quality improvement; it should not be a privilege reserved for the academic elite, but should benefit the entire university community, and society beyond it.

Internationalization is a complex concept that encompasses multiple dimensions, including the physical mobility of students and faculty, curriculum internationalization, internationalization at home, research internationalization, and more. In academic literature, various dimensions of the internationalization of higher education are identified, although certain dimensions tend to recur across different authors. For example,

Finkelstein and Sethi (2014) distinguish the following dimensions of internationalization: 1. Physical mobility, 2. Integration of an international perspective into teaching and research (internationalization "at home"), 3. Collaboration with international students and colleagues (involvement in international research networks and publications).

De Wit and Altbach (2021) identify the following elements of internationalization: 1. Internationalization abroad, which includes subcategories such as: a) Student mobility; b) Academic staff mobility; c) Program mobility, which is reflected in double degree programs, joint programs, international branch campuses established by universities abroad, and more; d) Online mobility; 2. Internationalization at home, which includes curriculum and teaching internationalization, the development of global citizenship, and other related activities; 3. Internationalization of research.

Jones *et al.* (2023) point to aspects such as international research collaboration, internationalization at home, recruitment of international students and academic staff, mobility of students and academic personnel, online teaching, and transnational education.

Gao (2018), meanwhile, identifies six key dimensions: research, students, faculty, curriculum, governance, and engagement. Each dimension consists of specific components, which can be measured using certain indicators.

Similar to De Wit and Altbach, Huang (2014) also distinguishes three elements of higher education internationalization: 1. Mobility of faculty and students; 2. Development of international programs, program accredi-

tation, curriculum internationalization, and related components; 3. Joint research projects and academic events.

In the literature, the various components of higher education internationalization are discussed unevenly. Jones *et al.* (2023) note that, within the context of internationalization, the greatest attention has been given to student mobility, policy, and institutional strategies. Woldegiyorgis *et al.* (2018) make similar observations regarding student mobility. Researchers point out that topics such as the internationalization of research, the international activities of academic staff, and their perceptions of internationalization have received comparatively less analysis in the literature (Çalikoğlu *et al.*, 2022; De Wit & Altbach, 2021; Jones *et al.*, 2023; Li *et al.*, 2021; Woldegiyorgis *et al.*, 2018).

In light of this, the goal of the present study is to explore the understanding and experiences of academic staff regarding the broader process of internationalization and, in particular, the internationalization of research in Georgian higher education. To address this goal, the following research questions were formulated:

1. How do academic staff in Georgia perceive the internationalization of higher education and the internationalization of research?
2. What opportunities and challenges do they encounter in engaging with international research?
3. How do academic staff perceive the individual, institutional, national, and international contexts that shape their engagement in research internationalization?

1. Theoretical Foundations of the Research

1.1 Internationalization of Research: Global Trends and Perspectives

International research collaboration is a critical factor for research productivity, recognition, and access to funding (Kocar *et al.*, 2023). Moreover, in recent years, the internationalization of research has become an area of strategic intervention for both governments and universities (Bégin-Caouette *et al.*, 2023).

Woldegiyorgis *et al.* (2018) identify three levels of underlying motivations for research internationalization: national, institutional, and individual. At the national level, one of the driving motivations is the desire to increase a country's competitiveness in the global knowledge market. At the institutional level, motivations are linked to the pursuit of enhanced productivity and competitiveness. At the individual level, motivations are often tied to the prestige economy and aspirations for career advancement. In addition, the authors identify a range of factors that directly or indirectly influence the internationalization process. Some of these factors operate at the individual level, while others are related to the discipline, institution, or broader environment. However, in their view, the intersection of these different factors at the individual level plays a key role in research internationalization.

Çalikoğlu *et al.* (2022) point to the following motivations: academic development, support for institutional growth, student development, and sociocultural and international advancement. Jones *et al.* (2023) emphasize

that academic staff play a key role in the internationalization process, as they are the main driving force behind teaching and research. A similar position was expressed earlier by Finkelstein and Sethi (2014). Li *et al.* (2021) also highlight that the involvement of academic staff is essential for the successful internationalization of higher education.

According to the prestige maximization model discussed by Kwiek (2021), both research-oriented universities and individual academics constantly strive to maximize their prestige and adjust their actions to remain competitive in the academic market. Although the internationalization of research is influenced by academic discipline and university type, the decision to engage in internationalization is personal, with significant importance placed on individual organizational skills and informal collaboration.

This observation echoes the conclusion of Woldegiyorgis *et al.* (2018, p. 12), who argue that “the internationalization of research is essentially a bottom-up activity, regardless of moves to enforce new national or institutional strategies to enhance it.” According to the authors, the research activities of academic staff are relatively independent from institutional internationalization strategies. A similar conclusion is drawn by Yemini (2019), whose study showed that international research collaboration was mostly initiated and developed at the individual level.

The important role of individual researchers in the internationalization of research is also emphasized by Jones and Oleksiyenko (2011). Their case study of a Canadian university demonstrated that, despite limited

national and institutional funding, individual academic units were highly internationalized, provided that they operated in an environment that supported individual research initiatives. In this process, individual researchers played a decisive role.

Since, as noted above, the internationalization of research is largely driven by the initiative of academic staff, it becomes important to examine their attitudes and perceptions toward this phenomenon. Yemini’s study (2019) highlights the expectations and risks associated with international collaboration. The research showed that highly productive scholars place significant value on international collaboration, and view it as a key factor for career advancement. As Jones *et al.* (2023) emphasize, the perspectives of academic staff play a crucial role in understanding and implementing internationalization. In their analysis of academic staff’s international engagement, Çalikoğlu *et al.* (2022) distinguish between institutional and individual motivations. Due to reduced public funding and increased competition in the global academic market, institutions prioritize internationalization as a strategy to enhance their prestige and income. In contrast, academic staff’s motivations and perceptions regarding internationalization are more closely tied to individual and disciplinary contexts. The authors also point out that, in recent decades, strategies and underlying motivations for internationalization in higher education have become increasingly complex.

Although institutional and individual motivations for internationalization differ, they cannot be entirely separated, as institutional,

national, global, and other contextual factors may either facilitate or hinder academic staff's engagement in international collaboration (Jones *et al.*, 2023).

In examining how academic staff perceive internationalization, Li *et al.* (2021) identify five main categories: understanding of internationalization; perceptions of the underlying institutional motivations for internationalization; academic staff's understanding of their own role in the process; motivation; and actual engagement in internationalization. Within this final category – engagement – Li and colleagues further distinguish subcategories such as participation in international conferences, publication in international journals, short-term research mobility, involvement in international research projects, serving as a reviewer for international journals, co-authorship with foreign colleagues, supervision of international students, and hosting visiting scholars. Such differentiation is necessary because, as Leask *et al.* (2021) argue, the literature often lacks precision in defining what is meant by "faculty engagement" in internationalization.

In the context of research internationalization, the literature identifies a range of facilitating and hindering factors. Finkelstein and Sethi (2014) group these factors into three broad categories: national, organizational, and individual. Within the individual category, they further distinguish between professional (e.g., disciplinary field, academic rank, teaching/research orientation, international publications) and personal/demographic factors (e.g., age, gender, country of degree, years spent abroad). Building on this

model, Bégin-Caouette *et al.* (2023) categorize the factors influencing international research collaboration into four groups: individual, professional, institutional, and national.

Bégin-Caouette *et al.* (2023) highlight several key factors that influence international research collaboration: obtaining an academic degree abroad; the level of funding received from international sources; and institutional expectations for researchers to publish in internationally recognized outlets. Rostan *et al.* (2014) emphasize the particular role of language, suggesting that language can either facilitate or hinder international collaboration.

Kwiek (2020) categorizes the barriers to the internationalization of research into three levels: macro, organizational, and individual. At the macro level, influential factors include geopolitics, cultural traditions, language, country size, and the level of economic development. At the organizational level, institutional reputation and available resources play a critical role. At the individual level, personal circumstances, the academic status of the researcher, and their perceived attractiveness as a partner in international collaboration are key considerations. Furthermore, as the number of individuals and institutions involved in international research networks increases, the coordination required to manage these collaborations effectively also grows, resulting in what are often termed "coordination costs."

Other challenges related to research internationalization noted by scholars include academic migration (commonly referred to as "brain drain"), the limited use of local languages in scholarly publications due to the

dominance of English, and a tendency to focus on research topics that are less connected to local or regional needs. Researchers have also identified asymmetric power relations within international collaborations – where some partners hold more influence due to prestige or status – as well as communication challenges, insufficient institutional support, and difficulties integrating internationalization effectively into institutional missions and strategies (Flander *et al.*, 2023; Jones & Oleksienco, 2011; Queirós *et al.*, 2023; Rostan *et al.*, 2014; Woldegiyorgis *et al.*, 2018).

Yemini (2019) draws attention to further obstacles, such as strategies of advancement at others' expense (particularly within large research teams), time burdens resulting from inter-team communication, difficulty reconciling divergent interpretations, and the complexities of managing relationships with international colleagues.

Çalikoğlu *et al.* (2022) identify institutional, bureaucratic/geopolitical, and financial barriers to internationalization. In a study analyzing academic staff attitudes toward teaching abroad, Leask *et al.* (2021) argue that insufficient engagement from academic staff constitutes a significant impediment to internationalization. These barriers may be cultural, institutional, or personal. Thus, academic staff can be seen both as the main drivers of internationalization and, simultaneously, as insufficiently motivated or resistant to change – factors that may negatively affect the internationalization process. This observation echoes the claim by Jones and Oleksienco (2011) that research internationalization is often inconsistent and irregular rather than a coherent set of planned actions.

A more recent study by Queirós *et al.* (2023) shows that in Portugal, academic staff report a lack of meaningful institutional support for internationalizing their research. Woldegiyorgis *et al.* (2018) stress that, like other aspects of higher education internationalization, the internationalization of research cannot be reduced to a purely quantitative analysis: it is more of a process than a product, and its measurement is inherently complex. This conclusion aligns with Queirós and colleagues' (2023) call for qualitative analysis of international research collaboration across different national contexts.

Building on the reviewed literature, this study adopts a multi-level perspective on research internationalization, drawing on Woldegiyorgis *et al.*'s (2018) threefold distinction of national, institutional, and individual motivations, and extending it with a fourth, international level to better capture the dynamics of cross-border engagement. A central insight from the literature, emphasized by Jones *et al.* (2023), Finkelstein and Sethi (2014), and Li *et al.* (2021), is the pivotal role of academic staff in driving the internationalization of research. This bottom-up perspective, highlighted by Woldegiyorgis *et al.* (2018), informed the design of semi-structured interviews, guiding both the formulation of discussion topics and the overall interview process. While the literature identifies a range of enabling and restricting factors for research internationalization, this study specifically aims to explore how these factors manifest in the Georgian higher education context, thereby contributing context-specific insights to the broader understanding of research internationalization.

1.2 Internationalization of Research in Georgia

During the Soviet period, science and scholarship in Georgia were under strict control by the state ideological apparatus, and were conducted mostly separately from universities, within institutes subordinated to the Academy of Sciences (Chankseliani, 2022). After the restoration of independence, the first significant change in Georgia's higher education system was the privatization of universities (Chakhaia & Bregvadze, 2018). Apart from this factor, the system of higher education and scientific research largely retained features characteristic of the Soviet period (among them, the most prominent was the existence of a centralized research system, with the Georgian National Academy of Sciences as its central unit). However, the heavy socio-economic crisis that followed the civil war in the early 1990s, and the conflicts initiated by separatist movements in the Abkhazia and Samachablo regions, severely hindered the development and internationalization of research. Due to the dire economic conditions, state funding for research was drastically reduced or disappeared entirely, and much of the research infrastructure was destroyed. This was accompanied by the so-called "brain drain," as a number of researchers emigrated abroad (Chakhaia & Bregvadze, 2018; Tabatadze & Chachkhiani, 2022).

In 2005, Georgia joined the Bologna Process (European Higher Education Area, n.d.). This significantly increased the mobility of academic staff and students within the European Higher Education Area (Nastase, 2020). During this period, substantial reforms were

implemented in the higher education system, resulting in a transition to a three-tier structure (bachelor's, master's, and doctoral levels). The introduction of master's and doctoral elements, along with the integration of scientific centers and institutes into universities, transformed the research landscape in Georgia. As a result of the reforms, the primary goal of the Georgian National Academy of Sciences became the facilitation of research development, while most research now takes place within universities (Georgian National Academy of Sciences, n.d.; Chakhaia & Bregvadze, 2018; Tabatadze & Chachkhiani, 2022). The research funding system was also changed. Prior to the reforms, research institutes received funding directly from the state; as a result of the reforms, their funding became dependent on the universities to which these research centers belong. Furthermore, based on the order of the Minister of Education and Science of Georgia dated July 28, 2010, a legal entity of public law – the Shota Rustaveli National Science Foundation of Georgia – was established (Shota Rustaveli National Science Foundation of Georgia, n.d.), which annually announces state research grant competitions. Researchers affiliated with Georgian universities are eligible to participate in these competitions. In 2024, the foundation's budget amounted to 35 million GEL (Shota Rustaveli National Science Foundation of Georgia, n.d.).

Chachkhiani and Tabatadze (2023) point out that the internationalization of research in the Georgian context has not been sufficiently studied. They identify various strategies for the internationalization of higher education in Georgia, including modeling

academic programs on international curricula, mobility of students and academic staff, joint programs with foreign universities, participation in international projects, and attracting international students to Georgian universities. In terms of research internationalization, the authors note that the motivations of academic staff, and the factors influencing international research collaboration, remain underexplored in the Georgian context. The present study focuses precisely on this dimension.

Integration into the European Higher Education Area has accelerated the process of research internationalization in Georgia. However, it is worth noting that during the final years of the Soviet Union, Georgian researchers were highly active in several fields, including physics, chemistry, biology, and mathematics. According to Tabatadze and Chachkhiani (2022, p. 203), Georgian researchers published 406 articles in Web of Science-indexed scientific journals in 1984. The authors note that this number was only surpassed in 2006. Overall, the number of Georgian publications indexed in the Web of Science has steadily increased in recent years. Georgian researchers have also demonstrated a high citation rate. As of 2019, the citation rate of publications by Georgian researchers was the highest among post-Soviet countries. However, the authors also note that publications in international journals are often produced in co-authorship with foreign colleagues. International collaboration is highest in disciplines such as physics and astronomy, and relatively lower in the humanities and social sciences (Campbell &

Gorgodze, 2016; Chachkhiani & Tabatadze, 2023; Tabatadze & Chachkhiani, 2022).

In post-Soviet Georgia, the development of research is hindered by a number of factors. These include insufficient funding for research centers and doctoral students, low salaries for academic staff, and a weak pension system (which obstructs generational change within universities), lack of proper infrastructure, shortage of qualified personnel, language barriers, and a negative ratio between researchers and doctoral students (i.e., too many doctoral students per researcher) (Nastase, 2020; Tabatadze & Chachkhiani, 2022). Naturally, these factors also negatively affect the internationalization of research. In this context, a positive development is the integration of mechanisms for evaluating research activities into the standards for university authorization and program accreditation introduced by the National Center for Educational Quality Enhancement, which includes a specific focus on internationalization. As a result, universities have begun to pay greater attention to the development and internationalization of research (National Center for Educational Quality Enhancement, n.d.; Campbell & Gorgodze, 2016; Tabatadze & Chachkhiani, 2022). Additionally, researchers view the introduction of a competitive, public funding system – embodied in the Shota Rustaveli National Science Foundation – as a positive step toward enhancing the quality of research (Tabatadze & Chachkhiani, 2022). Another factor contributing to the internationalization of research is the requirement introduced by universities that doctoral students must publish at least one article in an

international journal before defending their dissertation. However, researchers evaluate this requirement in mixed terms (Nastase, 2020; Tabatadze & Chachkiani, 2022).

Campbell and Gorgodze (2016) identify three main driving forces behind the internationalization of higher education in Georgia: the influence of the West, accreditation processes, and the mobility of academic staff and students. Their study found no unified national strategy for the internationalization of higher education, which aligns with the observation by De Wit and Altbach (2021) that internationalization policies tend to be fragmented rather than centralized. In this regard, Nastase (2020) identifies several factors and motivations: the desire for integration with the West, and the European Union in particular; financial motives (such as access to international projects and attracting international students); the aim to provide internationally recognized or accredited education for Georgian students in order to increase their competitiveness; staying abreast of global scientific trends and innovations; and promoting the development of research more broadly. The only negative consequence of internationalization mentioned is the reduced use of the Georgian language by researchers (Nastase, 2020).

Chachkiani and Tabatadze (2023) identify the following factors that influence academic staff at the individual level in the context of research internationalization: the desire for access to international scientific literature, engagement with complex research problems, financial incentives, infrastructure improvement, professional development,

and increased research productivity. The authors group these factors into categories of human, financial, and physical capital. In terms of international collaboration, the following factors are identified as influential: the country's pro-Western orientation, the high regard for the quality of Western science, personal contacts with foreign colleagues, foreign language proficiency, and sources of research funding.

Based on the literature, it can be concluded that the internationalization of higher education in Georgia is generally viewed positively by both administrative and academic staff. In this regard, Nastase's (2020) conclusion is particularly noteworthy, as it emphasizes the financial aspect of research: since research development requires substantial funding, financial support from the European Union plays a crucial role for Georgian higher education. “[...] therefore, internationalization is as much a choice as it is a need” (Nastase, 2020, p. 102).

2. Methodology

2.1 Participants and Data Collection

The study is based on 32 semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted with academic staff affiliated with Georgian higher education institutions. In total, the respondents represented 16 different universities. Of the 32 participants, 21 were employed at universities located in Tbilisi, while 11 were affiliated with universities in various regions. In terms of institutional type, 18 worked at state universities and 14 at private universities. This diversity allowed the study to capture a

wide range of experiences and perspectives across Georgian higher education. For detailed demographic information, see Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (N = 32)

Demographics	Number
Gender	
Female	19
Male	13
Academic position	
Professor	12
Associate Professor	11
Assistant Professor	7
Assistant	1
Researcher	1
Geographical Distribution	
Tbilisi	21
Regions	11
Type of University ¹	
Public	18
Private	14
Field of Study	
Humanities	9
Social Sciences	11
Natural Sciences and Mathematics	6
Biomedical Sciences	6
Type of Position	
Academic	16
Academic & Administrative	15
Only research	1
PhD Degree	
Defended in Georgia	23
Defended abroad	6
PhD student (in Georgia)	3

Participants were selected using a combination of purposive, expert, snowball, and heterogeneous sampling strategies. Initial respondents were identified based on specific criteria indicating active engagement in internationalized research: at least two Eng-

lish-language publications within the past three years, involvement in international research projects, and collaboration with foreign partners. For those in administrative roles, demonstrated experience in international academic activities was also required.

The interview questions were developed by the research team based on a review of existing literature on internationalization and research internationalization. Prior to the main data collection, five pilot interviews were conducted to test and refine the interview guide. All interviews, with one exception, were conducted online in Georgian via Microsoft Teams and Zoom platforms between November 2023 and September 2024. One interview was conducted in person, also in Georgian, at East European University. Interviews continued until data saturation was reached – that is, until no new themes or perspectives emerged.

The average duration of the interviews was approximately one hour. As part of the interviews, participants were asked about how they understood internationalization/research internationalization, who their key international partners were, how these collaborations had been established; what motivations drove them toward international research collaboration, and what enabling and hindering factors they identified in the internationalization of research at the individual, institutional, national, and international levels.

After each interview, respondents were asked to recommend other individuals to participate in the study. This approach enabled the inclusion of diverse perspectives, as participants varied in academic disciplines,

¹ Although respondents were affiliated with 18 public and 14 private universities, the total number of distinct universities represented in the study is 16, as several respondents came from the same institution.

institutional positions, and levels of involvement in research internationalization. While the initial participants were selected based on strong international engagement – such as English-language publications and participation in international projects – subsequent respondents, particularly those in regional universities or at earlier stages of their careers, did not always have such internationalized profiles. As a result, the sample also included academic staff with limited involvement in research internationalization. This diversity provided valuable insights into the barriers to internationalization, as perceived by those who have faced challenges in becoming internationally engaged.

2.2 Data Analysis

All interviews were audio-recorded and manually transcribed. The transcripts were analyzed using NVivo 14 qualitative data analysis software. Both deductive and inductive approaches were applied. Following Saldana (2021), two cycles of coding were conducted. In the first cycle, In Vivo coding, capturing participants' own phrasing, and Values coding, which reflects beliefs, motivations, and attitudes, were employed. In the second cycle, pattern coding was used to cluster codes into broader themes. These themes were organized according to Maxwell's (2013) qualitative research framework: *Perspectives, Contexts, and Processes/Results*. Particular attention was paid to participants' subjective understandings of internationalization and research internationalization, as well as to their accounts of contextual features and processes that, in

their view, facilitated or hindered research internationalization – or internationalization more broadly – within those contexts. The analysis was guided by a deductively established framework comprising four levels – individual, institutional, national, and international – into which respondents' views on enabling and constraining factors of internationalization were categorized.

2.3 Ethical Considerations

All ethical protocols were followed throughout the research process. Before the interviews, participants were sent an information sheet about the study via email. This document provided a detailed description of the research purpose, conditions of participation, and terms of anonymity and data protection. In addition, they received the corresponding consent form electronically. The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of East European University.

2.4 Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, the interviews were conducted only with academic staff affiliated with Georgian universities; therefore, perspectives of non-affiliated faculty were not included. Second, some participants may not have fully articulated critical views during the interviews, and may have focused more on the positive aspects of internationalization. Third, as with any qualitative study, the coding process was inevitably influenced by researcher subjectivity. To mitigate this, the research team engaged in collaborative discussions to review and align the assigned codes.

3. Qualitative Research Findings

3.1 Perspectives on Internationalization

Respondents perceived internationalization as a broad and complex phenomenon, of which the internationalization of research was considered a key component. Their understanding of internationalization as a comprehensive process shaped how they interpreted research internationalization. Internationalization was primarily defined as international collaboration and communication encompassing both research and teaching, leading to personal and professional development, improved quality, increased visibility, and enhanced financial opportunities.

Some respondents expressed categorical views, asserting that internationalization is an *essential precondition* for conducting research. One professor from a state university remarked, “I simply find it unimaginable how one can conduct research or be a researcher without internationalization. Without internationalization, research does not exist.” Similarly, an associate professor from a state university said, “Without internationalization, the development of teaching and research simply does not happen. [...] Without internationalization, not even a mid-level quality is attainable.”

Several respondents emphasized internationalization’s importance for *professional development*. An associate professor from a state university noted, “Internationalization is the only opportunity for professional growth.” A professor from a private university emphasized that internationalization is, “first and foremost, an opportunity to intro-

duce yourself, your university, or your research field, to others.”

This view was echoed by an associate professor in the social sciences: “The internationalization of research implies increasing visibility, and, along with that, planning something in common with other professionals from different countries.”

The link between internationalization and a university’s visibility was also emphasized by a professor from the international relations department at a state university: “A university’s ranking is determined precisely by the diversity of its research; it is determined by internationalization and visibility.” This view, emphasizing university rankings and competitiveness in the higher education market, was mostly expressed by respondents with administrative roles. In contrast, respondents who were more focused on academic research, associated internationalization less with ranking systems and more with substantive international research collaboration. “An internationalized university should have academic staff actively engaged in international research, co-publishing articles in international journals with foreign scholars, organizing conferences, and more. Internationalization should be grounded in the development of the researcher,” said one associate professor from a state university.

A similar view came from an assistant professor at a private university: “Internationalization implies global collaboration between universities and, in this context, academic programs as well. It includes the mobility of students and researchers, and, more broadly, the exchange of knowledge

and ideas with academic representatives from different countries."

More cautious perspectives were also expressed. A natural sciences professor warned against equating internationalization with the uncritical glorification of anything foreign, emphasizing the need for academic critical spirit: "We had seminars where I talked about CERN [The European Organization for Nuclear Research], and no one asked a single critical question – just because it was CERN. That's something we need to overcome. We shouldn't assume that just because something is foreign, it's automatically good. For instance, if a curriculum is foreign, it doesn't necessarily mean it's good."

A similar viewpoint was articulated by another respondent, a professor at a private university, who saw internationalization not as an act of dependence, but as an avenue for growth and equality in scholarly recognition: "For me, internationalization is, first and foremost, an opportunity for development, and less about feeling inferior. It means being based in Georgia and still conducting research, publishing, and delivering presentations respected by peers worldwide."

This aligns with the concept of "internationalization at home," explicitly mentioned by several respondents. One social sciences professor from a private university explained: "Internationalization at home means aligning ourselves with global academic processes, whether it's methodology, technological innovation, or something else, and feeling that we are part of and contributing to that global landscape." Similarly, a humanities professor from a state university stated: "For competitive international research, it is not strictly

necessary to go abroad or to stay there for long periods of time."

Although respondents generally believed research internationalization involves integrating international partners into the research process, some noted that not all international collaboration qualifies as meaningful internationalization. According to this perspective, if collaboration is limited solely to the post-Soviet region, it may constitute only "formal" internationalization. An associate professor from a state university explained: "There is a risk of devaluing the term. For example, an international conference was held, but only participants from the post-Soviet space attended. Formally, yes, it was international. But real internationalization means being in contact with someone more advanced, so that you can learn from them."

This perspective reveals two key dynamics: 1. What might be termed *formal internationalization* – collaborations that are not driven by genuine research interests, but by convenience. In such cases, research partners tend to operate within the same political and cultural space, rather than by expanding beyond familiar contexts; 2. What could be called *selective internationalization* – the tendency of actors to seek research and collaborative relationships with partners who occupy higher positions within prestige hierarchies. This inclination is motivated by the desire to maximize one's own academic standing and visibility. The echoes the position of Kwiek (2021), who argues that universities and researchers are engaged in a "prestige game," where collaboration with prestigious institutions and/or scholars helps publish in leading journals.

Some respondents also expressed what internationalization *is not*, reflecting broader concerns about the academic landscape in general. One private university professor stated, “Research, and research management, have become a business. For example, paid conferences, paid publications, and so on... People shouldn’t be so focused on this. It’s all they do, just go around... Research tourism is not reasonable.”

No significant gender-based differences emerged in defining internationalization, nor did differences arise based on public vs. private affiliation, academic rank, location (capital vs. regions), disciplinary field, or whether the PhD was obtained abroad or in Georgia. However, differences did appear by position type. Those who occupied only academic roles tended to define internationalization primarily in terms of research development. In contrast, respondents with both academic and administrative roles emphasized institutional collaboration between universities when discussing internationalization. For them, internationalization was not solely about research or teaching, but was understood within the broader framework of university rankings and strategic development.

3.2 Enabling Factors for Internationalization

Some respondents’ answers revealed that, at the individual level, *personal motivation* is considered the most important enabling factor. According to one researcher in the natural sciences at a state university, it is especially significant when a motivated researcher also serves as a supervisor for early-career scholars, as their attitude can

positively influence those they mentor: “Motivation is the key factor. Either you need to have it as a young person, or your supervisor needs to have it. A good supervisor is like a good football coach – they lead their team and deliver results.”

An assistant professor in the humanities from a private university identified a *sense of patriotic duty* as her primary motivation, with professional development secondary: “The first thing is that as many people as possible should learn about our country. My motivation was that I wanted to work on issues that are very important for my country.”

In addition to personal motivation, a key enabling factor for research internationalization is what one respondent called “*prior internationalization*,” meaning prior experience with international academic engagement. This includes early-career exposure to various international contexts – study or research visits abroad, participation in international conferences, foreign university study, work in internationally active units, early collaboration with foreign colleagues, or involvement in international projects early in one’s career.

This experience is reflected in the view of one social sciences professor from a private university: “The people I collaborate with in different countries now are long-time acquaintances. I met some of them at conferences, others in Georgia or abroad, and it’s really the result of what I’d call ‘prior internationalization’ that I now have the opportunity to do research with these people.”

Among the *institutional-level enabling factors*, respondents particularly emphasized *support from their universities*, especially fi-

nancial support. Those at state universities noted mechanisms to cover expenses related to international activities (e.g., conferences, publications):

"The researcher submits information about the conference in advance, and there is a certain amount allocated at the faculty level. Within that limit, you receive funding. Of course, it doesn't cover everything, but it might pay for the registration fee, hotel, things like that. The second incentive is co-financing of article publication, plus, if it gets published in Scopus, there's a certain bonus" (associate professor, biomedical sciences).

Respondents at private universities also noted internal grants for research. "When I go to a conference, my university covers the registration fee, which is huge support for a researcher. And one very important motivation is that the researcher can count on this support, that they will have funding" (assistant professor, private university).

Another enabling factor mentioned by respondents from both state and private universities was *support in handling bureaucratic matters*. "The greatest support I receive from my university is complete freedom. I was away for six months, and I didn't even take official leave. I was teaching remotely. Almost every year, I go somewhere for one, two, or three months, and I have full freedom from the university in this regard" (professor, private university).

Others emphasized *administrative help in organizational tasks*, especially when hosting conferences. "In my case, whenever I'm organizing something, the routine work – like arranging accommodation for guests, managing conference or research-related expenses – is handled by the university administration.

As a result, I barely feel the burden. This is, of course, a huge relief."

One important institutional-level enabler, according to respondents, was the presence of what might be called a "*tradition of internationalization*" – long-standing collaboration with foreign institutions. In such contexts, internationalization becomes part of a researcher's *modus vivendi*.

For example, one associate professor from a state university noted that her faculty has been collaborating with a university in Germany for over four decades. Since this partner university is located in former East Germany, which belonged to the socialist "Eastern Bloc," the academic relationship was initially established during the Soviet period. Another respondent from the natural sciences and mathematics (associate professor, state university) emphasized the importance of academic ties dating back to the Soviet era. He noted that his opportunity to study abroad was made possible by a foreign professor who had first come to Georgia to attend a conference. That conference, in turn, was part of a symposium series that was initiated back in the 1980s.

Several respondents also highlighted the importance of having an internationalized supervisor or colleague as a role model: "There needs to be at least one person in the department who has this experience – collaborating with foreign institutions – and then the whole process becomes easier" (professor, state university).

At the national and international levels, respondents identified various forms of state support as key enabling factors. These included research development grants from

the Shota Rustaveli National Science Foundation, direct state funding (e.g., from the Ministry of Education and Science), regional/municipal funding, and support from international foundations. While most were aware of the Rustaveli Foundation, not all made equal use of it.

As for international organizations, respondents in higher academic positions emphasized the importance of grants provided by international public and private organizations at the early stages of their careers – such as Erasmus (European Union) and other EU-funded projects, U.S. Department of State programs, the Carnegie Foundation (USA), the German Research Foundation (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, DFG), the Open Society Institute, the International Monetary Fund, World Bank, the World Economic Forum, and others.

Some discipline-specific patterns also emerged. Natural sciences, especially physics, had a stronger history of internationalization even during the Soviet era. One state university professor of physics described the period:

“Within the Soviet Union, Georgia was heavily involved in these scientific fields – probably more so than any other republic except Ukraine. [...] The Soviet Union functioned as an intermediate stage in establishing contact with the outside world. When foreign scientists came here, they couldn’t exactly hide them, so I would talk to them too. [...] The foreigners themselves were interested – initially, to be honest, for very mercantile reasons. They knew that certain disciplines in the Soviet Union were at a very high level, and they wouldn’t say no – not

then, and not now – to scientists reaching out to them.”

At the national level, lack of funding emerged as *both an enabling and hindering factor*. “Because there is no funding in Georgia, the only solution is internationalization,” stated a professor from a state university. Similarly, a private university professor remarked, “Our poverty, in a way, becomes an additional driving force. Whether you want it or not, you are compelled to think about internationalization.”

Thus, a structural barrier that hinders internationalization – limited financial resources – can also serve as personal motivator. For some actors, internationalization becomes a necessary strategy to access resources otherwise unavailable in Georgia.

3.3 Barriers to Internationalization

At the individual level, respondents identified a lack of proficiency in a foreign language – primarily English – as the main hindering factor to internationalization. One respondent highlighted a generational divide: “Language barriers exist in Georgia, especially among the older generation. For example, there are many very dedicated and capable researchers, but they don’t know English” (professor, private university). Another, an associate professor at a private university, noted that this is becoming less of a problem for younger scholars. Still, an early-career academic (assistant professor, humanities, state university) emphasized that the lack of foreign language proficiency poses a major challenge both for students and faculty.

An associate professor from a private university, who speaks German, shared how

English is becoming the dominant language in scholarship: "When I was dealing with [the German institution], everything was conducted in English. That's when I realized I need to make the switch." This reflects the growing dominance of English as the global language of research.

At the individual level, *gender* also emerged as a constraining factor. Female respondents frequently mentioned that caregiving duties limit research capabilities. One professor noted, "When you have a family, especially young children, it becomes difficult to follow through with things in terms of research." Similarly, a female associate professor remarked, "Even if you have a supportive partner, you still have your own responsibilities. When your child is small, it's very difficult to be more productive." No male respondents cited family responsibilities as a factor hindering their research.

Most respondents holding administrative positions alongside academic roles emphasized that *administrative responsibilities* consume substantial time and create stress and anxiety, which negatively impacts their ability to conduct research. This was true for both senior professors and early-career faculty. "There are so many organizational matters that take up a huge amount of time, and, as a result, I'm on a very, very bad schedule. I don't even know how to describe it. Minutes, time, day, night, Saturday, Sunday, they don't exist anymore. I don't know how long I can keep this up" (professor, state university). An assistant professor reported that the administrative workload made it hard to even respond to emails. Administrative tasks, especially unrelated to the university's office of interna-

tional relations, were more often viewed as hindering research than teaching was.

Lack of experience among academic staff frequently emerged in respondents' narratives as a key factor hindering internationalization. One professor at a private university, who also held an administrative position, described how faculty struggle to identify suitable journals, despite support from the research office: "We try to help. We even search for journals for them and teach them how to do it, but they still don't learn it well, so we end up doing it for them."

In some cases, respondents admitted to their lack of experience, and spoke openly about the anxiety it caused. One associate professor at a state university remarked:

"To be honest, there's a lot of fear around writing an academic article. I constantly worry: what style do they require? What exactly are they expecting? I mean, there's the fear of searching for sources, then the technical formatting issues, and finally the fear of plagiarism, whether I might accidentally plagiarize."

Lack of experience emerged as a particularly significant barrier in relation to the European Union's Horizon projects, as several respondents noted that preparing a proposal requires a high level of technical knowledge that not everyone possesses. One professor in the biomedical sciences explained: "Only about a quarter of it is the scientific part, while the remaining three-quarters is legal content that you don't really understand. I simply didn't have that knowledge." Other respondents echoed the challenges of working on Horizon projects, stating that the process of preparing documentation was so de-

manding that, at a certain point, they simply gave up pursuing their projects.

At the institutional level, nearly all respondents identified *inadequate funding* as one of the main barriers to the internationalization of research. One respondent highlighted limited internal research funding within universities:

“The amounts allocated for research in this country are simply ridiculous. [...] I had a long argument with the rector of one private university about this. I kept telling him: if you allocate 5,000 or 10,000 GEL for research, it’s laughable. That’s not a research budget. He kept insisting, ‘Well, have I broken any rules? Where does the law say 10,000 GEL is not enough?’” (associate professor, private university)

The shortage of funding is felt particularly acutely in the natural and biomedical sciences, where research materials and/or technological equipment tend to be very costly. As a result, universities often struggle to provide adequate financial support for research in these fields. This situation gives rise to a kind of paradox: the lack of funding actually pushes researchers in these disciplines to seek international collaborations. As already noted, in the context of limited domestic support, internationalization often emerges as the only viable path forward.

In addition to the general lack of funding, respondents also highlighted another financial factor that, in their view, negatively affects the internationalization of research: *low salaries for academic staff*. Due to insufficient compensation, several respondents reported that they are compelled to seek additional income through consultancy work or entirely different

types of employment. As a result, they have less time available for research activities.

“Teaching responsibilities and my consultancy work hinder me, and take away the time I would like to dedicate to research. Research doesn’t pay. My research is sacrificed to the struggle for income” (professor, state university).

This suggests that institutional barriers often operate in combination. As the quote illustrates, the interplay between high teaching loads and low remuneration reduces research productivity, as academics are forced to supplement their university salaries through external sources of income. As an assistant professor from a state university noted, “Today, university faculty are among the poorest in Georgia. Without an additional source of income, it is quite difficult to manage on our salary alone.”

Another respondent, a professor at a state university, stated that on top of offering low salaries, state universities have *unreasonable demands*: “On a B contract, they ask you to publish in a journal with an impact factor for 1100 GEL. This is something unimaginable. [...] The requirement is about that of a full professor, something that would make even a professor at Harvard University envious. And I don’t even have an office in the university.” For some, these pressures prompted thoughts of leaving academia. “Sometimes, I think maybe I should find another way: leave and join the ranks of emigrants” (associate professor, state university).

Another important barrier to research internationalization identified by respondents was the *heavy workload of faculty members*.

"Institutions tend to impose a very heavy workload on professors. If you reduce the workload, the salary is so low that it is not enough to support a family, so the professor is forced to work at two or three universities (professor, private university).

The *lack of institutional support* was identified by some respondents as another barrier. In this regard, some expressed quite a radical view: "We got here mostly through our own contacts, personal and international connections, but institutionally, nothing. The university has never helped me or done anything like that" (professor, state university). Some respondents noted that institutions often rely heavily on international funding sources and do not actively fund research themselves. "Our doctoral students try to go somewhere using Erasmus. But what if we don't have Erasmus? Then what do we do?" (professor, state university)

Respondents also stressed the interplay of several factors that hindered internationalization. As one professor from a state university summarized, "The local situation is such that no one really wants to do anything. Second, there is the language problem; third, lack of funds; and fourth, bureaucracy is completely ineffective and kills projects." These responses reveal how individual-level barriers (motivation, language) intersect with institutional ones (funding, bureaucracy).

Responses from the participants also revealed that universities often lack dedicated departments for research internationalization. As one associate professor from a private university noted, the international office focuses on agreements, but lacks the expertise to support researchers: "They are not

specialists in specific fields, nor are they able to assist us."

While most barriers were institutional, national and international-level obstacles were also evident. At the national level, several respondents identified "formal internationalization," as previously mentioned, as a hindering factor. As one professor with an administrative role at a private university stated, "At the national level, the strategy for the internationalization of research is merely formal, and does not attempt to connect universities." According to him, the core issue is that the internationalization policy and strategy developed at the national level remain confined to the state level and do not meaningfully engage the key actor, universities, and, within them, faculty and students. That is why internationalization does not reach the "heart of the issue." This view was echoed by another professor from a state university, who noted that some state-level initiatives to promote internationalization were merely formal in nature, resulting in money being spent without achieving concrete outcomes.

Several respondents identified the country's *political and economic situation* as a national-level hindering factor for internationalization. They referred to the 1990s, a period marked by severe social, economic, and political instability, noting that this era was particularly challenging for the development of research. Relating to the contemporary context, respondents emphasized the low salaries in universities, which, in their opinion, have not kept pace with rising prices, and are inadequate given the unfavorable economic climate in the country: "Today, market prices for everyday necessities are rising sharply,

while our salaries lag far behind. If this is not addressed, and I am forced to seek a second job to earn additional income, then research – and everything else – becomes irrelevant (associate professor, state university).

As the respondents noted, these problems also affect students. “Our master’s students often work a lot. They come to lectures at five or six in the evening, and are so preoccupied with everyday problems that it is rare for anyone to want to continue studying or to pursue research: they work, attend classes, and then leave” (assistant professor, private university).

At the *international level*, respondents identified several hindering factors. One of these was the existence of *negative stereotypes toward the post-Soviet space*. Specifically, some respondents believed there is a certain negative attitude toward the Caucasus region, and the post-Soviet area in general, which in some cases may impact collaboration with foreign researchers. For example, one professor recalled what a German professor once told him: “There is generally a very negative stereotype about your region – mainly that people come through Erasmus programs just for academic tourism. We don’t have time for that.”

In some cases, however, respondents noted that the existence of such negative stereotypes can paradoxically encourage deeper internationalization: “When journals see that a foreign colleague is involved in the article, it becomes much easier to get it published than if they see it directly coming from Georgia. That’s why we have this collaboration, so that our articles are more easily published in higher-profile journals” (assistant professor, private university).

4. Discussion

The findings of this study resonate with the theoretical frameworks discussed in the literature. Following Woldegiyorgis *et al.* (2018), the analysis approached internationalization through multi-level interactions – national, institutional, individual, and international – revealing that factors enabling or constraining internationalization often overlap across these levels. Respondents themselves did not isolate enabling or hindering factors in their reflections; rather, they tended to bundle and connect them, revealing interdependencies between personal motivation, institutional and national contexts, and the norms of the global academic community.

At the same time, respondents identified factors that closely mirror those discussed in the theoretical literature on internationalization. Language, for instance – highlighted by Rostan *et al.* (2014) as a significant barrier – featured prominently in their accounts as one of the main hindering factors at the individual level. Similarly, research funding, discussed by Bégin-Caouette *et al.* (2023), appeared in a dual role: as both an enabler and a constraint, depending on whether access to resources was available (institutional, national, and international levels). The lack of institutional support, also emphasized by Queirós *et al.* (2023), was another recurring theme (institutional level), reinforcing the idea that while internationalization is often driven by individual initiative, its effectiveness depends heavily on the presence of adequate institutional support.

Respondents’ answers aligned with positions established in the literature (Jones & Oliksiyenko, 2011; Woldegiyorgis *et al.*, 2018;

Yemini, 2019), which emphasize that academic staff play a key role in international research collaboration. Although respondents often acknowledged the supportive role of their institutions, in most cases they indicated that this support was insufficient (as also noted by Queirós *et al.*, 2023), and that the international collaborations they engaged in with foreign colleagues or institutions were largely the result of their own personal initiative.

Based on the findings of this study, several key concepts emerged. One of these is *prior internationalization* – international experience gained at an early stage of one's career, whether through study or research – which, according to respondents, played a crucial role in establishing themselves in the international academic space and in building connections with prestigious and reliable academic partners.

If we apply Kwiek's (2020) concepts of "internationalists" and "locals," it can be said that among the respondents, "internationalists" – those who regularly published in international journals and collaborated consistently with foreign colleagues – tended to engage in what might be called *selective internationalization*. In forming partnerships with foreign colleagues, their starting point was often the colleague's or institution's place within a hierarchy of prestige. For them, such collaboration was pragmatically advantageous because it helped raise their visibility in the international academic space. This pattern was especially noticeable in the humanities and social sciences.

The situation was somewhat different in the natural and mathematical sciences, where the fields have a long-standing tradition of in-

ternationalization in Georgia. For academics in these disciplines, interaction with leading global centers and researchers was described more as a normal part of academic life than as a privileged opportunity. This supports existing literature suggesting that the natural sciences lead in international research cooperation in Georgia (Chachkhiani & Tabatadze, 2023; Tabatadze & Chachkhiani, 2022).

In contrast to selective internationalization, which operates within a prestige economy and is more typical of "internationalists," the case of "locals" can be described in terms of *internationalization as a burden*. Due to a combination of hindering factors – many of which echo challenges identified in the literature (Nastase, 2020; Tabatadze & Chachkhiani, 2022) – academic staff are unable to meaningfully engage with internationalization, and, as a result, academic publishing is experienced more as a burden than as a pathway into the prestige economy. Closely related to this is the concept of *formal internationalization*, which refers to superficial or symbolic efforts at internationalization that occur without real improvements in research quality or in the skills of academic staff.

Echoing Nastase's (2020, p. 102) observation that internationalization in Georgia is "as much a choice as it is a need," the findings of this study reveal that the lack of research funding functions paradoxically as *both a barrier and a driver of internationalization*. On the one hand, insufficient financial support, particularly in natural and biomedical sciences, limits universities' ability to sustain and develop robust research environments. On the other hand, this very scarcity compels some faculty members to pursue internation-

al collaborations as a means of accessing resources and opportunities otherwise unavailable within the domestic system. For some, internationalization becomes not a strategic option, but a survival mechanism.

Conclusion

This study sought to explore how academic staff at Georgian universities perceive and engage with the internationalization of research, identifying both the enabling and hindering factors across individual, institutional, national, and international levels. Drawing on 32 in-depth interviews with faculty members from diverse universities and disciplines, the study offers insights into how research internationalization is experienced and navigated within the Georgian context.

The findings highlight that while there is a strong normative commitment to internationalization among faculty, actual engagement is uneven, and is shaped by a combination of structural limitations and personal agency. Among the enabling factors, respondents emphasized personal motivation, prior international experience, access to supportive supervisors and role models, institutional support, and the availability of external funding.

However, respondents also identified numerous barriers. Chief among these were linguistic challenges, particularly English proficiency; insufficient institutional funding; low salaries, overwhelming teaching and/or administrative workloads; and the lack of dedicated support units for research internationalization. Additionally, the dominance of formalistic approaches, where internationalization is pursued to meet accreditation re-

quirements rather than to genuinely support research, further constrains meaningful academic engagement.

The findings show that factors influencing research internationalization operate across multiple levels. At the individual level, language barriers were a significant challenge; at the institutional level, the lack of support limited faculty engagement, emphasizing that individual initiative alone is not sufficient; while at the national and international levels, funding both enabled and constrained research collaboration.

At the national level, several respondents pointed to the problem of *formal internationalization* – strategies and policies that are formally adopted but lack meaningful connection to universities, faculty, and students. In addition, persistent socio-economic challenges, such as low academic salaries and limited state funding, continue to hinder the internationalization of research in Georgia, as they restrict both institutional capacity and individual engagement. While EU integration and participation in frameworks such as the Bologna Process have opened new opportunities, respondents emphasized that such developments require stronger institutional alignment and long-term capacity building.

Based on the present study, it can be said that the internationalization of research in Georgia is a dynamic process characterized by contradictions. Despite the declared desire for internationalization, there are several individual and structural factors whose complex interaction hinders the full development of international cooperation. Among the hindering factors, respondents most frequently

mentioned insufficient funding, low salaries, and the formal nature of internationalization.

Based on this study alone, comprehensive policy recommendations cannot be formulated; however, it can be stated that universities (and the state) need to take more effective steps and assume greater responsibility for facilitating the development of international research cooperation. This primarily involves creating a stable economic environment for researchers, along with a long-term research development plan supported by a dedicated budget and capacity-building initiatives for future researchers. Otherwise, there is a high probability that internationalization will remain merely a fashionable (and substantively empty) term used by universities in their promotional campaigns.

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