

Rural disadvantage in the context of centralised university admissions: A multiple case study of Georgia and Kazakhstan

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Abstract

The extraordinary expansion of higher education has not been accompanied by more equitable access to universities for various disadvantaged groups. Rural youth is at the heart of this study that draws on secondary data and literature to examine rural-urban disparities in higher education access in two high-participation systems in the Caucasus and Central Asia. This multiple case study uses a historical-comparative lens to offer a synthesis of the evidence on the subnational and cross-national differences in the three domains of higher education access - academic preparedness, HE aspirations, and HEI/programme choice-making - to point to the existence of prominent rural-urban disparities in Georgia and Kazakhstan. The study contributes to an improved understanding of the structural-territorial foundations of inequalities in higher education access and charts future directions for policy. The framework used in this study can be applied to examining disparities in access to higher education in other national contexts.

Keywords

Higher education, access and participation, Georgia, Kazakhstan, rural disadvantage, examinations

Introduction

Globally, higher education (HE) systems have seen a vast expansion, accommodating approximately 38% of the age-cohort (UNESCO, 2018). Many countries have declared their commitment to the goal of ensuring equitable access to HE (Goastellec & Välimaa, 2019). Despite the expansion of the sector and the commitment to equity, access to HE has not become more equitable (Cantwell et al., 2018), and Martin Trow's (1973) observation from half a century ago remains relevant: 'the question of the principles and processes of selection and admission to higher education is the crucial point where higher education touches most closely on the social structure' (p. 25). There exists a great diversity of student selection practices and systems (Helms, 2008; Opposs et al., 2020). Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the majority of newly independent states introduced a centralised system of HE entrance examinations where designated government agencies administer the student selection process, thus limiting the university autonomy (Bethell & Zabulionis, 2012; Huisman et al., 2018). One key assumption that underpins centralised admissions systems is the equal treatment of all. The equal treatment, however, can perpetuate inequitable outcomes by social class, economic status, ethnicity/race, geographic origin, gender and other factors of disadvantage (Neubauer & Tanaka, 2011; Noah & Eckstein, 1989; Zajda et al., 2006). This study conceptualises access to HE by breaking it down into three distinct but interconnected domains - HE aspirations, university/programme choice-making, and academic preparedness. This innovative conceptual approach provides a holistic understanding of geographic inequalities in HE access in centralised systems and questions the fairness of neoliberal meritocracy.

The majority of literature on geographic inequalities in HE access that is published in English originates from Australasia, the UK, and North America (Leibowitz, 2017), with only a handful of studies from non-English speaking countries (Jinzhong, 2010; Konstantinovskiy, 2012; Verdis et al., 2019; Voicu & Vasile, 2010). Using a historical-comparative lens, this multiple case study builds on the existing literature and secondary data to examine the rural origin as a composite factor of disadvantage in HE access in two centralised systems of student selection – Georgia and Kazakhstan. These countries share a number of similarities as they used to be part of the Soviet Union which aspired to build an egalitarian society. Despite this, glaring gaps existed between rural and urban areas in terms of the standard of living, occupational, cultural and educational opportunities (Cheselka, 1968; Hans, 1961; Zajda,

2006). The methods section of this paper explains in detail the reasons for selecting these two countries.

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the living conditions as well as the educational opportunities for the rural population deteriorated (UNICEF, 2001). In the last two decades, Georgia and Kazakhstan have been in the process of transition into what these countries refer to as competitive, knowledge-based, market economies (Chankseliani & Silova, 2018). Both countries have implemented a number of public policy reforms including the abolition of what was described by local reformers and global partners as the Soviet-style, corrupt system of university-based admissions and the establishment of centralised examinations for student selection in 2003 in Kazakhstan and 2005 in Georgia (Bethell & Zabulionis, 2012; World Bank, 2012). The centralised examinations determine who enters university, how entrants are distributed to higher education institutions (HEIs), and how the state grant for tuition is allocated. The governments fully control, administer and fund these examinations.

Kazakhstan's National Testing Centre (NTC) and Georgia's *National Assessment and Examinations Center (NAEC) report to their respective line ministries in charge of education and allow almost no involvement from HEIs in the process of student selection.*

Up until 2020, the Georgian Unified National Examinations (UNEs) included three compulsory tests for all HE applicants: foreign language, Georgian language, and General Abilities Test (GAT). Starting from this year, all HE applicants need to take three compulsory exams: Georgian language and literature, foreign language and either mathematics or history as the third subject based on students chose of the course of study. In Kazakhstan, all HE applicants take the Unified National Test (UNT) which is completed in one sitting and is structured into two blocks. The first block is based on three compulsory tests: history of Kazakhstan, mathematical literacy, and reading literacy (MoES Kazakhstan, 2018). In the second block, applicants are examined on two specialist subjects of their choice. In both countries, the allocation of the state grant for HE tuition is based on applicants' UNE/UNT results. The examinations are held once a year in Georgia and, starting from 2019, four times a year in Kazakhstan (Kazpravda, 2018). Applicants competing for state grants in Kazakhstan must sit the examination in June. Those who gain university admission in any of the other three exam cycles need to cover their HE costs privately.

Prior to the introduction of centralised examinations for HE student selection, universities in post-Soviet countries followed a uniform Soviet practice of conducting university-specific oral and written tests in three or four subjects. These used to be administered and funded by

HEIs (Chankseliani, 2013a). Corruption during university admissions was widespread (Heyneman et al., 2008). The new system of standardised and centralised examinations for HE student selection was funded and promoted by the World Bank, the European Union, the USAID, and the Open Society Foundations (Bethell & Zabulionis, 2012). The centralised, government-controlled system of university admissions considerably limited the autonomy of universities to select students (Zaalishvili, 2013). However, the centralised admissions model has been viewed favourably by local populations as the policy instrument that has combated the rampant corruption and increased the transparency in university admissions (Bethell & Zabulionis, 2012; Drummond & Gabrscek, 2012; OECD, 2017). The status quo in both countries represents what Meyer et al. (2013) call ‘a “tacit” or “implicit” contract among the main stakeholders which emerged under particular, idiosyncratic historical and social conditions’ (p. 2). Today, the parties to this implicit contract are HEIs, international organisations, policy-makers, students/their families, and the entire public. Whereas in Georgia, the centralised admissions are recognised as a successful policy by the full political spectrum (Chakhaia & Bregvadze, 2018), in Kazakhstan the support is less strong due to the limited evidence on the UNT eliminating the deep-rooted practices of informal payments (Oka, 2018).

Allegedly, the centralised systems of student selection were also supposed to enhance equity (Chakhaia & Bregvadze, 2018; Huisman et al., 2018). While there exists evidence that corruption was eradicated in some settings (Chankseliani, 2014b; World Bank, 2012), equal treatment of all applicants did not translate into the equitable outcomes for all (Chakhaia, 2019; Chankseliani, 2013b, 2013d). This multiple case study uses a historical-comparative lens to address the following research question: How does higher education access differ by geographic location in Georgia and Kazakhstan?

Conceptual framework

This study conceptualises access to HE in centralised admissions systems in terms of three distinct but interconnected domains - HE aspirations, HEI/programme choice-making, and academic preparedness. The multi-domain examination helps to explain how rural-urban disparities in HE access are shaped cumulatively. HE aspiration as such is the desire and hope to pursue HE that is often defined as a social-epistemological process, embedded in socio-cultural, ideological and historical groundings and linked to the individual agency (Zipin et

al., 2015). For the purposes of this study, one indicator of HE aspiration is participation in the centralised examinations, i.e. applying to HE and sitting the UNT/UNEs. Choice-making is the second domain that is viewed as a process where individuals' freedom for making decisions on HEIs/programmes is constrained by organisational and policy structures. HE aspirations and choice-making practices can be shaped by a variety of cultural and social factors as well as the support individuals receive from their parents, families, peers, and schools (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Literature on HE choice-making shows that holding income and other characteristics equal, as the distance to the selective HE institution increases, applicants are less likely to apply to it (Griffith & Rothstein, 2009). Internationally, the distance to HE institutions proves to be a significant factor when making choices for rural applicants in particular, as they are not able to afford studying very far from home (Frenette, 2006). The choice-making process can lead to inequitable outcomes when it is driven by financial considerations instead of academic abilities and interests (Mullen, 2010).

The rural-urban disparities in HE access develop cumulatively throughout individuals' prior education experiences. The rural disadvantage in the academic preparedness - the third domain in our framework - represents a construct that brings together the opportunities of schooling, private tutoring, and out-of-school extra-curricular activities. Rural schools are often resource poor, unable to employ well-qualified teachers and offering relatively limited learning opportunities; rural school graduates can have distorted assumptions on the affordability of HE, are uncomfortable to try unfamiliar experiences of HE, and develop desire to earn wages immediately after school completion (McDonough & Fann, 2007). Private tutoring appears to be particularly widespread in the national contexts where university admissions are determined by high stakes examination results. Due to the perceived low quality of formal education and the existing system of high stakes examinations, formal schooling in former Soviet countries is frequently supplemented by private tutoring (Jumabayeva, 2016; Machabeli et al., 2011; Silova, 2010). Geographic isolation and the relative unavailability of cultural, educational, and social infrastructure, such as libraries, extracurricular activities, and youth development programmes, in rural areas can further exacerbate differences between young people from urban and rural areas (Umbetaliyeva et al., 2016; MoES Georgia 2017).

In a majority of studies on educational outcomes, location effects have the status of a residual category that remains unexplained after researchers have controlled for some of the above-enlisted characteristics. There is a smaller group of studies in which researchers try to

disentangle family and school effects from area effects. Whereas family influence is considered to be much larger, area effects are recognised (Andersson et al., 2019; Bernelius & Kauppinen, 2012; Brännström, 2008; Datcher, 1982; Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000).

Individual agency and organisational/policy structures influence how the three aspects of HE access unfold for individuals from rural and urban areas (McDonough & Fann, 2007). While the role of individual agency cannot be underestimated, this sociological analysis focuses on the structural factors and links each of the three domains of access with affordability, indicating that affordability lies at the heart of rural disadvantage in HE access. In both countries, there are significant rural-urban disparities in wealth and incomes (OECD, 2017; World Bank, 2016). The public spending on education is low (UNESCO, 2017b) and the needs-based financing for HE is extremely limited (Chakhaia, 2019; OECD, 2017).

Methods and sources

This multiple case study uses a historical-comparative lens to examine the case of the centralised system of university admissions in two countries that are similar in some respects, yet different in others. Georgia and Kazakhstan represent the highest participation systems in the Caucasus and Central Asia, respectively, with tertiary gross enrolment ratio of 60% in Georgia and 54% in Kazakhstan (UNESCO, 2018). These students are enrolled at 128 HEIs in Kazakhstan and 63 HEIs in Georgia (GeoStat, 2019; zakon.kz, 2019). There are substantial differences in terms of the countries' economic and demographic indicators. With a population of 3.7 million (per capita GDP \$4,717), Georgia is a lower middle income economy; whereas Kazakhstan is an upper middle income country with a population of 18.3 million (per capita GDP \$9,812)(World Bank, 2020a, 2020b). Both countries have significant rural-urban disparities in wealth and incomes (OECD, 2017; World Bank, 2016), with poverty rates being much higher in rural than in urban areas. Poverty rates were 11% in Tbilisi and more than 20% in rural areas in 2016 (Fuchs Tarlovsky et al., 2019); in Kazakhstan, 4.4% of rural residents live in poverty, compared to 1.3% in urban areas (World Bank, 2015). These similarities and differences made Georgia and Kazakhstan informative contexts to address the following research question: How does higher education access differ by geographic location in Georgia and Kazakhstan?

The comparative analysis of the current realities in two countries is contextualised within the historical roots of the existing policies to explain how this unique model of the unified

admissions system became popular in the post-Soviet context, despite the inequalities that it brings about and the ways in which it limits the university autonomy to select its own students. The documentary analysis was utilised as the central methodological approach, which included the analysis of secondary data, policy documents, and scholarly literature. Government websites in both countries were carefully examined, focusing on the ministries in charge of education as well as the two government agencies administering centralised examinations - Kazakhstan's National Testing Centre (NTC) and Georgia's *National Assessment and Examinations Centre (NAEC)*. *Most of the quantitative data was obtained either from the education ministries, NTC, NAEC, GeoStat in Georgia and the Information Analytical Centre in Kazakhstan; from their web-sites and through direct email communication. Initially, the study aimed to analyse the applicant-level, anonymised datasets in a comparative perspective, replicating the earlier study of the Georgian examinations (Chankseliani, 2013b). Since obtaining such data from Kazakhstan was impossible, the study utilised only the group-level data from the sources listed above as well as the national-level data from the UNESCO Institute of Statistics, the OECD's PISA office, and the World Bank.* Relevant reports were identified and sourced from various local and international organisations working in the region, such as Friedrich Ebert Foundation; International Institute for Education Policy, Planning and Management; OECD; UNESCO IIEP; UNICEF; and the World Bank. We have also examined legal documents, print and online media sources in both countries. Finally, this study included extensive academic literature searches in English, Georgian, and Russian languages. The analysis of the secondary numeric data, policy documents, and scholarly literature involved the classification of the available evidence into the three areas of conceptual interest: HE aspirations, choice-making, and academic preparedness. Within these three areas, we grouped the data and literature sources by country (Georgia and Kazakhstan), created a third group for the generic sources on centralised examinations, and a fourth group on rural-urban disparities more broadly. Throughout the analysis process, we checked and cross-checked the sources and investigated any mismatches carefully.

Higher education aspirations

Young people who complete secondary education have multiple options to choose from: studying for an academic degree (at home or abroad), pursuing vocational education,

acquiring skills informally through on-the job training/apprenticeship, or joining the labour market directly as unskilled workers. The focus of this study is the access to academic higher education. In order to pursue HE at home, individuals need to participate in centralised examinations to gain HE admission – the UNT in Kazakhstan (OECD, 2017) or the UNEs in Georgia (Government of Georgia, 2004). Statistics show that rural school graduates are less likely to participate in centralised examinations than urban school graduates. In Georgia, where 35% of school graduates attend a rural school, 31% of the UNE applicants graduated from a rural school (NAEC, 2019a).¹ In Kazakhstan, where 50% of secondary school graduates attend a rural school, 46% of all UNT applicants are rural school graduates (NTC, personal communication, 2019). These figures are aligned with the results of a survey in Kazakhstan which showed that 85% of youth from urban areas and 81% of those from rural areas aspired to pursue HE (Umbetalieva et al. 2016). Using this statistic (proportion of school leavers who apply to university at home) as a measure of aspirations is not without limitations as not applying to HE does not mean that individual does not aspire to HE. Furthermore, this statistic does not account for the individuals who pursue HE abroad.² HE aspirations are shaped by a variety of socio-cultural factors, such as the value placed on higher education. Families in urban areas, that are more likely to be university graduates than families in rural areas, may encourage their children to apply to university, trying to avoid the downward mobility (Chakhaia et al., 2014). Furthermore, there is evidence to argue that when choosing their partners, urban youth in Georgia are considerably more likely to consider their potential partner's HE attainment than rural youth, with 91% of individuals in the capital and only 68% of individuals in rural areas considering HE attainment as an important factor in selecting a partner (Omanadze et al., 2017). It has also been shown that rural parents/teachers have relatively modest views on the abilities of rural pupils (Chankseliani, 2013b) that can contribute to individuals' decision-making when it comes to applying to university.

HE aspirations are also influenced by affordability considerations. Affordability is defined here as an ability to meet tuition and maintenance costs for HE students. A youth survey in Kazakhstan showed that 42% of those not pursuing HE indicate affordability as the main

¹ The Georgian data includes all those who register for the UNEs in a given year, irrespective of their school graduation year.

² Approximately 30% of students in Georgia and 48% in Kazakhstan aspire to pursue university education abroad (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung 2017; Umbetalieva et al. 2016). In fact, 7% of HE students from Georgia and 14% from Kazakhstan are enrolled at universities outside their home countries (UNESCO, 2017a).

reason (Umbetaliyeva et al., 2016). Rural residents in Georgia and Kazakhstan experience significantly higher levels of poverty, lower levels of income and wealth, and higher levels of overall socio-economic deprivation than urban residents (OECD, 2017; World Bank, 2016). Considering that the absolute majority of HEIs are located in urban areas, students from rural areas need to make special living arrangements away from their family home to pursue HE. Furthermore, rural students need to make the accommodation arrangements entirely on their own as HEIs rarely have any dormitories (Young Socialists Georgia, 2017). Hence, living costs are significantly higher for students from rural areas than their urban peers who normally commute from their family home.

The average costs of HE tuition are higher in Georgia than in Kazakhstan, when viewed in relation to their respective GDP per capita. In Georgia, the government-set tuition fee at state HEIs (\$831) amounts to approximately 18% of the per capita GDP (\$4,717). In Kazakhstan, typical tuition levels at public institutions (ranging from \$1,166 to \$1,673) amount to 12% - 17% of per capita GDP (\$9,821).³ In the context of significant rural-urban disparities in wealth and incomes in both countries, the tuition costs represent a disproportionately bigger burden for individuals from rural areas.

State tuition grants are limited, very competitive and only about a quarter of all enrolled students obtain a full or partial grant in either country (NAEC, 2018; OECD, 2017). The residential origin of students is linked with their chances of obtaining a grant. In Georgia, 27% of students from Tbilisi and 10% of students from rural areas obtain a full or partial grant (NAEC, 2018). In Kazakhstan, 54% of students from Nur-Sultan and 24% of students from rural areas obtain the state grants (NTC, personal communication, 2019). There exist grant quotas for rural school graduates in Kazakhstan which sometimes creates a perverse incentive for urban school students to move to rural areas during their final year of schooling (NUGSE, 2014). The number of grants changes annually. Last year Kazakhstan's government allocated 9,000 of an available 30,000 state grants to rural school graduates. Out of 146,034 school graduates in 2018 (NTC, personal communication, 2019), 72,746 pupils finished school in rural areas which means that if all rural school graduates applied to HE, only 12% of rural school graduates could expect to obtain a state grant. Thus, HE is considerably less affordable for rural residents when compared to urban residents in these countries.

³ Based on the authors' calculations, using the tuition fee information from HEI web-sites and the GDP figures (World Bank, 2020a).

Higher education programme and institution choice-making

Once the decision to apply to HE is made, individuals and their families make choices of HEIs and programmes of study. In both national systems, applicants list the combinations of the programme(s) and institution(s) in their choice in the order of preference (MoES Kazakhstan, 2018; NAEC, 2019c). The choices are made at the time of registration for centralized examinations. The admission to HE is determined by the scores the applicant obtains in relation to all other applicants who applied for the given programme and HEI.

A number of factors are at play when HE applicants make choices for programmes of study and HEIs. These may include HEI location, living and tuition costs, prestige and availability of the desired programme, and these factors may differ considerably by individuals' residential location (Chankseliani, 2013c). Below we focus on the perceived value of a degree for employability and the affordability of HEIs and programmes of study.

The perceived value of a degree for employability is a major factor when it comes to the programme/HEI choice-making in both countries. In two recent studies, students in Georgia and academics in Kazakhstan and Georgia report that students view HE primarily as the stepping stone for individuals' employment or further studies (Chankseliani et al., Forthcoming; Gorgodze et al., 2019). Furthermore, significantly larger proportions of Kazakhstani young people from rural areas (80%) than their urban peers (66%) think that HE will improve their employment opportunities (Umbetalieva et al., 2016). The premise that student choices are driven by employability considerations could be contributing to the reality where only half of the Georgian students enrolled in HE study the subjects that genuinely interest them (Omanadze et al., 2017).

Whether driven by employability considerations and/or genuine interest in the subject, when it comes to the selection of HEIs, individuals in both countries ostensibly have an array of choices. Georgia and Kazakhstan offer a diverse landscape of HEIs with private universities outnumbering public universities. 69% of all HEIs in Georgia and 62% in Kazakhstan are private (GeoStat, 2019; zakon.kz, 2019), with 34% of students in Georgia and 53% in Kazakhstan enrolled at private HEIs (UNESCO, 2017c). The same kind of admission procedure is in place both for private and public universities in both countries.

Following the neoliberal, free-market model of educational governance (Adamson et al., 2016), in both countries financing from the state follows students, irrespective of whether they enter a private or a public institution. Thus, through the centralised admissions system

and the linked student financing mechanism, the public funding is channelled into private institutions. This can be one reason why private universities do not express much discontent about the lack of autonomy in student admissions. Although a number of private HEIs charge similar fees to public HEIs in both countries (Government of Kazakhstan, 2018; NAEC, 2019c), in many cases, the tuition costs at private HEIs are higher than at public universities where the state tuition grant fully covers the tuition costs. Tuition fees at private universities are sometimes three times higher than at state universities in Kazakhstan (OECD, 2017), and in extreme cases up to ten times higher than public universities in Georgia (NAEC, 2019c). If admitted to prestigious, high-fee charging private HEIs, students need to cover a substantial difference between the full state grant and the tuition fees, as very few university-specific scholarships are offered.

The perceived quality of HEIs varies greatly in both countries. Although a decade ago public universities would be considered more reputable than private universities, nowadays the picture is more complex, as selected private institutions are believed to lead to better employment opportunities for their graduates (Chankseliani, 2013c; Sharvashidze, 2005). According to a recent study, almost one third of young people in Georgia hold a negative view of the quality of HE offered at public universities and one in five do not see the professors of these universities as being suitably qualified for their jobs (Young Socialists Georgia, 2017).

Furthermore, all relatively prestigious private and public universities are located in the capital cities⁴ in both countries. The location of the HEI can be decisive in the process of making HEI choices (Chankseliani, 2013b). The population-level quantitative data analysis showed that in Georgia the applicants who have not graduated from a secondary school in the capital, tend to name the least prestigious HEIs as their first choice most frequently;⁵ interviews with rural families from the same study revealed that naming a Tbilisi-based HEI is directly related to the family's ability to pay higher tuition costs and finance the student maintenance associated with the residence away from home, in the capital (Chankseliani, 2013b). Finally, it has been shown that controlling for the Georgian HE applicants' general aptitude, an applicant from a mountainous village is approximately 12 times more likely to apply to a

⁴ In case of Kazakhstan, Nur-Sultan as well as Almaty, the largest city.

⁵ The 'prestigiousness' of an institution is determined by the combined academic achievement of the incoming student body (Chankseliani, 2013b).

least rather than a most prestigious HEI as their first choice than an applicant from the capital (Chankseliani, 2013c).

Since the reputation of a university is closely linked with the higher probability of graduation, greater access to postgraduate studies, and higher wage premium (Morley & Aynsley, 2007; Rivera, 2011), it can be argued that rural students who apply and gain admission to less prestigious HEIs, may benefit from tertiary education to a lesser extent than urban students.

Choice-making patterns may be explained not only by rational calculations related to the reputation and costs, but also by social and cultural factors linked to applicants' social class and the type of school attended. Individuals with the experience of private education (supplemented by private tutoring) may be in a better position to see themselves as more suited to prestigious HEIs and competitive programmes than applicants from rural areas who are likely to have attended a small, rural school with limited support from private tutors. Rural families in Georgia seem to believe that urban school graduates are more swift and agile in their thinking and have better abilities of general reasoning which they explain by better quality of schooling and more widespread access to informational technologies (Chankseliani, 2013b). These views can influence HE choice-making in a detrimental way for rural applicants.

Academic preparedness

The roots of inequalities in higher education access often lie outside the higher education sector itself, namely in the earlier stages of education (Lleras, 2004; T McCowan, 2007; Wößmann, 2008). This section starts by presenting the evidence on marked differences in the UNT/UNE scores between rural and urban test-takers in Georgia and Kazakhstan. We then offer a literature-based conceptualisation of factors that can explain the differences in the academic preparedness by residential location.

Since the format of the examinations, as well as the presentation of the data in the reports used for this analysis, differs in these two countries, the descriptive data below is presented for each country separately. The UNT data for Kazakhstan shows that rural applicants, on average, are less likely to obtain higher scores (100-140) and more likely to obtain lower scores (0-99) on the university entrance exams when compared to their urban peers (Figure 1). 32% of all urban applicants and 22% of all rural applicants achieve the scores 100 to 140;

in contrast, 78% of all rural applicants and 68% of all urban applicants score between 0 and 99.

FIGURE 1

Similarly, the differences between the rural and urban test-takers are also pronounced in the Georgian context, where rural applicants score significantly lower than urban applicants in all UNE subjects. The differences are particularly stark between the average scores of the applicants from the capital city and those from rural areas (Figure 2), with the largest differences observed in the foreign language test. HE applicants who graduated from a secondary school in Tbilisi, on average score 22 points (one standard deviation) higher in the foreign language test than applicants from rural areas.

FIGURE 2

While primary and secondary education is quasi-universal in both countries, the average outcomes of schooling as measured by international large-scale assessments is not high. In both countries, there are significant rural-urban disparities in cognitive outcomes (MoES Georgia, 2017; MoES Kazakhstan, 2017). While the motivation for studying Science does not differ by school location (MoES Georgia, 2017), in both countries, pupils from urban centres obtain consistently higher scores on PISA than their rural peers (MoES Georgia, 2017; MoES Kazakhstan, 2017).

As academic preparedness is internationally recognised as one of the best predictors of HE access (Perna, 2005), it is the disparities in the academic preparedness that most likely translate into a rural disadvantage in HE access in the context of centralised selection systems: 85% of test takers who graduated from a school in the capital city and only 68% of test takers who graduated from a school in a rural area gain HE admission in Georgia (NAEC, 2019b). Similar statistics for Kazakhstan are not made available.

Lower quality of formal and informal education opportunities, as well as the availability of those opportunities, aggravated by the overall socio-economic disadvantage, are known to create multiple educational detriments for rural students (McDonough & Fann, 2007; OECD,

2017). Rural residents in Georgia and Kazakhstan experience significantly higher levels of poverty, lower levels of income and wealth, and higher levels of overall socio-economic deprivation than their urban peers (OECD, 2017; World Bank, 2016). Families in poverty, which constitute a larger proportion of the population in rural areas, are less likely to afford private schooling and/or private tutoring; they are also less likely to bear the direct costs of schooling (tuition fees, textbooks, writing materials, and clothing) and the opportunity cost of schooling (due to the need for child labour). Overall, the entire system of the UNT in Kazakhstan filters the economically more privileged into the HE system, favouring ‘richer families who do better on the UNT as they are likely to attend better schools and can afford private tuitions’ (NUGSE, 2014, p. 15). The same applies to the Georgian context.

One reason why the family-level disadvantage cannot be remedied at rural schools is the poor teaching quality and the poor physical infrastructure that are the two main features of rural schooling in Georgia and Kazakhstan (Bokayev, 2016; MoES Georgia, 2017). Many rural schools do not have modern libraries or labs for natural sciences. There are shortages of computers and the internet as well as the heating infrastructure (Bokayev, 2016; Chankseliani, 2013b). The remote location of rural schools, especially in the mountainous areas, has been linked to the low attendance of pupils in winter, as schools are often unable to provide adequate heating and/or transportation (Silova et al., 2007). Geographic isolation of rural areas is also associated with limited community resources such as libraries, extracurricular activities, and youth development programmes (Umbetaliyeva et al., 2016; MoES Georgia 2017).

Georgian rural families consistently link the applicant’s academic underachievement with their academic experiences in rural schools; when describing their schools, families in Georgia identify the quality of foreign language teaching as the most serious challenge (Chankseliani, 2013b). Although additional remuneration (+25% of basic pay in Kazakhstan and +35% in Georgia) is provided to teachers in rural schools in both countries (Bokayev, 2016; Government of Georgia, 2015), attracting and keeping good teachers to rural areas has been a challenge since the Soviet times (Jahn, 1975; OECD, 2018). It is particularly difficult to attract foreign language teachers who are in a position to generate substantial additional income by ‘selling’ their marketable skills in urban areas with plentiful opportunities in the private sector (Chankseliani, 2013b).

The school choice in rural areas is also rather limited. Shutting down a number of public schools, better known as the efficiency driven neo-liberal policy of ‘school network

optimisation’ had an impact on the accessibility of schools in rural areas in both countries (Chankseliani, 2014a; Silova et al., 2007). In 2001, there were no schools in 477 settlements in rural Kazakhstan, with an additional 889 villages without a secondary school, and 977 villages without an elementary school (Silova et al., 2007).

As a remedy to low quality schooling, and in preparation for centralised university examinations, formal schooling is frequently supplemented by private tutoring; it is perceived to be helping applicants in improving their performance in university entrance examinations (Jumabayeva, 2016; Kobakhidze, 2018; Machabeli et al., 2011; OECD, 2017). An estimated \$14.8 million (40 million GEL) is spent each year by families of Georgian HE applicants on private tutoring (Chakhaia, 2019). This has implications for equity, because the availability and affordability of private tutors differs significantly between rural and urban areas in both countries (Chankseliani, 2013b; Kalikova & Rakhimzhanova, 2009; OECD, 2017). Although tutors do not always charge cash, especially in rural areas where “in-kind” tutoring is an accepted practice (Kobakhidze, 2018), the quality of tutoring in rural areas is questionable, especially in foreign languages. Competent teachers/tutors of a foreign language are in great shortage in rural areas in both countries (Irsaliyev et al., 2017; Kobakhidze, 2018). Furthermore, where fees are charged, private classes in foreign languages are the most expensive (Kobakhidze, 2018).

The low-quality, relatively poorly resourced schooling for rural pupils, limited availability and choice of schools and private tutors in rural areas - taken together under the composite concept of rurality – may explain the differences in the UNE/UNT scores of rural and urban applicants. The differences in test scores translate into a clear disadvantage for rural applicants when it comes to HE access in these centralised systems of university admission where academic achievement on unified tests determines who goes to university and whether or not students obtain a state grant for tuition.

Discussion and conclusion

There has long been a strong academic and policy interest in inequalities in access to higher education. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, that Georgia and Kazakhstan are tracking their progress to, contain a target on equal access to HE: ‘By 2030, ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university’. Inequalities in HE access have been linked to broader

economic, political, and social factors as well as school, family and individual characteristics. Larger social inequalities set limits on what education can achieve; as Basil Bernstein put it, ‘education cannot compensate for society’ (Bernstein, 1970, p. 344). At the same time, the crucial function of individual agency in various institutional settings is also confirmed by research (Marginson, 2018). Thus, the determinants of inequalities in access to HE are multiple, nuanced, and context-dependant.

This study used cross-national comparison to enrich the explanation of geographic disparities in HE access in centralised systems of university admissions. Georgia and Kazakhstan are leaders in terms of tertiary gross enrolment rates in the Caucasus and Central Asia. As larger proportions of school graduates have been choosing HE, these two countries’ systems have been expanding at the expense of private institutions and fee-paying enrolments at public HEIs to the extent that the supply now meets the demand. Consequently, the differentiation of HEIs by perceived quality and reputation becomes more prominent. The competition for places at more prestigious HEIs, which are often private, is very high. This competition fuels the industry of private tutoring. Under these circumstances, the opportunities for rural school graduates who attend less well-resourced schools, are significantly less well-off, have fewer out-of-school opportunities, lower quality/no private tutoring, seem to be much more limited than the opportunities for their urban peers.

This multiple case study used a historical-comparative lens to examine spatial inequalities within the centralised systems of university admissions. Using multiple sources of secondary data and literature, the study demonstrated that the rural origin creates a serious impediment for HE access in Georgia and Kazakhstan. Rural school graduates may be less likely to apply to university, due to the affordability considerations as well as the perceived assessment of their own academic ability. When rural applicants participate in the centralised examinations, they are less likely to enter HE than their urban peers due to the academic preparedness. In Georgia, urban applicants apply, and gain admission, to more prestigious universities which charge higher tuition fees than the universities where rural applicants enrol; urban students also manage to obtain higher proportions of the public tuition grant than their rural peers, as the state grant allocation is determined by the test scores obtained in the centralised examinations. Thus, rural and urban students access HE of different quality for the same out-of-pocket costs, with urban students being more privileged and rural students relatively less so (Chankseliani, 2013d, 2013b, 2013c). Both countries operate HE admissions systems that offer an allegedly level playing field for all applicants, limited only by effort and ability.

Rural applicants and their families appear to be willing to accept that the failure was a result of their inferior efforts and ability (Chankseliani, 2013b; Tristan McCowan, 2019).

In the context of centralized admissions, intensified competition between universities, and households' growing consumption of the private tutoring, a gap between the HE access opportunities for urban and rural school graduates in these countries is likely to increase in the future. The gap between more prestigious and less prestigious HEIs will presumably widen which will be reflected in the tuition costs at more prestigious universities. It is likely that some universities will uphold their elite status while the majority will focus on their demand-absorbing function (Cantwell et al., 2018).

Spatial disparities in educational outcomes stem from an intricate interplay among various socio-economic, cultural, and educational variables. While not all causes of such disparities may lie in the realm of the education sector per se, education policies can be successfully used to alleviate some effects of socio-economic disparities in the short-run and facilitate establishment of an environment where economic and social benefits are more equitably distributed in the long-run.

Education access problems will continue to exist as long as education remains a commodity. In the context of growing commercialization of HE and increasing competition for places at prestigious HEIs, these two countries would need to re-examine the structure and logic of their national systems for university student admission and funding distribution. Market and competition-based solutions do not normally lead to fair outcomes when it comes to public funds and university admission decisions. This is a long-term task that requires substantive, sector-wide rethinking that can lead to transformational changes for these two societies. This includes re-conceptualizing of the equity as requiring policies that consider diversity of student potentials and promoting 'different treatment according to relevant differences' (Bennett, 2001, p. 174). There are, however, two immediate challenges that would need to be tackled by policy-makers: the uneven distribution of resources for schooling and private tutoring that lead to uneven results at high-stakes tests, the unaffordable tuition and living expenses for individuals from rural areas because of uneven distribution of incomes and wealth. Considering the examples from other global contexts, we suggest that there are at least two major policy approaches to be considered in the short to medium term to tackle these barriers to HE access for the rural youth.

One such option is to introduce more nuanced criteria for HE selection, including but not limited to the consideration of applicants' geographic origin. This can be done by adopting the so-called contextual admissions approach to address equity concerns by controlling for variations in educational opportunities by area when selecting academically successful applicants for higher education. For this purpose, an Index of Area Educational Deprivation can be created that will include the classification of all areas by educational deprivation. The index could include the indicators on HE participation, school-level outcomes (national assessment data), poverty and employment, amongst others. The area-based weights would then be applied to the UNE/UNT scores before ranking the applicants nationwide.

A major mechanism to equalize chances for rural school graduates could lie in the refined system of financial aid. Globally, there exist various mechanisms of financial aid that countries/HEIs use to financially support students who are underrepresented in HE, such as means-tested income support while being enrolled at an HEI, support in repaying tuition fees, deferred/income-contingent loan repayment schemes, funding to help specific disadvantaged groups meet their needs while in HE. There are several impediments to implementing these in Georgia and Kazakhstan, and one of these could be the unreliable system of assessing family/individual income. Unless the financial aid system undergoes a significant reorganisation, the HE system will continue to reproduce existing patterns of inequalities.

To conclude, this study treated spatial disparities as geographic revelations of intricate educational and socio-economic inequalities which create a group-level disadvantage for individuals from rural areas. It was shown that the rural residence is linked with HE aspirations, choice-making and academic preparedness in the context of high-stakes, centralised examinations in the marketised systems of higher education.

Affordability lies at the heart of rural disadvantage in HE access, with individuals from rural areas not being prepared to enter into a genuinely equal competition with their urban peers when it comes to university access. This study, therefore, undermines neoliberal, exclusively individualistic explanations of inequality where individual agency is treated as the sole determinant of individual success.

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