# STUDENTS AND LECTURERS PERCEPTION OF EQUITY ACCESS AND DEMOCRATISATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN GEORGIA

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**Abstract:** As a developing country, there are some challenges in Georgian Higher educational system that are related to equity, access and democratization. In addition to the students coming from ethnic minority groups (with no competences in Georgian language), the majority of the students comes from the peripheral areas and after moving to the big cities they need to work for paying their studies. Distance Education can be seen as a solution of the problems related to access on Higher education, for this reason this study aimed to find out what were the perceptions of the students and faculty members from the three universities (one from capital and two regional state HEIs). After collecting the data with using online surveys some focus groups and in-depth interviews were conducted with staff member, in order to discuss the students survey findings and hear more about teachers' perceptions regarding the equity/access in Higher Education. The data collection was conducted fully online due to the pandemic (in April-June 2020). The results of the survey, together with the discussion and main findings are given in the following report.

*Keywords: Higher Education; Distance Learning; Georgia*

## Introduction

Being a Post-soviet country Georgia experienced some economic problems, which influenced the universities as well (Dobins, 2015; Orkodashvili, 2010; Gvaramadze, 2010). The majority of the HEIs in Georgia have been transforming nowadays (Cherkezishvili, 2020). The new Authorization Standard offered by the National Centre for Educational Quality Enhancement is a mandatory for Georgian HEIs to obtain authorization in order to carry out HE activities as obligatory measures clearly urge HEIs to have a well-developed educational programs that supports effective implementation of educational and research activities and ensure their relevance with constantly changing environment; Individualized educational programs should offer students appropriate format and conditions of teaching, learning and assessment to students with different requirements or special educational needs. Being an integral part of the European HE Area since 2004,

Georgian universities have been trying to align their teaching and learning processes with European HE standards (Tabatadze, 2017) and requirements to ensure compatibility of its curriculum, synchronization of the learning outcomes that support effective student mobility and enhance the degree of internationalization within the national education system in general and individual HE institutions in particular. In the given report three GE higher education institutions will present the outcome of the locally conducted re-search regarding students and lecturers' perception to equity access and democratization at given higher educational institutions.

## 1. Ilia state university

Ilia State University, one of the biggest state Higher Educational Institutions was founded in 2006, as a merge of several universities and research centers. Currently, ISU is one of the leading research and educational institutions in Georgia. A big variety of subjects and courses are being offered in four different faculties/schools (from medicine to humanities and business). ISU offers all three levels of studies - Bachelors, Masters and PhD, in addition to this, Teacher education and Georgian Language preparation programs are also conducted.

ISU, placed in the capital, gathers students from different regions and different backgrounds. Although the university offers specially designed curricula to students coming from ethnic minority groups, still attending every single class is problematic for those students, as due to their traditional views they are not allowed to leave their family often. Besides, more and more students are working at the same time of their studies and they can't attend classes every day. As for the faculty members, although they understand that technological development has brought new opportunities even in the classroom of higher education systems, but still they are lacking the skills required for implementations of the different e-tools that can improve the quality of teaching and learning, guarantee students involvement and advance their learning outcomes. ISU offers a special program to students coming from the ethnic minority groups, namely Azerbaijanis and Armenians, whose Georgian language competences aren't that high. One-year intensive course into Georgian is offered to those students, after successfully completing it, they are able to prolong their studies on Bachelors level. Every year, approximately 300-350 students are using this opportunity and almost the same number is starting studies on upper levels. The university also considers the fact that the majority of the students, especially at Masters level, are working at the same time of their studies, thus the classes are normally scheduled after 6 p.m.

## 2. Methodology

In order to collect data from students, the survey was created. The questionnaire was divided into three parts, the first was dedicated to some descriptive aspects, while the questions in the second part were about their experience and expectations regarding distance education, and in the third part we tried to get information about their ICT skills. The questionnaire was designed in Google Form and it was distributed with the link in the study information system. Students were given one week and it was optional for them to fill the form. In total, we had 704 responses. Data gathering was conducted in April-May 2020.

## 3. Analysys

The majority of the students responding to the survey were doing their studies on BA level (almost 88 %), while only 10% is from the Georgian language preparatory program, which is specially designed for students coming from ethnic minority groups. As we could see the majority of the students' state that Georgian is the first language for them, but 18% of students Georgian is a second language. More or less the same is with the religion, 75% represent Christian orthodox, while the rest are from different religious groups. As for the student's employment status, the majority doesn't work, but from the 43% of the students who are working, the majority has full time jobs.
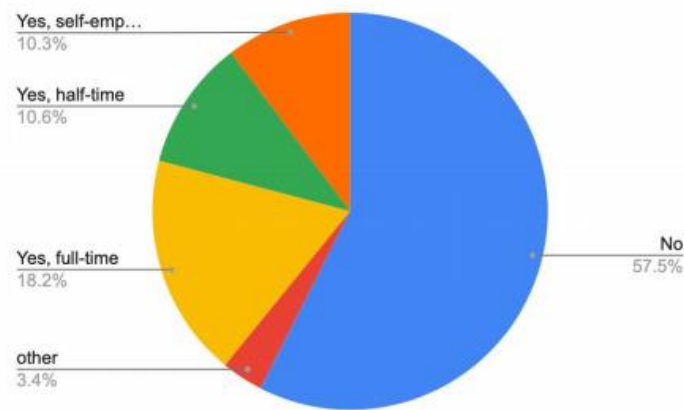


*Figure 1.* Students Employment

The survey aimed to find out the student's attitude towards the distance courses. Until the Spring 2020 there was not any single course delivered fully online at Ilia State University. In some courses a blended earning method was used and students were able to communicate with

teachers and classmates in the learning management system in addition to face to face meetings, but this practice was not spread in each program and in each department. Because of the Coronavirus pandemic all classes had to deliver distantly. The data with our survey was collected in May 2020, that said, students also mention the practice they had just gained.

The majority of the students point that they found the distance lectures interesting, the learning materials were organized well and in an easy way to understand, however quite a big number of the students' state that the online course itself didn't motivated them to learn the topic, as shown in a chart below (1 means the least they agree and 5 mostly they agree on).
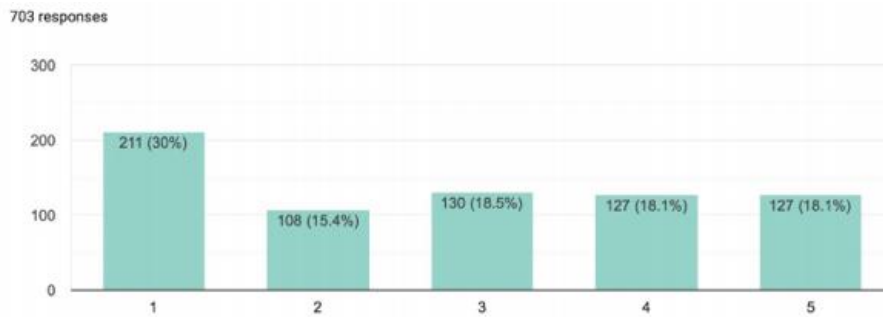


**Figure 2**. *The Online Lesson Motivated me to Learn the Topic*

Students' perceptions toward the possibility of getting feedback from the course instructor was also assessed positively. The majority of the participants mentioned that they got individual and timely feedback during the course (almost 84% of students), in addition to this they also state that they were able to ask questions and get answers on time (1 means the least they agree and 5 mostly they agree on).
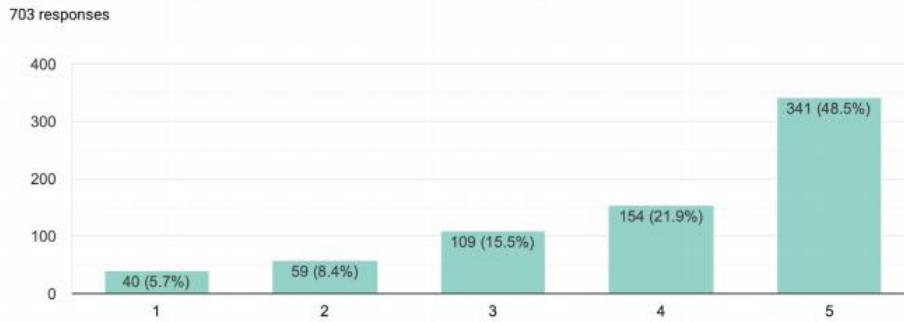
***Figure 3****. It was possible to ask questions and get timely feedback from the instructor*

We also asked students to assess their skills in ICT overall and using different computer programs, as it turned out almost 86% of them state that they have good command of using computers and technology. In addition to this, we asked whether the distance learning environment was easy to navigate or to use, here again, the majority al-most 77% responded that they are satisfied with this. However, when we asked whether they had some significant technical issues that hinder their learning, quite a big number of students responded positive, as shown below.
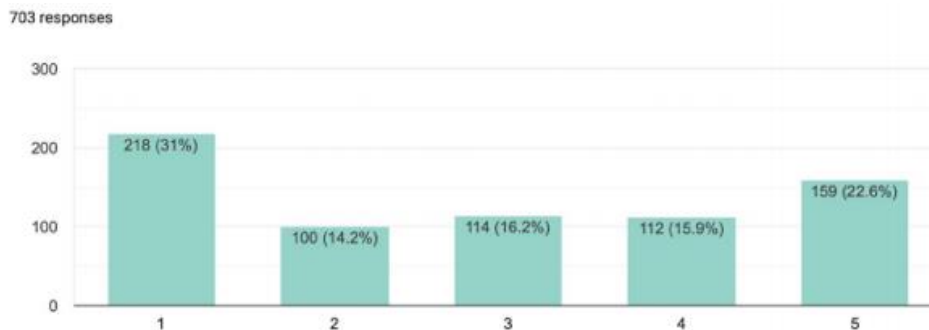


***Figure 4.*** *I had no significant technical issues that hindered my learning*

In the survey we also asked students about their feelings about distance education in general. Quite a significant number (almost 38% of the students) state they feel disappointed with distance education and even more, almost 46% says that distance education puts them in an awkward situation. These might be the facts, that explain the response to question, that they don't prefer online classes to face to face meetings (1 means the least they agree and 5 mostly they agree on).
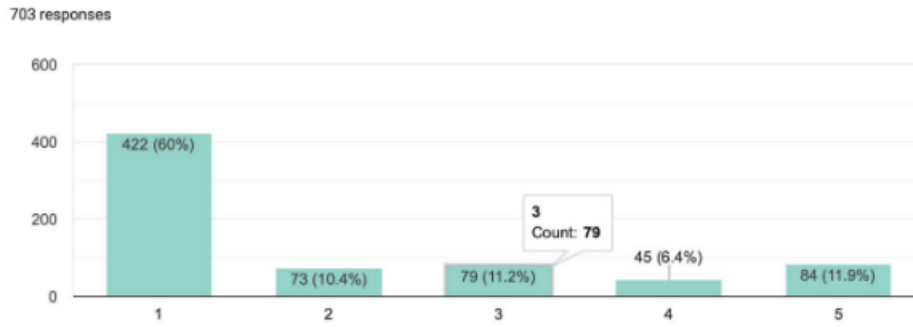
**703 responses**

***Figure 5.*** *I prefer an online lesson to a face-to-face lesson*

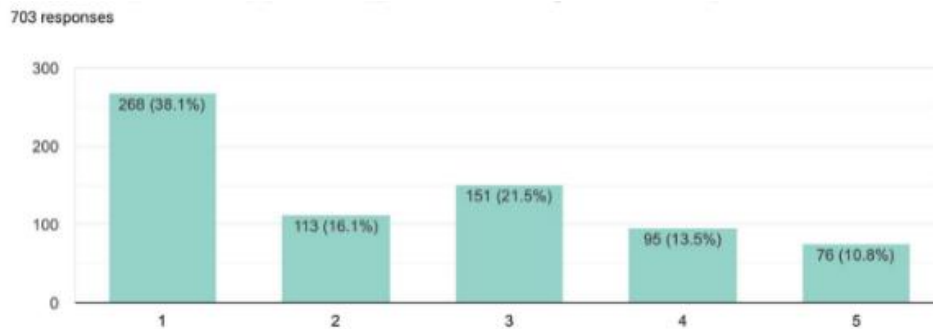In addition to this, the majority of the students are not satisfied with the online classes they attended.



**703 responses**

***Figure 6.*** *Online learning makes me feel pleased/satisfied*

In order to assess the current situation regarding equity access and democratization and to explain the outcomes of students surveys we also intended to conduct in depth interviews with ISU faculty and administration staff members. Due to the CoronaVirus pandemic lockdown started in early March in Georgia, and the interviews were done online in the beginning of May. In total we had six faculty members and one administrative staff member.

The majority (five out of seven) of the respondents have been working at ISU more than ten years. Everyone states that they have had experience with teaching students coming from ethnic minority groups, which are Armenians and Azerbaijanis and also religious minority students. Everyone maintains that they have quite a big number of students working at the same time of their studies in each semester.

As for the advantages of distance education, the faculty members identify different elements but almost everyone mentions that it is time saving, both from teachers and students perspective, as they are not required to lose their time in the transport to and from the university. Teachers also state that quite a big number of the students were skipping classes due to the reason they physically couldn't attend classes at the university (for different reasons), and distance education made it possible for students to attend the lectures from any location. Some of them also noted that it's much easier to diversify the learning methods in distance teaching, from traditional methods to flipped classroom, active learning etc, in addition to this the possibility of giving the individual and timely feedback is also an asset in distance education. One professor mentioned her experience regarding the video tutorials she is making saying that students find it very useful, as those who skipped the classes are able to get back to the video materials and prepare themselves. The administration staff member, together with other respondents' state that one of the advantages of getting education distantly is that it is financially attractive for students, as they don't have transport and accommodation related costs. As the majority of students are coming from regions to the capital in order to get higher education, they have to get accommodation and the expenses are risen for their families, but now they are able to cut those costs.

All of the staff members confirm that the distance learning meets the requirements of the students coming from the special population groups. Namely, there are some major factors which the faculty members underline: ability to attend the class from any location, this is crucially important for students having the jobs at the same time of their studies, in addition to this, students coming from regions are also able to attend classes without traveling to the capital. One of the most important issue is finances, as it is a major problem for students either coming from ethnic minority groups or from regions, as they have cost of living and need to cover it by themselves (as there is not any governmental support for this), if they attend the classes online they don't have to rent an apartment and pay for transportation and etc. Some of the teachers also note that it is easier for students to actively participate in online classes rather than it was during the face to face meeting.

As for the challenges, which teachers see during distance education, number one is the social-economical disbalance, which means not every student has a personal computer and, in some cases, not even the smartphone. As Georgia is a developing country the number of the females with lower income are still high, they can't afford to have internet access on a daily basis. The university physical infrastructure offered those students personal computers and free internet connection, but this is only accessible at the campus. The current pandemic situation illustrated that the number of those students are high enough. The second challenge, teachers mention, is the lack of theoretical and pedagogical knowledge of managing distance courses. As this is

completely new reality, as Georgian teachers had not experience in delivering fully online classes now they are missing it. The majority of teachers started uploading reading materials only, someone created short videos, but still the faculty members we met mention that they see the pedagogical view of delivering fully online class a bit challengeable. Lack of communication with students is also something that local teachers see as a challenge, as the majority of students are not using cameras and teachers only see their photos, which makes the online classes a bit hard to deliver for teachers, and finally, almost everyone mentions the principles of academic integrity as one of the biggest challenges while distance education. As it is hard to guarantee that students are not cheating and no other person is doing assignments and exams on their behalf.

All of the above-mentioned challenges are equally in line with the problems students from special population groups are having. Namely, not having sufficient computer techniques, as well as the internet connection, these are the factors more or less dependent on the family incomes. Besides, some teachers state that once being with their families, students are more actively involved in home activities such as gardening or any other and they find it difficult to find time and space for learning. But there are few other changes as well, teachers note that in some cases, students coming from special population groups are shy and they are not actively involved in distance classes, they lack of communication with their pairs and try not be involved in group activities, that can be explained due to the fact that the socialization they went through during the face to face lectures, can't be done in distance learning, as they still are living in their families and don't see classmates that much, also, some teachers underline the difficulty of teaching language in via distance education as the nonverbal communication here is a must but sometimes it is missing in online classes.

The university tries to minimize the risk factors of distance education by offering different technological solutions for conducting lectures, providing feedback, grading assignment, providing learning materials, conducting exams, however those can't fully solve the problem, as some students might have problems with electricity, others might not be able to use computer and concentrate the whole day on the screen. Teachers do their best to support students, as they record the classes and upload it in learning management systems for those who couldn't attend the live class, also they diversify the class activities and assignment assessment methods in order to cover all the students population.

The majority of teachers state that they needed twice as more time in distance learning as they do in face to face classes. It also took time to adjust all the class activities into a online infrastructure, thus into the first semester, they spent a lot of time in planning and conducting the classes, however they are not fully satisfied with student engagement, as not all of them used microphones and cameras, and sometimes teachers only looked at their photos, that was a bit

stressful, as teachers couldn't get feedback and didn't had chance to fully communicate with the e-audience. As for the support to students coming from special education groups, the majority of teachers as well as the administrative staff member mentions that they offered individual consultations what was delivered distantly in addition to the classes they had weekly. Some of the students used this possibility before the midterm and final exams. Teachers also note that as they are using learning management systems, they tried to update their students and communicate with them not only in the given hours of class, but also throughout the whole week. As they uploaded additional reading materials, video lectures, actively participated in forums and tried to support those students who mostly needed it.

During the interview it was found out that accountability of conducting the effective distance learning course is on both sides. Teachers see their responsibility to prepare the class activities and reading materials well enough, taking into account the needs of students from with different needs, to design the assignment and exams that will be in harmony with the course content, to identify the correct teaching method and make appropriate changes in order to adjust it to local course needs, to provide feedback that will support students develop their learning out-comes. However, they also see students' responsibilities as key in this process, namely, students should try their best not to skip classes and to actively participate in the discussions as well as prepare all the assignments. Stu-dents are also responsible for academic integrity issues as well, as teachers are unable to fully guarantee this.

Although some pedagogical skills are equally important in distance learning, the majority of staff identify advanced ICT skills as a key component, to be able to fully navigate in different online tools, learning management and study information systems. Besides, the teaching staff state that they need more professional development courses in designing and managing distance courses, in different assessment methods, pedagogical theories. Thus, the must have skills are definitely different in face to face classes and distance learning.

As for the learning outcomes of students coming from special population groups, teachers' reflection on this is not the same. Two of them note that despite the fact that students from ethnic minority groups are having intensive Georgian language courses, it remains a major barrier in their academic activities. Other teachers also mention that students who are working are divided between their studies and career and this doesn't make a good effect on their learning outcomes. However, the majority of teachers we met, mentions that the most successful students are those coming from regions, who had to move to the capital as they have some responsibility toward their families and doing their best to succeed.

## 4. Shota Rustaveli Batumi State University

BSU project group used the questionnaire created in the frame of the project to find out the student perception about online learning in the university. The questionnaires were sent to all BSU students and only 404 feedback was received. Completing the questionnaire was voluntary for students. Statistically, 74.3% were female and 25.7% were male.

The age of the surveyed students was distributed as follows: 8.7 % age 30-39, 1.2% age 40-49, 0.5% age 50-59 and 89.6% were under 30; 95.8% of respondents have no cognitive impairment, only 4.2 % believe they have cognitive impairment. As for the question whether they had any other disability the answers were as follows: 93.1% - No, 6.9% – yes; The next question was about the religion. It turned out that: 71.3% of the surveyed students were Christians, 26. 5 % Muslims, 0.2 % Jehovah witness, 0.2% Non-religious.

The surveyed students informed that 94.3% speak Georgian with their parents, 0.2% speak Kist, 1 % speak Azerbaijanian, 3.5% Russian, 0.7% Armenian; The next part of the questionnaire is dedicated to identify the advantages and disadvantages of online learning.

79.7 % of the interviewed students think that online lectures were interesting, 8.2 % – think that they were not interesting, 12.1 % are neutral on this issue (1 means the least they agree and 5 mostly they agree on).
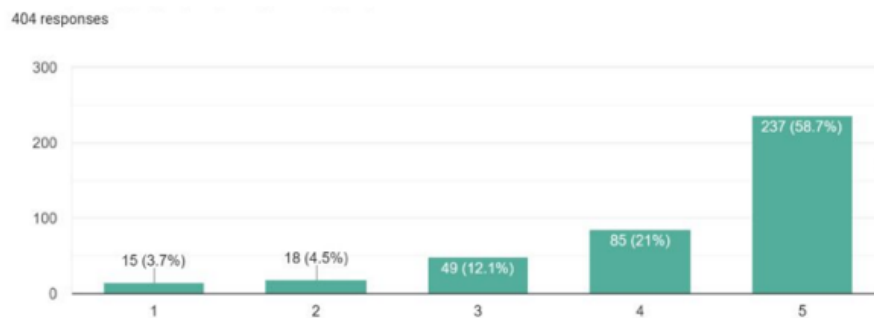


*Figure 7. The online classes were interesting*

77.7 % believe that online lectures allow them to adapt the learning process to their own needs. 10.7 % think that online lectures have failed to achieve their goals, 11.6 % are in a neutral position. 79.7 % of interviewees believe that the study material was well organized during online lessons, 9.5 % of respondents do not think so, and 10.8% stay neutral. For 78.7% students the study material was clear, for 8.9 % the online material was unclear, 12.4 % was neutral (1 means the least they agree and 5 mostly they agree on).
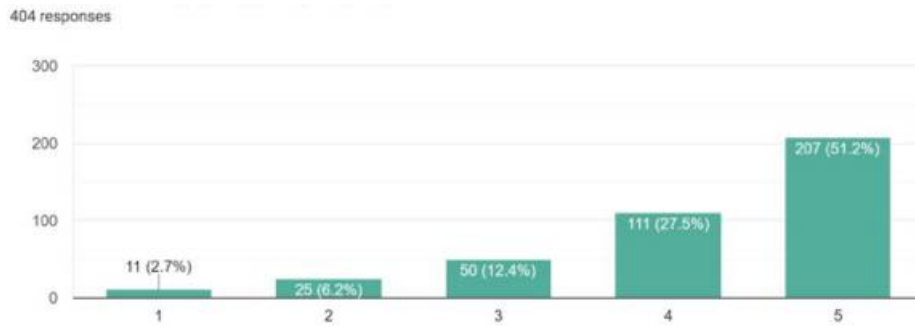
***Figure 7.*** *The learning materials were easy to understand*

79.9 % of the students stated that they got lecturers' feedback timely, 8.5 % doesn't agree with this and only 11.6 % are neutral on this issue, 77 % of the interviewed students easily interacted with their peers in relation to the study materials, while 9.2 % were unable to interact with their peers. 13.8% of students were neutral. 69.6 % students said that online learning encouraged them to study the material provided by the lecturer, 15,1 % claim that since it was an online course, they didn't study the material, 15.3 % of respondents were neutral (1 means the least they agree and 5 mostly they agree on).
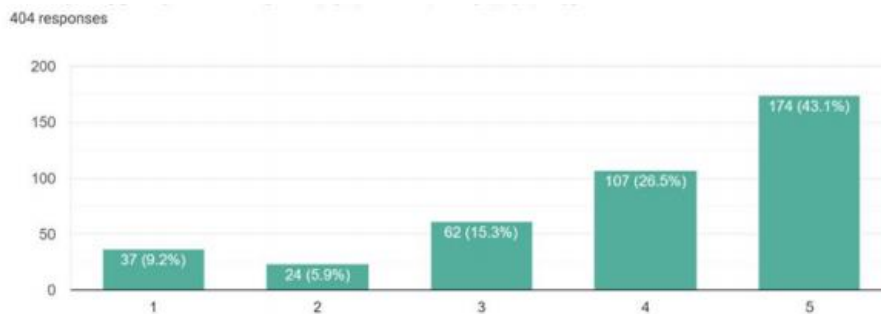


***Figure 8.*** *Online learning motivated me to study all the learning materials*

63.2 % of the students did not have a significant technical problem during the online courses, which prevented them from their learning process, 17.3 % had a technical problem during the learning process, and 19.5 % were neutral. 77 % believe that the exercises, learning material and activities were relevant and they will pass the exams easily, 12.4 % were neutral, and 10.6 % think they will not be able to pass the exam after taking the online course.
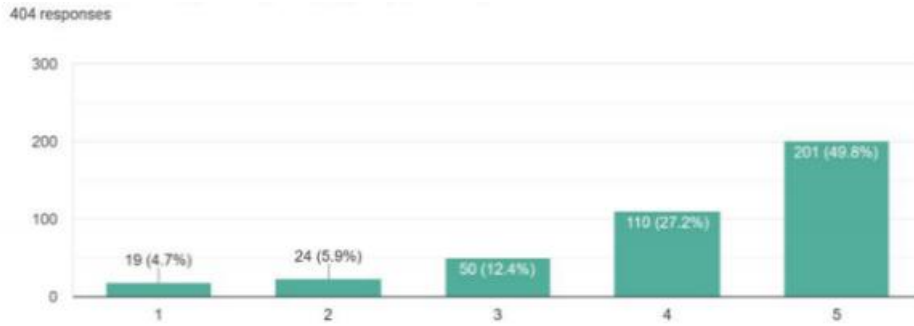
**Figure 9.** *After writing all the assignments in online course, I believe the final exam will be easy to be passed*

34 % of students prefer traditional lectures to online lectures. 46,6 % support online lectures, , and 19.4 % are neutral. Most of the students, about 74% think that the e-learning environment is easy to use, 10% think that the e-environment was not easy to use, and 16% were neutral. 72.3 % of students fix their satisfaction about the online environment, 11.6 - are not satisfied and 16.1 stay neutral. Whereas, 75% are satisfied with online lectures, 12.6% are not and 12.4 are neutral. 80.7 % think that they are good at computer skills, 7.4 % – don't think so and 11.9 prefer to stay neutral (1 means the least they agree and 5 mostly they agree on). And still only 55.1 enjoy online learning, 15.3 – do not, and 19.6 are neutral. Online learning is frustrating for 21.5%, 59.4 % do not show up frustration, and 19.1 % are neutral.
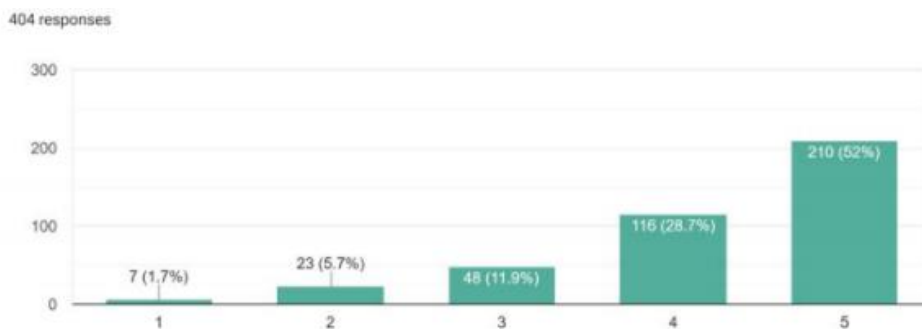


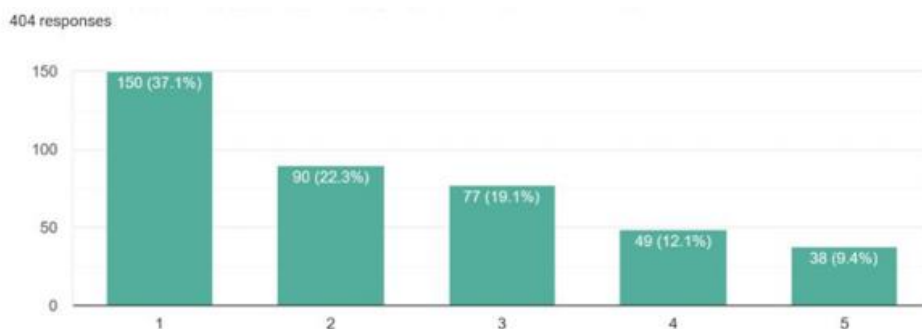**Figure 10.** *I have an advanced ICT Skills*

***Figure 12.*** *Online Learning disappoints me*

To sum up the attitude towards online learning is mostly positive. Despite the fact that online learning for most of the students was time consuming and demanded more effort since it was a new challenge for everyone, they still think that it was comfortable, interesting, fruitful and productive. On the one hand they fix their satisfaction about the teaching/learning process during a pandemic period and wish to keep e-learning elements from the new academic year. On the other hand, they mentioned that if online teaching were more structured and organized It would have a better effect. Though there are still some challenges and issues to be dealt with in order to improve the teaching quality and maintain good statistics, the first steps are done quite effectively.

Since special population students' study at different levels and programs at BSU, we decided to interview the lecturers from different faculties to give a clear picture of the support at the university level. 12 lecturers were interviewed in total. Since the survey was held during the midterm exam period when BSU professors were very busy, the feedback was received a bit later than it was supposed. We received feedback from 12 respondents via Google drive. All the respondents were females aged 35 and above. Respondents were academic staff as well as visiting teachers of BSU teaching at the BA and MA levels. While analyzing the questions, it was found out that Russian, Azerbaijanian, Armenian, Indian, Romanian, Turkish students study at BSU as well as students with special needs and are socially vulnerable.

When talking about advantages of online learning and teaching BSU academic staff first of all mentioned its effectiveness in terms of self-paced learning, since it allows students to take courses from their own devices anytime and anywhere. Online teaching enables a teacher to communicate with students irrespective of the location and distance (i.e. remote villages, mountainous regions). On the other hand, online teaching is schedule-free allowing students to simultaneously work full time and study (even attend several courses); Students attend the lectures without any obstacles such as illness, bad weather or transportation (reduced transportation costs were also mentioned). Distance learning develops a sense of responsibility

and improves self-discipline since students have to meet the deadline when submitting homework; It is also perfect for introverts. First of all, they feel more comfortable in front of the screen rather than answering face to face. Teachers might discover how creative and imaginative these students are when they complete the tasks; Some lecturers state that getting an education without leaving home gives spare time for more leisure activities, too. BSU Professors named "Adjusting new technical skills" as one of the benefits of online teaching for both – teachers and students. It provides lecturers with better administration tools whereas in a traditional classroom a lecturer faces a lot of administrative challenges. As for students, they develop digital literacy skills that are necessary to have in life, they feel enthusiastic about submitting the homework and getting feedback. Thus, it triggers students' motivation.

BSU professors claim that advantages mentioned above are beneficial for the students of all categories. It is in compliance with the needs of both, the special population and ordinary ones. Online teaching responds to their needs because they receive higher education despite their geographical location, social background and with minimized financial costs. Online learning puts everyone in the same boat with similar challenges and opportunities - everyone has equal chances to receive an education. Besides, it gives a great chance to acquire knowledge during a pandemic or other unexpected cases.

However, BSU professors outlined some challenges in remote learning: First of all internet accessibility for underprivileged social class and not only; the next biggest challenge according to their answers is availability of necessary equipment, such as a computer, laptop, smartphone, etc.; In some cases, even environment (some students are shy to switch on camera if they consider their house shabby). lacking digital literacy skills also ham-pers the process of teaching /learning and takes extra time and effort for both – students and lecturers. Some platforms and online teaching tools /techniques need to be taught beforehand in order to make students' and teachers' lives easier and the lessons more efficient. The other drawbacks of online teaching mentioned by the lecturers are: resource-selecting process which they consider to be quite time-consuming (searching, choosing, preparing materials, uploading, checking, etc.); Cheating (not only plagiarism, weaker students might get higher scores in tests especially when they have someone to help them); lacking self –motivation and self – organization skills (which is not everyone's strong asset); Attitude towards e-learning - some students don't consider it to be serious and important.

As for special population students – they sometimes have difficulties in attending online lectures. Much depends on their financial wellbeing which determines their accessibility to the internet and availability of electronic devices needed for learning. Some students might feel frustrated due to problems in their families and this kind of "isolation" and no chance to meet

friends, lecturers, can prevent them from fulfilling their tasks and participating in online lessons. Remote learning will do no good to the students who belong to ethnic minorities, different communities or the students with special needs in terms of their integration into the community. They always need peer support to cope with some challenges and get used to the learning process.

BSU administration and academic staff were concerned about the students of a special population. The University tries to help to overcome the challenges posed by online learning as much as possible. The most effective way is Students Portal through which students get materials and work on it. Of course, it will substitute, neither online consultation nor face-to-face meetings. But at least university avoids completely unfavorable conditions for them. Students can upload assignments weekly, get points, feedback, etc. Hence, if students don't have access to the internet, they have the whole week to complete given tasks and upload within 5-6 days. So, they have an opportunity to keep up with the syllabus. The platform turned out to be quite efficient since students can refer to the lecturers if they need any help in submitting the tasks. Besides, the university officially started to use Zoom to deliver lectures so that a vast majority of students can attend the lectures irrespective of their location. Relevant services of the university try to manage to communicate with students of special populations to provide administrative assistance, too.

Virtual learning really made a difference. It has changed the way lecturers used to teach. On the one hand, the online process requires more work, time and energy. Professors have to spend far more time compiling or organizing resources, uploading the material, downloading students' works, etc. But on the other hand, improved IT skill is a clearly visible outcome of online teaching. Lecturers are happy to gain new experience since online teaching strategies pushed them to vary methods and approaches. They record lectures, which on the one hand, give students a chance to listen when they have free time, or there is something incomprehensible during the lecture, and on the other hand, lets lecturers reassess their own performance. Besides, virtual learning gave the opportunity to a wider audience to get an education, including employed students, since it is combined with the student's desired pace of learning. It changed attitude towards remote teaching/learning effectiveness and raised awareness about the importance of academic integrity;

BSU lecturers consider online teaching as a new challenge. However, they think that it makes their teaching methods diverse; They try to be flexible and support students with different experiences by giving additional consultations online. They take their weak sides on board and when planning the lessons, try to tailor their methods, techniques to meet students' needs and adapt the activities so that they suit the online format. BSU professors try to personalize the

learning process and consider the individual requirements of the student. Their work is based on planning, preparing, anticipating, conducting and giving feedback; To make e-lessons involving they use diverse resources like audio, video material, animations, different apps like Kahoot, Mentimeter, etc. They combine lectures with practical work and use various activities to achieve the goal and reach learning outcomes. e.g. they include discussions, simulations, group work. They upload assignments, give online feedback, use electronic surveys. Thus, they do their best to fit the needs of students of any population as much as possible.

The responsibilities of the lecturer and the student are different in achieving the goals/outcomes de-scribed and planned in the syllabus. The lecturer is responsible to create a safe, honest and academic environment and disseminate knowledge through teaching and research; They should develop teaching methods that encourage and motivate students. For this, it's necessary to diagnose learning needs and provide students with all necessary and relevant learning resources in due dates, give clear-cut instructions about the tasks and give comprehensive feedback. It is their responsibility to prepare the material beforehand, deliver clear structured lessons, direct students to gain knowledge, guide and support, develop students autodidactic skills; one of the most important responsibility according to BSU professors is equal involvement and assessment solely based on academic achievement and not on personal characteristics such as gender, religion, race, personal values, political affiliation, and more.

As for the students, they are required to fulfill the obligations they are assigned, they should feel responsibility to attend online lectures, to be active and participate in e-discussions, get and reflect the material provided by their lecturers, meet deadlines and timely upload written tasks and assignments. They should work on nurturing appropriate attitudes towards e-learning, self - discipline and self – organization skills.

According to interviewees, the most important skill required while teaching online is IT skills. Lecturers should be able to replicate classroom strategies into a different form, facilitate the distance community and de-sign well-structured lectures and engaging activities for online teaching which is quite different from face-to-face one.

Besides, lecturers should strengthen supportive skills, in addition to the basic skills, like time management, communication, addressing a variety of student learning styles, flexibility; BSU lecturers consider cooperative skills to be very important, too. This might include building good rapport, using efficient strategies and techniques for more engagement and motivation increase, fostering student-centered learning, providing constructive feedback. To deliver effective e-lecture, teachers should also have patience and vigilance that are undoubtedly necessary to cope with challenges successfully.

For students, as well as for lecturers, online lectures were a novelty and a challenge at the same time. BSU lecturers' goals always met students' expectations and nothing changed while online learning - students' expect to get the same quality knowledge in non-traditional learning process, to have safe virtual classroom environment, widen their horizon, improve their life skills, have a lecturer's support and guidance throughout the learning process. Students require variety. Accordingly, professors try to vary teaching approaches and strategies that guarantee the outcomes; They attend training, and online courses on online teaching methodology in order to update their IT skills, e-strategies and live up to BSU students' expectations. They help them with individual consultations and recommendations.

Most of the BSU students are Georgians. Each student is treated equally and gets the results based on their performance. Students with special populations are not distinguished and their academic achievement varies between "average" and "good".

In both cases (face-to-face/online teaching) a lecturer should be attentive to the students of a special population, responsive to their needs and requirements as well as should try to enhance their integration within the classroom group as well as a local community and society. However, there is no doubt that online teaching with all the advantages mentioned above, is more supportive for the students of the special population in terms of flexibility and a chance to be fully involved in all the activities being held online. It gives even more possibility to listen, ask, debate, participate for them than while face-to-face learning. Based on the BSU lecturers answers, despite the challenges of e-learning, it dealt with such obstacles as access to students of special needs and employed ones; It solved the problems of attendance which is related to geographical location.

## 5. Iakob Gogebashvili Telavi state university

TeSaU LOVEDISTANCE group used the questionnaire created in the frame of the project to find out the student perception about online learning in the university. The questionnaires were sent to all TeSaU students and only 223 feedback was received. Completing the questionnaire was voluntary for students. Statistically, 78% were female and 22% were male. The age of the surveyed students was distributed as follows: 60.1% were between 20 and 25, 31.4% were under 20, 6.3% were between 25 and 30, and 2.2% were over 30.

99.1% of respondents have no cognitive impairment, only 0.9% believe they have cognitive impairment. The same percentage was shown by the question of whether they had any other

disability. A question about the religion was asked to the respondents. 93.7% of the surveyed students turned out to be Christians and 6.3% were Muslims.

The surveyed students informed that 93.7% speak Georgian with their parents, 4.5% speak Kist and 1.8% speak Azerbaijanian with their family. This question completes the part of the questionnaire that give information about the statistical data of the surveyed students. The next part of the questionnaire is dedicated to identify the advantages and disadvantages of online learning.

On the question of whether online lectures were interesting, 58.7% agree with this opinion, 18.4% think that online lectures were not interesting, 22.9% are neutral on this issue.

61.4% believe that online lectures allow them to adapt the learning process to their own needs. 20.7% think that online lectures have failed to achieve their goals, 17.9% think they are in a neutral position.
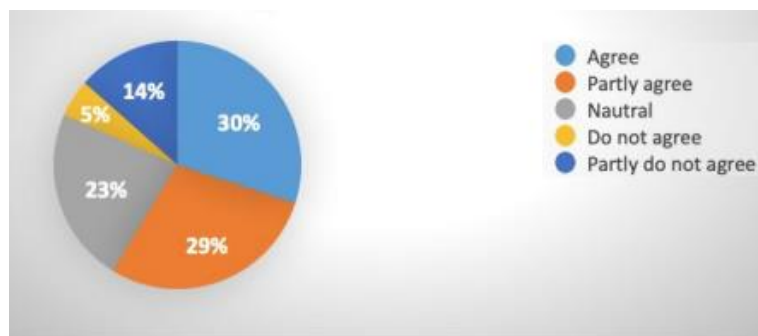


***Figure 11.*** *Online lectures were interesting*



***Figure 12.*** *Online lecture allowed me to adapt the learning pace to my needs*

60% of respondents believe that the study material was well organized during online lessons, 24.3% of respondents disagree, and 15.7% are neutral.

For 67.7% students the study material was presented clearly online, for 16.2% the material remained unclear, 16.1% was neutral. In terms of interaction, the situation was better, 83.4% think that it is easy to ask a question to a lecturer and at the same time timely get the feedback, 9.9% are neutral on this issue, and 6.7% think that it was impossible to communicate with a lecturer. 68% of students receive feedback from lecturers on time, 13.1% fail to receive timely feedback, and 18.8% of students are neutral.

During the online course, 79.8% of the surveyed students easily interacted with their peers in relation to the study materials, while 7.6% were unable to interact with their peers. 12.6% of students were neutral.

45.7% were encouraged by the online course to study the material provided by the lecturer, 31.4% believe that the study material was not learned because it was an online course, they would do it during the traditional lectures i.e. they will learn it by all means. 22.9% of respondents were neutral.
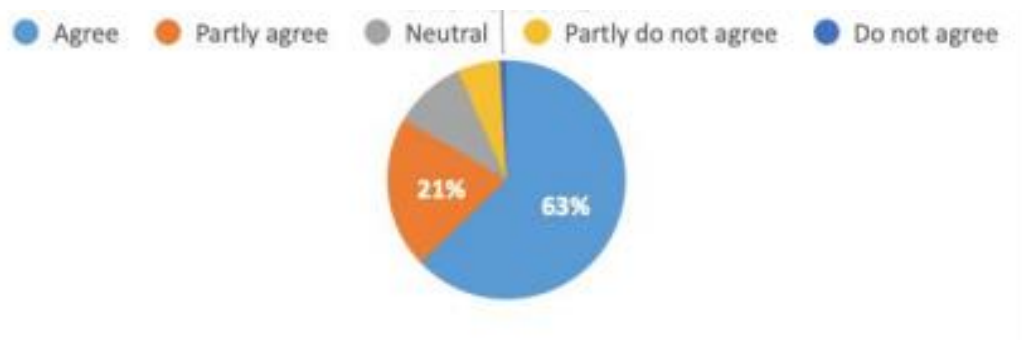


*Figure 13. It was possible to get feedback timely from the lecturer*

53% of the students surveyed did not have a significant technical problem during the online courses, which hindered their learning process, 34.1% had a technical problem during the learning process, and 13% were neutral.

58.3% were confident and believe that the exercises, learning material and activities they encountered while taking the online course will help them to pass the test/exam easily, 14.8% were neutral, and 26.9% think they will not be able to pass the exam after taking the online course.

To the surprise, a large number of students prefer traditional lectures to online lectures. Here the percentages are as follows: 72.1% support face-to-face lectures, 14% recommend online lectures, and 13.9% are neutral. Despite this opinion, 54.7% positively assess the e-learning environment

because they believe that it is easy to use, 30% think that the e-environment was not easy to use, and 15.2% think that such an environment is neutral.
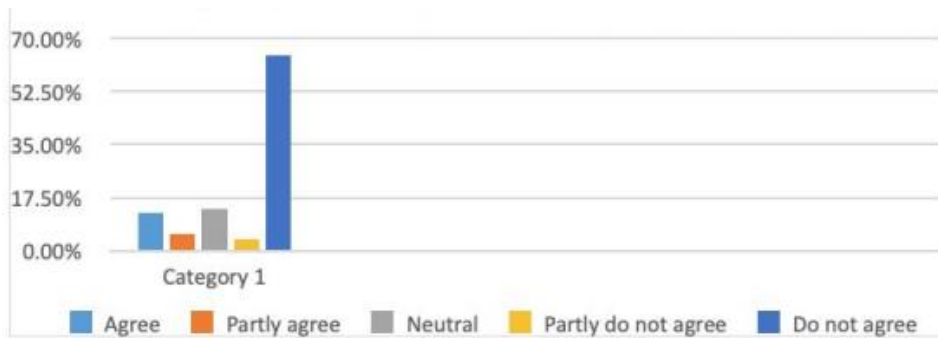


***Figure 14****. I prefer online lectures to face-to-face lectures*

45.3% are satisfied with the online environment, 30.1% are not satisfied with the online environment, 24.7% are neutral- i.e they are most likely students who are equally satisfied with both traditional and online environments.

As for computer skills, 65.9% are good at it, 12.1% are not good at computer skills and 22% are neutral.

After all, we see that 55.6% of surveyed students do not enjoy online study, 26.9% enjoy it, and 17.5% are neutral. Perhaps one of the reasons for this is that some of them have feelings of frustration and embarrassment when learning online. Online learning is uneasy/frustrated for 38.5%, 39.5% do not show up frustration, and 22% are neutral.

In conclusion, a large number of students with a neutral answer are students who fit both types of teaching (traditional and online) equally. There is a positive attitude towards online teaching among students, but in order to increase the effectiveness of online teaching, university lecturers need to be trained to master new skills that will make online lectures even more interesting, high quality and effective.

There are certain mechanisms to support students of special populations at Telavi State University. It is difficult to predict how many such students will be in the new academic year at the university. Even a 1 + 4 program cannot be used as an indicator to foresee the number of special populations. (1+4 program is offered to ethnic minority students to master Georgian language for a year. After fulfilling one year of Georgian language program (1+4 pro-gram) ethnic minority students have the possibility to become students of the university without the Unified National Exams.) These students are scattered across the various programs of the five faculties of the university, making it difficult to bring all of them together. Therefore, the project

LOVEDISTANCE TeSaU team discussed who will be better to be interviewed to give us a clear picture of the support of special population students at the university. We concluded that it would be better to interview the lecturers who have a direct connection with the teaching of compulsory subjects at the university. In other words, these are lecturers who teach the subjects that all students must take in the first year of their studies. These subjects are foreign language (English, Russian, and German), IT (Information Technologies), academic writing and philosophy. The questionnaire additionally was completed by several other course lecturers on a voluntary basis. These are lecturers in the field of tourism and history. The number of lecturers who filled the survey is more than the number of staff foreseen in planned visits for the training in the frame of the project. The project training will be attended by as many professors as the project foresees, and those who return back will train other colleagues in the methods and skills need-ed to achieve the project goals, it will increase the number of online courses in the university.

10 lecturers were interviewed. At this point, the project group thought it would be difficult to do the interview because the survey period coincided with the intermediate exam period at the university and TeSaU professors were very busy. So the questionnaires were sent to them and asked to fill it out within 5 days. The feedback was received from all 10 respondents via Google drive.

80% of the respondents were female and 20% were male. 30% were between the ages of 56 and above, 30% were between the ages of 46-55, and 40% were professors aged 36-45. All respondents were academic staff of Telavi University and teach at the BA and MA levels. Analysing the questions, it was found out that Kisti, Azerbaijanian, Armenian, Russian, with special needs, socially vulnerable, as well as employed students study at TeSaU.

Advantages of online learning and teaching for TeSaU academic staff is that the online process is flexible in terms of time, failure to deliver a lecture is minimized. Students attend the lecture without any interruptions such as illness, bad weather or transportation. Without leaving home, the learning process is planned and conducted, the problem of geographical location is solved, especially with employed students.

Out of the reality online lectures coincide with the needs of both, the special population and ordinary students, because due to the global pandemic situation attending the traditional lectures in Georgia is forbidden for a while. If it is generally considered the benefits of online lectures in terms of the needs of the special population, it really responds to their needs, because they receive higher education despite their geographical location, poverty, and minimized financial costs.

There are also challenges in online learning. These include improper technical equipment, malfunctions of technical equipment, insufficient technical skills, internet interruptions, lack of motivation of older staff and lack of flexible regulations. These challenges hinder students from attending online lectures and their perceptions. Obstruction is individual because all students have developed computer skills at different levels that is why the material provided by the lecturer does not equally give everyone the same proper knowledge. This applies to all technical malfunctions, internet access and unequal background.

TeSaU helps lecturers to overcome the challenges posed by online learning as much as possible. Training is con-ducted systematically and online instructions are placed for working remotely for both academic staff and students with the help of IT and Quality Assurance Services. For lecturers who do not have a home computer, the university provides notebooks for them for temporary use to qualify the teaching process. Relevant services of the university try to manage to communicate with students of special populations to provide administrative assistance with video conferences and individual consultations. Additionally, to these activities' information letters are published and the hotline of IT is functioning.

Virtual learning has changed the way lecturers used to use it. The online process requires more work, time, energy, and technical skills from the lecturer. It is also noteworthy that the number of students attending the lecture and, consequently, their activeness has increased significantly. Employed students also do homework when they have free time. Lecturers took more effort to manage time and process. In some cases, lectures are recorded in a very fruitful way. On one hand, the students listen when they have free time, or there is something incomprehensible during the lecture, and on the other hand, listening to a record from a side of a lecturer, in some cases, leads to reassessing and analyzing his/her teaching approaches and methods. They use it for the next record and the lectures become more effective and interesting for students. However, some part of the academic staff thinks that distance learning will alienate lecturers and students. To avoid it the existing and online lectures should be combined in the learning process. Some believe that lecturer speaking from a screen can't greatly enhance the quality of the learning process, because online lectures are more than just talking from the screen, there many other methodologies should be included.

Lecturers try to make online lectures more interesting for students and offer them a customized style. They use different forms of lecturing: discussions, surveys, interactions, brainstorming, lectures are recorded and uploaded to a special platform. If necessary, students are given assignments with special deadlines and are focused on the various formats of the assignment. Lecturers provide students with online textbooks, slideshows, use ZOOM, Google classroom and

Hangout platforms. Students receive individual feedback. Students with different experiences are offered individual approaches, given different assignments to simplify the learning process.

The responsibilities of the lecturer and the student are different in achieving the goal described and planned in the syllabus. The lecturer should provide interesting online study material to students, should support them with the recorded lecture, give the correct and timely feedback, provide the students with an online guide and work with them individually if it is needed. The lecturer's responsibility is also to have high qualifications, use modern technology and consider the interests and needs of the students.

As for the students, they should be responsible and timely engaged in the e-learning process offered by the university, attend online lectures, be honest about all the activities provided by the lecturer set by the syllabus, inform the lecturer in a timely manner if any problem arises. React on the lecturer's feedback, approach the seminars seriously, and regularly do the assignments.

Additional skills that lecturers need to have while teaching online are computer skills, technology management skills. These are additional skills required as opposed to traditional skills. Other skills such as subject competence, learning process management, time management, communication skills, interesting lecturing skills, analysis, synthesis, etc. and professionalism are equally needed for the traditional and online teaching process.

For students, as well as for lecturers, online lectures were a novelty. After the lecturers themselves underwent training and consultations, they did not make the students feel disappointed with the expectations and helped them with individual consultations and recommendations. Lecturers followed the sequence of topics from the syllabus to avoid confusion of students. Some students, for example, had difficulty in accessing the internet. Because of it they had the expectations that the lecturer would help them and at least postpone the deadline of the assignment in such a case. Another expectation that the students had was to listen to the lectures' lecture when they have free time, and it was also justified.

There are mostly Georgian students who study at the university. Nationality does not matter; every student goes through the results based on their motivation and mental abilities. Students with special populations are not distinguished with initiative and are more modest than ordinary students. The academic achievement of most of them is assessed as "average" and "good", however, there are some Kisti students who have the maximum mobilization towards the learning process, which has a positive impact on their academic performance. Azerbaijanian students need more individual assistance.

According to TeSaU lecturers, traditional learning is indispensable in terms of student support, although they con-sider online learning / teaching as a complement to traditional one. But to support the students from a special population, online learning better solves various problems related to geographical lo-cation, raises the attendance rate of students at lectures and helps students who are employed in parallel with their studies to pay their tuition fees themselves. It is also worth noting that shy students became bolder and more active to communicate with the lecturer in a different way: write a personal message to the lecturers about their opinion on this or that issue and ask a question if they have during or after the lecture. However, there are still some challenges regarding the quality assurance of online learning.

## Conclusion

As Georgia is a developing country, still there are quite a big number of the students who either don't have personal computers at all, or there is only one in a family. In some cases, students only had smartphones owned by their parents or siblings and they used it for accessing educational resources. Internet connection is also a significant factor, as it was not easy for those living in the rural areas to get connection, as only mobile internet was available for them and some of the families couldn't afford it. The majority of people in Georgia live with their families, quite often you will find three generations living at the same house. This factor also determined students' attitude toward online education, as they had a stress due to the factor that they were unable to find free space at home for attending the class and prepare for the lectures, as some of them don't own separate rooms.

The roots of stress level in students also is connected to social and economic factors, such as the physical environment at home. There was a problem with turning on the cameras during the lectures, for those who owned cameras, and one of the reasons for this might be the fact that those coming from poor families don't feel comfortable to show their houses, as it will be compared to those from rich families. The mandatory emergency of turning everything into online could also cause stress not only among the students but also in faculty members. Drawbacks of online teaching mentioned by the lecturers are: resource-selecting process which they consider to be quite time-consuming (searching, choosing, preparing materials, uploading, checking, etc.); Cheating (not only plagiarism, weaker students might get higher scores in tests especially when they have someone to help them); lacking self –motivation and self – organization skills (which is not everyone's strong asset); Attitude towards e-learning – some students don't consider it to be serious and important.

The most important skill required while teaching online is ICT skills. Lecturers should be able to replicate classroom strategies into a different form, facilitate the distance community and design well-structured lectures and engaging activities for online teaching which is quite different from face-to-face one.

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