

HIGHER EDUCATION TRENDS AND THE CHANGING COMPETENCIES OF HIGHER EDUCATION PROFESSIONALS: IMPLICATIONS FOR LABOR MARKET AND PROGRAM DESIGN

Research Report



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Use of Artificial Intelligence

The artificial intelligence–based tool ChatGPT was used in a limited and supportive capacity during the preparation of this manuscript, primarily to assist with language proofreading and the organization of the text. All analysis, interpretation, and conclusions remain the sole responsibility of the author.

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ABBREVIATIONS

AI - Artificial Intelligence

EHEA - European Higher Education Area

ENQA - European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education

EQAR - European Quality Assurance Register

EQF – European Qualifications Framework

EU -European Union

HESII -Higher Education Systems and Institutional Innovation

QA - Quality Assurance

MA - Master's Degree

SDG- Sustainable Development Goals

PhD – Doctor of Philosophy

UK – United Kingdom

USA – United States of Amerika

1. INTRODUCTION

The research is designed to deliver a comprehensive analysis of higher education sector trends and the recurring labor market needs for higher education professionals, both locally in Georgia and internationally. Higher education trends encompass the evolving patterns, practices, and priorities within the sector, reflecting shifts in policies, technologies, and societal demands. Labor market needs, on the other hand, focus on the specific skills, competencies, and expertise sought by employers to meet the challenges of a rapidly changing landscape. The research offers a comprehensive understanding of the evolving expectations surrounding the roles and competencies of higher education professionals.

Exploring these areas is essential for bridging the gap between academic programs and workforce demands in the field, ensuring alignment with societal development and contributing to shaping the future of higher education. By providing a detailed and actionable overview, this research serves as a foundation for designing a Master's Degree (MA) program in **Higher Education System and Institutional Innovation (HESII) at Ilia State University**.

Additionally, the study intends to contribute to the articulation of the scope and significance of the higher education specialist as a profession, emphasizing its critical role in the effective functioning of universities and other organizations engaged in higher education policy and practice. This study seeks to elevate the recognition and professionalization of higher education specialists, ensuring they are equipped to meet the sector's growing complexities and contribute to its advancement locally and globally.

1.1 Report Organization

The research report is structured to provide a clear and logical progression of the study, from identifying the problem to presenting actionable conclusions. The report is organized as follows:

1. **Overview:** This brief section problematizes the current state of the higher education specialist profession. It highlights the growing complexity of the higher education sector and evolving labor market demands. The section establishes the significance of the study by situating these shifts within both local and global contexts. It underscores the relevance of the proposed MA program in responding to these developments by equipping graduates with the competencies required to address contemporary challenges locally and globally.
2. **Research Design:** This section outlines the research design, detailing the research questions, data collection methods, and data analysis approaches. The methodological design is built on the two main data sources: analysis of existing graduate programs in higher education, and in-depth interviews with academic and professional actors in the field. The methodology is designed to capture national, regional, and international dimensions, incorporating diverse perspectives to offer a holistic understanding of the field.
3. **Findings:** This section presents the results of the study, including trends and themes identified through the review of existing programs, as well as insights gained from interviews with key actors in the higher education sector. It provides a detailed analysis of the skills, competencies, and knowledge required in the field, along with prospective career paths.
4. **Conclusions:** This section, presented as concluding remarks, outlines the professional role, key characteristics, and core competencies of the higher education professionals in the contemporary higher education landscape. It highlights the scope of the profession and underscores its importance for the advancement of the higher education sector. This section also explores the career perspectives.
5. **Overview regarding prospective students.** The final section discusses the profiles of the target students for the master's program. It also addresses issues related to student recruitment, program positioning, and sustainability

1.2 Overview: Higher Education Specialist

The profession of higher education specialists — referred to interchangeably in this report as higher education professional — has been gaining prominence alongside the expansion and diversification of the higher education sector (Veles et al., 2023; Whitchurch, 2018). Universities, as central actors in this landscape, have witnessed broadening employment opportunities driven by institutional developments and policy shifts (Gornitzka & Larsen, 2004).

Despite the growing demand, the scope of this profession remains unclear, and the significance of specified training and qualifications is often undermined. Many positions are often filled by individuals lacking specialized training in higher education, relying instead on transferable skills, on-the-job learning, and self-navigation within complex systems. The growing complexity and competitiveness of higher education systems underscore the critical importance of specialized administrative and support personnel in enhancing institutional effectiveness and academic excellence (Baltaru, 2019). Beyond universities, higher education specialists are in demand within governmental, non-governmental, and international organizations engaged in policymaking, implementation, and research in higher education.

This study aims to articulate the scope and critical importance of higher education specialists by identifying specific areas of expertise and employment, thereby addressing the profession's evolving demands through the development of the MA program. These considerations are integral to the research methodology, ensuring a comprehensive exploration of this vital field.

2. RESEARCH DESIGN

This study employs a qualitative research design aimed at informing the development of content, teaching, learning, and assessment methods for the HESII program. It focuses on investigating higher education trends, essential competencies, and career prospects for professionals in the field. By examining diverse experiences and geographic contexts, the study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the needs and opportunities for higher education professionals.

The research is guided by the following questions:

1. What are the key trends and recurrent themes in higher education locally, regionally, and internationally that highlight the need for and relevance of the program?
2. What knowledge, skills, and competencies are most critical for professionals in the higher education sector?
3. What are the prospective career paths for graduates of this program?
4. What constitutes the profession of a higher education specialist?
5. Who constitutes the target segment of students for the program?

By collecting the data from diverse experiences and geographic areas, the study ensures a nuanced and well-rounded understanding of the higher education sector's demands, ultimately contributing to the design of a program that is both globally and locally informed and relevant.

2.1 Data Collection Approaches and Analysis

The study employs two primary research methods: (1) and in-depth interviews with academic and professional actors in higher education sector and (2) a review and content analysis of existing programs in the higher education field. To ensure a comprehensive understanding of the subject and capture the diversity within the higher education field, both methods incorporate national, regional, and international perspectives.

Review of the existing programs

The initial stage of the research involved a comprehensive review of existing MA programs in the field of higher education. This analysis provided valuable insights into the main trends and rationale underpinning these programs. It facilitated the identification of effective approaches, benchmarked dominant practices, and helped define a clear focus for designing a program that is competitive, innovative, and responsive to the needs of students and the broader higher education landscape.

Programs were selected from diverse geographic regions to ensure coverage of national (Georgia), regional, and international contexts. This included diverse geographic coverage such as educational programs from the South Caucasus and Eastern Europe, Asia, Scandinavia, Western Europe, the United Kingdom (UK), the United States of America (USA), Australia, South Africa, South America, and Canada. The selection emphasized diversity, examining both common and unique features across programs.

Keywords such as “higher education,” “higher education administration,” “higher education leadership,” “higher education and innovation,” “higher education policy,” “international higher education,” “student affairs,” and “higher education specialization” were used to identify relevant programs. Priority was given to prominent national universities and internationally recognized programs in the field. In the non-English speaking countries, priority was given to the English language programs highlighting the international dimensions of the program.

A total of 40 programs were selected for the study. Information presented on the official program webpages served as the primary data source. Content analysis was conducted using a predefined analytical template, which systematically organized information on program titles, host institutions, country and language of instruction, duration and mode of delivery, program objectives, content and structure, as well as target student audiences and intended career trajectories.

Interviews with academic and professional actors

The second pillar of the study involved conducting in-depth interviews with key actors in the higher education field. Participants included heads of similar programs, university leaders, heads of various university units, representatives of governmental and international organizations, graduates of similar programs, and internationally renowned experts and professors in higher education. Purposeful sampling was employed to select respondents with extensive experience in the higher education sector, both nationally and internationally, representing multiple roles across 23 countries. A total of 36 interviews were conducted.

The interview questions were tailored to address the expertise and experiences of respondents from the various categories mentioned. In some cases, respondents' roles spanned multiple categories, and additional insights emerged during the interviews. As a result, the questions were occasionally adjusted dynamically to explore relevant aspects further.

The interviews explored key topics, including ongoing and prospective developments in higher education, workplace expertise requirements, broader labor market trends, critical knowledge, skills, and competencies, as well as prospective roles and areas for employment.

The interviews were conducted via the Zoom platform, and the data were analyzed using MAXQDA software. A thematic analysis was carried out through a combination of deductive and inductive coding. Deductive coding was employed to identify themes aligned with the key components of higher education programs, including skills, knowledge, and competencies, as well as career prospects and the professional roles of higher education professionals. Inductive coding, in turn, allowed additional themes to emerge directly from the data. This combined approach enabled the identification of overarching themes, nuanced insights, and recurring patterns across participants with diverse expertise and from multiple geographic regions (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006).

3. FINDINGS: RECONFIGURING HIGHER EDUCATION - TRENDS, INSTITUTIONAL FUNCTIONS, AND PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCIES

Professional roles and competencies in any occupation, including those of higher education professionals, are continuously evolving in response to global and local developments. These changes are not confined to a specific field but are deeply intertwined with multiple sectors and their intersections. In a rapidly changing environment, educational programs cannot rely solely on past experiences or current challenges; they must also anticipate future needs and actively contribute to shaping that future.

3.1 Global and Local Trends in Higher Education

Higher education today is shaped by profound societal transformations, geopolitical tensions, and shifting economic and technological landscapes. Universities are caught between two key roles: responding to societal demands and leading future development. Universities are increasingly expected to drive societal change, but their ability to do so varies based on political environments, economic support, and cultural attitudes toward education, universities in different parts of the world still operate within historical constraints, facing challenges in adapting to contemporary demands. Several ongoing trends that shape the higher education landscape globally, regionally and nationally.

3.1.1 Geopolitical shifts and their impact on higher education

Respondents across various countries emphasized that global geopolitical developments are exerting an increasingly significant and complex influence on higher education systems. While universities have long been positioned as engines of international cooperation, innovation, and societal progress, their capacity to fulfill these roles is now shaped - and in many cases constrained by political instability, rising nationalist sentiments, and shifting global alliances.

A recurring theme was the growing **tension between nationalism and internationalization**. In several contexts, higher education policies are becoming increasingly inward-looking, shaped by right-wing political movements that place the national sovereignty narrative at the forefront and frame sovereignty and global engagement as inherently conflicting and mutually exclusive. As one respondent observed:

I think another counter-trend is that in terms of both European politics and particularly national politics, we see a lot more movement towards - well, let's say more right-wing politics, which has led to the closure of systems. So while we are trying to open the systems and be able to cooperate, etc., the national politics are actually countering that trend.

These political shifts are not limited to discourse but are increasingly embedded in policy. Respondents pointed to a range of measures that restrict the internationalization of higher education. For example, several European countries have begun reducing the number of English-taught programs, which serves as a de facto filter for limiting international student enrollment. In parallel, more restrictive visa policies are being introduced, further hindering the mobility of non-EU students. These developments were seen as symptomatic of a broader backlash against internationalization - even in traditionally open systems such as those of the Netherlands and Denmark.

A paradoxical trend is emerging in more politically controlled settings, where international education credentials, once regarded as markers of prestige and advanced competence, are now increasingly viewed with suspicion. Several respondents observed that holding a graduate degree from a Western institution may be perceived as a sign of disloyalty or dissent. In the absence of strong political backing or patronage, such credentials often fail to translate into meaningful career advancement. Instead, internationally trained professionals are frequently relegated to narrowly defined roles, with their ideas, creativity, and forward-looking perspectives dismissed or deliberately marginalized.

Another major concern was the growing securitization of academic collaboration, particularly in the field of research. Respondents described heightened scrutiny of scholars from certain countries driven by fears related to data security and intellectual property protection. These concerns are now influencing decisions about who may participate in research collaborations and the extent to which they are granted access to sensitive information. This climate of suspicion has begun to erode the foundations of international academic cooperation. In some cases, governments have issued official lists identifying institutions or countries with which universities are discouraged or restricted from collaborating. These directives are often framed not only in terms of geopolitical alignment but also national security, underscoring the strategic dimensions of scientific knowledge production.

In parallel, institutional-level policies are emerging in response to these shifting geopolitical dynamics. Respondents noted the introduction of new travel protocols aimed at protecting the physical and digital security of researchers. These measures include guidelines for safeguarding research and personal data, as well as restrictions on the use of electronic devices while traveling. Moreover, academics are increasingly urged to exercise caution when engaging with politically sensitive topics, as local regulations and censorship policies in some countries now impose strict limits on what can be discussed, presented, advocated, or criticized even within academic contexts.

These developments raise profound ethical questions about the values that underpin international engagement in higher education. Respondents expressed concern that universities are being forced to navigate a complex terrain where institutional missions must be balanced against national-level interests and ideological constraints. As one respondent reflected:

We will talk quite a bit about ethics... about values, and how they impact with whom you can cooperate. People are starting to ask: Can you cooperate with institutions that are not behaving ethically? With countries that are not democracies? Nobody is saying no - but it's about how we manage all these ethical questions.

In light of growing geopolitical tensions, respondents from the European higher education sector increasingly emphasized the need for deeper and more meaningful collaboration between universities. One of the most prominent examples cited was the *European Universities Initiative*, launched by the European Commission. This initiative aims to establish transnational networks of higher education institutions, known as *European University Alliances*. These alliances represent a more structured and systemic approach to enhancing cooperation, innovation, and mobility within the European Higher Education Area.

Respondents viewed the initiative not merely as a symbolic gesture but as a transformative force in practice, particularly fostering the mobility and reinforcing the European commitment to internationalization. One participant emphasized that these alliances have the potential to “foster the mobility of students, turning them more international,” thereby reinforcing Europe’s long-standing commitment to internationalization. The initiative was also identified as a catalyst for significant developments in the organization of higher education across Europe, particularly with the anticipated emergence of joint *European Degrees* within these alliances.

Overall, the findings highlight a central paradox: while universities are increasingly expected to act as global and societal actors and leaders of change, their international engagement is being shaped - and in some cases restricted - by geopolitical forces that politicize, limit, or redefine the boundaries of academic cooperation. Higher education now operates within a contested global space, where academic values, political agendas, and ethical considerations are deeply entangled.

Most importantly, these findings prompt a deeper reflection on our own geopolitical positioning within the global higher education landscape and how this positioning shapes our responsibilities, vulnerabilities, and opportunities as an academic community. Recognizing where we stand allows us to better understand the constraints and potential of our institutional strategies and to engage more thoughtfully with the shifting global environment.

At the same time, the current geopolitical dynamics call for more than passive observation; they must be actively addressed through program design and institutional decision-making. This includes incorporating

relevant content into the curriculum that critically examines issues such as academic freedom, international collaboration, data security, and the politicization of knowledge. Moreover, these dynamics necessitate a careful reconsideration of potential institutional partners and target student groups, in light of growing ethical, political, and regulatory complexities. Navigating this contested space requires both strategic foresight and a reaffirmation of the core academic values that underpin meaningful international engagement.

Geopolitical shift and higher education in Georgia

The study revealed a complex and shifting trajectory for Georgian higher education. Respondents consistently noted that since 2004, Georgia has made deliberate efforts to align its higher education system with global and European developments -particularly through its harmonization with the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). These efforts reflected a reform-oriented agenda focused on quality assurance, internationalization, and institutional modernization. Despite frequent inconsistencies in policy implementation, this trajectory positioned Georgia as a committed actor in the European higher education space.

However, the findings also revealed growing concern about Georgia's current trajectory. Several respondents pointed to recent political developments that signal a shift away from earlier commitments to European integration. Notably, Georgia has lost its registration in the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR) and currently holds only "under review" status within ENQA - both of which are key components of the country's obligations under the Association Agreement with European Union (EU). While ministerial and institutional engagements with countries such as India and China have increased, respondents emphasized that these efforts remain largely symbolic and have yet to yield clear or meaningful educational outcomes.

The country's evident geopolitical reorientation away from European integration has raised doubts about the long-term sustainability of Georgia's higher education reforms. This uncertainty is compounded by a lack of political clarity and coherence. The absence of a forward-looking and actionable state strategy has left the sector drifting, with limited policy direction and minimal engagement with academic institutions. As respondents noted, "There's not much funding coming from the government... I don't see a lot of clear strategies and visions for what they actually want higher education to be."

In addition to geopolitical concerns, respondents drew attention to deep structural issues. A key challenge is the misalignment between higher education planning and demographic realities. In a context of declining student populations, the continued construction of new universities was described as short-sighted and unsustainable. One expert cautioned, "They should be stopping building universities... The pain will come later. Nobody wants to end the party, but the party's getting to an end." The study also found that internationalization, once seen as a hallmark of Georgia's higher education reform, is now being questioned. Specifically, the idea of attracting international students as a revenue model was viewed as a fragile and short-term solution. As one respondent observed, "The idea of bringing international students as cash cows is a fantasy for most countries... Even for those who can do it, this card is a short-term one and it has consequences."

A more pressing concern, however, was the growing influence of private and political interests within higher education governance. Respondents pointed to an environment in which business elites and politically affiliated actors are increasingly setting the rules of the game, often to the detriment of long-term institutional development and public trust. One participant described the situation starkly:

Since 2019, we've fallen off track. Inconsistency took over, and stagnation began. The same old political agendas, the same lobbying from business and political sectors. It is destructive when private universities and business elites dictate the rules. These actors have become the defining force behind our departure from global trends. What we managed to put on regulations before 2018, some things were implemented, others not. But now, most of it is simply not happening.

These reflections underscore a deeper institutional fragility, where reforms exist more in policy rhetoric than in practice. Respondents described a "laissez-faire" approach to policymaking: a lack of follow-up, missing

strategic documents, and weak accountability mechanisms. Higher education, rather than being recognized as central to national development, is often viewed as peripheral or even inconvenient — especially when student mobilization challenges the political status quo.

In sum, the study's findings reveal a growing gap between Georgia's formal commitments to European integration and its current domestic realities. While the country once pursued a clear path of European alignment, its present course is marked by political drift, institutional stagnation, and declining trust in reform processes. The combination of demographic contraction, underfunding, vague policy direction, and weakened international ties raises urgent questions about the purpose, priorities, and sustainability of higher education reform in Georgia today.

3.1.2 Questioning the university's essence in turbulent times

The study highlights growing concerns about the future of higher education amid the global erosion of democratic values and increasing societal polarization. Respondents observed that the decline of freedoms such as expression, pluralism, and civic dialogue is increasingly mirrored within academic spaces. These shifts are reshaping the values and mission of universities, prompting urgent questions about how institutions can remain publicly engaged under mounting political and ideological pressures.

Across contexts, participants pointed to a troubling decline in critical thinking skills, particularly in a digital landscape saturated with disinformation. One respondent noted that contemporary populism is often characterized by “not only negligence, but even hostility to knowledge and understanding” — a threat to both democratic life and the legitimacy of academic institutions. In response, participants emphasized the vital role of universities in cultivating critical thinking, long-term perspective, and civic engagement. As one put it, “The challenge of higher education is finding a role in society that demonstrates the value of thinking critically in the long term.”

Several respondents cautioned against reducing higher education to a vehicle for short-term utility and a driver for economic growth. “If you end up saying we only need immediately relevant research, then you've lost it. We need a broad and advanced knowledge base, not just the immediately useful.” This defense of knowledge for its own sake was framed as essential to preserving the democratic and epistemic mission of the university.

Academic freedom and institutional autonomy emerged as central concerns. Respondents described how universities in many contexts are increasingly vulnerable to political interference. Yet, even in restrictive environments, they emphasized that international and inter-institutional cooperation can help create spaces for dialogue and safeguard core academic values. The respondents highlighted the binary debate over whether universities should be more or less political, and challenged the premise altogether. They emphasized that in an era of disinformation and ideological distortion, it is the university's responsibility to actively engage with societal challenges and “bring truth to light”.

Examples of such engagement were cited from Finland, where the national broadcaster runs a program titled *What the Science Says*, presenting societal issues through evidence-based research. In contrast, respondents from Georgia noted a significant lack of academic engagement in public discourse: “The challenge in Georgia right now is that academia is not sufficiently involved in broader societal discussion.”

In sum, the findings call for a renewed commitment to the civic and democratic mission of higher education. At a time when critical inquiry is under threat and academic freedom is increasingly constrained, universities must reassert their public purpose, not only as educational institutions but as pillars of democratic participation, epistemic integrity, and collective imagination. This requires preparing graduates not only with professional competencies but with the ability to think critically, act ethically, and engage meaningfully in their professional and societal lives.

3.1.3 Micro-credentials

The study revealed a growing interest in the development and implementation of micro-credentials - short-term, flexible learning experiences certified through clearly defined learning outcomes. This trend is gaining momentum in response to several intersecting pressures: a rapidly evolving labor market, increasingly diverse learner profiles, the rising demand for lifelong learning, and the need to upskill and reskill individuals re-entering the labor market amid demographic decline affecting university enrollments in many regions. Micro-credentials are widely perceived as a promising means to address the needs of non-traditional learners, support workforce reskilling and upskilling, and offer targeted, demand-driven educational opportunities beyond the traditional degree structure.

Respondents described micro-credentials as part of a broader shift in the higher education paradigm — from rigid, linear degree pathways to more modular, learner-centered, and employment-oriented models. One participant explained that micro-credentials are increasingly viewed as a tool to support reskilling and upskilling while ensuring formal recognition of learning outcomes:

It's a shift from the traditional, full-time, once-in-a-lifetime student who comes to the university for three to five years and never returns. It's about attracting a new type of learner, including older students, in response to declining demographics in many universities.

At the same time, respondents expressed concern about the lack of system- and institution-level readiness to effectively implement micro-credentials. In many national contexts, there is still limited understanding of how to integrate micro-credentials into existing frameworks, how to ensure quality assurance and recognition, and how to build the legislative and policy infrastructure to support them. Many universities also lack the strategic vision, internal capacity, and digital infrastructure necessary to engage meaningfully with the emerging micro-credential ecosystem.

A related concern raised by respondents was the growing competition from non-university providers, including large corporations and online learning platforms. Technology companies such as Google and Amazon, along with platforms like Udemy and Khan Academy, are increasingly offering short, skills-based courses tailored to employer needs. This has contributed to a declining reliance on traditional academic qualifications in some sectors, particularly those focused on digital or technical skills. As one respondent noted:

Major employers are no longer demanding classical academic education. Micro-credentials emerged, in part, because companies like Google and Amazon began offering short-term courses themselves. These non-university providers quickly became serious competitors for universities, especially after the pandemic revealed the potential of online education.

This shift has sparked a broader discourse that questions the relevance and value of the university itself. In certain professions, a growing belief has emerged that formal degrees are no longer essential — as long as learners can demonstrate specific competencies. This trend has challenged the essence of what the university is for, and has fueled a degrading narrative that diminishes the role of academic institutions and academic programs in favor of purely skills-based training.

In this regard, micro-credentials are not only reshaping learning formats, they are reshaping public perceptions of higher education. The university is increasingly expected to compete in an open education market, where traditional degrees must be justified alongside more agile, industry-aligned credentials. As one respondent noted: "Universities are no longer the only ones providing higher education. They never really were, but now it's more strikingly so."

Respondents acknowledged and critically questioned the current model of how higher education systems and institutions operate. While reaffirming the continued relevance and necessity of universities, they emphasized the urgent need for institutional reflection and transformation. Universities are increasingly compelled to reconsider their models, missions, and modes of delivery, and to adapt while preserving their core educational values. As one respondent noted, "There's a huge push towards flexibility in higher education - stackable

degrees, recognition of prior learning, upskilling, and micro-credentials. All of these are part of a wider overhaul of the entire education model.”

Ultimately, micro-credentials represent both a response to external pressures and a catalyst for the transformation of higher education institutions. Crucially, this moment calls for a more clearly articulated understanding of what higher education uniquely offers, how it can coexist with - and contribute to - a broader ecosystem of lifelong learning, and where the boundaries of short-term, skills-based offerings lie.

3.1.4 Emerging and diverging approaches to sustainability in higher education

The study reveals that sustainability has emerged as a content area in curricula, a guiding principle for institutional development, and the global challenges that national systems are trying to tackle. Across the board, respondents acknowledged the growing importance of sustainable development, particularly in the context of environmental responsibility, green operations, and societal engagement. However, attitudes, motivations, and levels of implementation vary considerably across institutions, geographic areas, and disciplinary fields.

Some respondents described sustainability as a central and increasingly embedded component of institutional strategy. Universities are not only incorporating sustainability themes into curricula but are also developing dedicated programs, including joint initiatives and micro-credentials. A flagship example came from a European University Alliance, which is designing a “Global Sustainability Management” program across ten institutions. As one respondent explained, this initiative involves “building quality policy, infrastructure, and programs, not just for one institution, but for the Alliance as a whole.”

In certain contexts, sustainability remains more rhetorical than operational. Several respondents admitted that while their institutions nominally are committed to alignment with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), they lack concrete strategies or action plans. “We might be doing things that align with SDGs accidentally,” one noted, “but we don’t have mapped processes or focused implementation.”

At the same time, some institutions, particularly in applied or technical fields, described more advanced integration of sustainability. One respondent from a technological university explained that sustainability is being mainstreamed across engineering and technology programs and is also developed as a micro-credential. “It’s not just about environmental protection or climate change — it’s about embedding sustainability within organizational practices more broadly,” she explained.

However, the growing use of sustainability-related buzzwords without meaningful action emerged as a point of concern. Several respondents warned that overuse of terms like “green,” “sustainable,” and “SDG-aligned” without tangible practice risks creating cynicism. “Too much of the buzzwords, and not enough discussion about actual actions, leads to distrust,” one respondent explained. “We’re lacking honest conversations about barriers, trade-offs, and the real costs of becoming sustainable.”

This skepticism was echoed in reflections from the South Caucasus region, where sustainability and SDG agendas were described as largely aspirational. One respondent remarked that in their context, SDG-related efforts remain a “dream” rather than an operational priority, and that greening initiatives are “still not seen as relevant.”

Despite these disparities, a common thread across interviews was the recognition that sustainability is becoming an increasingly important institutional agenda. Respondents suggested that the more their universities engage with sustainable practices, the more visible and significant the issue becomes — not only in internal operations, but in contributing to broader societal and global environmental goals.

In summary, while sustainability is clearly emerging as a higher education trend, its uptake varies significantly. For some institutions, it is a transformative agenda with clear strategies and programs; for others, it remains symbolic or superficial. The findings suggest a need for more genuine, reflective, and practice-oriented approaches — grounded not just in rhetoric but in structural and behavioral change.

3.1.5 Digitalization and artificial intelligence as megatrends transforming higher education

Across interviews, digitalization emerged as a megatrend shaping the transformation of higher education, deeply affecting university governance, research, teaching, and learning. Respondents emphasized that digitalization is no longer an optional innovation but a foundational infrastructure underpinning both system-level and institutional efficiency. It informs strategic decision-making and pedagogical practices, positioning digital tools as essential not only for operational efficiency but also for institutional viability.

Participants situated digitalization within broader global dynamics, noting that the pace of technological advancement — particularly in educational technologies — is often externally driven and unevenly distributed. Respondents from European contexts observed that “technological development is driving institutions rather than the other way around,” with universities struggling to keep up. This rapid evolution was perceived as placing significant pressure on long-standing educational models.

A recurring concern was Europe’s lag behind global leaders in automation and digitalization. Interviewees noted that meaningful implementation requires sustained funding, staff training, and institutional restructuring.

While AI was viewed as part of the broader digitalization trend, respondents also distinguished it as a parallel development with specific implications. They emphasized its specific uses and the distinct ethical challenges it presents. The rise of digital tools — especially AI — has introduced complex ethical and governance concerns, ranging from academic integrity and fair use of automated systems to broader questions of data privacy and digital equity. One interviewee encapsulated this dual concern: “It goes from the ethical use of AI... to things like data protection, student learning data, which can be very useful, but also infringe on privacy.”

AI was widely regarded as a disruptive force reshaping core educational practices. Interviewees highlighted that generative AI tools have fundamentally altered how students complete assignments, creating challenges in verifying the originality of academic work. As one respondent explained:

We allow as much as possible for students to use AI, but at the same time, we need to control somehow the learning outcomes and verify the originality... AI is so easy and efficient compared to the old ways of looking for information and making analysis and so on. So, it’s totally changing the big picture.

Although ethical guidelines for AI use in student work are being developed, universities often rely on self-reporting mechanisms. Some institutions have introduced requirements for students to disclose the tools used and their specific contributions to assignments and theses. However, interviewees expressed doubts about the reliability and enforceability of these measures. Respondents stressed that the critical question is no longer whether to integrate AI but how to manage its implications. Several interviewees mentioned the formation of university-level committees dedicated to observing and regulating AI use on a continuous basis, underscoring that ethical regulation is an evolving and adaptive process.

In the Georgian system, the challenge of effectively managing digitalization and AI integration remains underdeveloped. Interviewees from Georgia pointed to EU-funded Erasmus+ projects as essential support mechanisms. However, they acknowledged that these efforts remain fragmented in the absence of a comprehensive national digitalization strategy coupled with limited investment in system development, significantly hampers the process of digital transformation. Additionally, respondents voiced concern that existing institutional and legal frameworks are ill-equipped to respond to the demands of digital transformation. With new regulatory standards for online education expected by 2026, many institutions are struggling to prepare and plan ahead their strategies.

3.1.6 Labor market uncertainty and skills mismatch

The interviews revealed significant shifts in labor market dynamics, underscoring the growing complexity and unpredictability of workforce demands. A recurring theme was the erosion of clearly defined professional

trajectories. Participants noted that traditional efforts to align higher education outputs with labor market needs are becoming increasingly futile, given the rapid transformation of jobs and sectors. Rather than chasing elusive matches, respondents emphasized the need to foster dynamic ecosystems of interaction among universities, employers, and broader societal actors.

As one of the respondents explained:

The current agenda is still on the skill match. But what we need is to have the information and the idea sharing mechanisms so that we can facilitate the process because the skill match ...it's an illusion. Everything is changing fast. So you cannot find how they are matching because we have to find new infrastructure by having some kind of social innovation.

The findings also highlighted persistent asymmetries in communication and expectations. Many employers were unaware of existing educational programs that train professionals for the higher education sector and struggled to articulate the specific competencies they required. In one instance, a university rector noted the challenge of engaging with employers to obtain feedback on graduates' preparedness — yet he, too, when asked to specify needed skills, found it difficult to offer a concrete response.

Employers frequently expressed a need for “better-prepared” graduates but rarely identified specific field-related competencies. Instead, the focus often shifted to transversal skills such as adaptability, analytical thinking, and interpersonal communication (A more detailed examination of the knowledge, skills, and competencies identified by the study is provided in a later chapter).

Several experts observed a growing demand for advanced qualifications, with many roles — both academic and administrative — now requiring at least a master's degree. This credential inflation is fueling rising enrollments in graduate programs, often driven by career imperatives rather than intrinsic academic interest. At the same time, senior university leaders across Europe emphasized that credentials alone no longer suffice. Institutions increasingly seek individuals who combine strong subject expertise with initiative, responsibility, and the capacity to implement their ideas.

Although the research focused on MA graduates, respondents also noted that PhD holders are increasingly competing for similar roles as opportunities in academia narrow. This heightens the need for MA graduates to cultivate distinct, practical competencies and work experiences to remain competitive.

Finally, respondents pointed out that the labor market “mismatch” is not solely a matter of skills gaps. Instead, it reflects deeper structural challenges — particularly the absence of robust institutional mechanisms and policy frameworks that could support ongoing, adaptive coordination. Tackling these challenges requires more than curriculum reform; it demands structural social innovation and sustained collaboration between education providers, employers, and policymakers.

The findings of this chapter highlight several megatrends shaping the development of the higher education sector — transforming its nature, mission, and the challenges it faces. These trends reflect both persistent pressures and emerging shifts that continue to redefine the field. On one hand, the findings inform our understanding of the global dynamics within which higher education operates — insights that are crucial for planning programs and guiding institutional strategies. On the other hand, they identify critical themes that must be addressed within academic curricula, offering direction on how to engage with global challenges that have local and international implications. The findings regarding the ongoing dynamic of the higher education field call for a flexible and adaptive curricular approach — one that prepares graduates to critically engage with complex issues and contribute thoughtfully to their resolution.

3.2 Systemic Challenges and Institutional Functions of Higher Education

This chapter highlights emerging trends across various functional areas within educational institutions and organizations engaged in higher education and research. It identifies several key dimensions that are gaining prominence and being challenged in today's rapidly evolving higher education landscape. These devel-

opments represent critical areas requiring strategic attention and should be thoughtfully considered in the design of higher education program curricula.

3.2.1 Institutional transformation and the role of academic leadership

This section explores the organizational and systemic challenges that universities face today, drawing attention to leadership capacity, institutional inertia, and the evolving expectations placed on higher education institutions. Across the interviews, respondents critically reflected on the ability of universities to adapt to change, lead reform, and fulfill their societal role in an increasingly dynamic and uncertain environment. Across contexts, the need for visionary, informed, and contextually grounded leadership was consistently emphasized as vital for institutional development and resilience.

Participants emphasized that, despite growing expectations for innovation and progress, universities remain among the most traditional institutions. Faced with limited capacity to keep pace with rapid change, they operate under constant public scrutiny. As one respondent explained:

Universities are struggling to keep pace with rapid changes... they're still one of the oldest institutions in society. The church and the university are the most traditional. But there's no alternative. But we need to transform, to become networked, integrated with society and opened up institutions — not closed, self-protecting systems. Unfortunately, we often see a strange phenomenon — a tendency toward self-isolation.

This tendency toward retreat was interpreted not only as resistance to change but also as a strategy to obscure institutional weaknesses. Rather than confronting limitations, some universities preserve insular systems, reinforcing myths and stereotypes about their value while avoiding necessary structural or cultural transformation.

Respondents across countries cited persistent bureaucratic inefficiencies and outdated administrative structures as key obstacles. Moreover, challenges related to institutional development were closely tied to the need to rethink institutional models and leadership styles. This requires a broader understanding of the higher education context, strong competencies in leading change, and sensitivity to institutional culture. The growing centralization of power within university administrations was viewed as contributing to the erosion of academic values and diminishing a sense of ownership over change and innovation. In contrast, universities with more decentralized governance, particularly in areas of academic, scientific, or social innovation, were seen as key drivers of institutional transformation.

Respondents emphasized that leaders and managers in higher education must possess a deep understanding of the academic ethos and cultural context of their institutions. They also underscored the importance of institutional research and data analytics in supporting evidence-based decision-making and guiding long-term reform and transformation.

Several respondents observed that university governance structures are increasingly shifting toward managerial approaches, concentrating power in the hands of individual administrators rather than shared governance bodies. As one of them noted, "Governance trends seem more managerial... individual managers and administrations instead of collegial or collective leadership practices."

In this context, it becomes essential for administrative staff to understand both academic culture and managerial logic. Without a grounding in academic values, managerialism risks eroding trust and undermining the university's mission. This balance is particularly critical when managing change and transformation, where sensitivity to the nuances of academic culture — across systems, institutions, or even individual departments — is indispensable.

In the Caucasus region, universities continue to struggle with legacy systems shaped by Soviet-style governance — characterized by rigid hierarchies, siloed departments, and limited cross-functional collaboration. These conditions hinder innovation and complicate the implementation of strategic reforms. Respondents pointed to key operational deficits, including weak strategic planning, underdeveloped data-informed de-

cision-making, and limited change management capacity. Despite years of attempted reforms, these challenges persist. Respondents emphasized the need for change management approaches that are tailored to local contexts and institutional specificities — approaches that take into account historical legacies, cultural dynamics, and existing structural limitations, while also fostering realistic pathways for sustainable and context-sensitive transformation.

Academic leadership under scrutiny

Participants repeatedly noted the complexity and growing demands placed on academic leadership. While many university leaders — rectors, deans, and program directors — are outstanding scholars in their fields, they are often appointed to leadership positions without adequate preparation or competencies in academic leadership. Respondents stressed the need to enhance leadership capacities to better respond to the pace of change and the scale of the challenges.

This leadership gap, alongside the emerging challenges facing higher education systems, has also been acknowledged in Europe, prompting initiatives such as the European University Association's Leadership Development Program, which seeks to strengthen university governance and equip academic leaders with the skills needed for effective institutional transformation.

Although the MA program referenced in this study does not specifically aim to prepare individuals already employed in senior leadership roles, these findings highlight a broader need for structured professional development. Targeted masterclasses, short-term executive training programs, and platforms for exchange and mutual learning among academic leaders were identified as important tools for strengthening leadership capacity.

Ultimately, respondents consistently emphasized the need for institutional and academic transformation in universities. They stressed that universities must become more open, integrated with society, and proactive in shaping both their own futures and that of the broader public. Achieving this vision requires a new generation of higher education professionals who are not only well-versed in systems and policy but also equipped to navigate complexity, lead change, and foster cultures of innovation.

3.2.2 Enhancing financial infrastructure and competency in higher education

Financial constraints emerged as a critical and cross-cutting issue across all geographic areas and institutional contexts represented in the study. While underfunding is a global concern, respondents from the Caucasus region — particularly Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan — emphasized its acute severity. Higher education systems in these countries remain chronically underfunded, heavily reliant on student tuition fees and international donor support.

Respondents from Georgia and Armenia noted that their systems have been subjected to repeated cycles of reform, yet these efforts have often stalled or failed to reach full implementation. In Georgia, for instance, a comprehensive higher education reform has been announced, but its contours remain vague and politically uncertain. As a result, higher education in both countries remains in a prolonged state of flux, lacking a stable and long-term financial strategy.

Beyond structural funding issues, the study revealed pressing institutional challenges related to financial management capacities. The mismatch between current professional competence and the evolving financial demands of higher education was a recurring theme. Respondents stressed the importance of interdisciplinary competencies, particularly the ability to integrate knowledge across financial, legal, and academic domains. Effective financial planning, they noted, now requires familiarity not only with internal budgeting but also with broader trends such as diversification of funding sources, cost efficiency, regulatory compliance, and local and global higher education contexts.

Across national contexts, participants underscored the need for basic financial skills among academic and administrative staff - the ones that are not directly responsible for financial management at the institutions,

especially in budgeting, reporting, and project planning. These competencies are increasingly vital as institutions engage in international collaborations and seek external research funding. As one respondent observed:

Financial management is also something that's really, really needed, where I find very little literacy among people here... If the program can offer some of those skills, it will really both help the sector and fill a real demand.

The need for updating the financial competencies was especially pronounced in the Caucasus region, where respondents noted that while financial officers are often skilled within their existing systems, they lack the decision-making power in the institutional contexts, and lack the exposure to wider higher education contexts and global higher education frameworks. Without such exposure, institutions struggle to modernize or reconfigure their financial operations for more efficient resource use.

Interviewees also highlighted the necessity of aligning institutional planning with budgeting processes and developing strategic decision-making capacities. Several respondents called for training and knowledge-building in areas such as investment in education, financial effectiveness, and long-term sustainability.

In Georgia, these concerns are particularly timely as a new higher education financing model is currently being developed. However, with its implementation still uncertain due to political instability, participants emphasized the urgent need for human capital capable of translating such reforms into practice.

3.2.3 Evolving function of quality assurance in higher education

Quality assurance emerged across the interviews as a key institutional and system-level function, widely recognized by both local and international respondents as a policy priority and growing area of employment in higher education. Increasingly, QA is seen not as a static compliance exercise but as a dynamic, data-informed process central to institutional improvement and strategic decision-making.

At the European level, respondents referenced the “QA Fit for the Future” initiative, which underpins the forthcoming revision of the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ESG), as mandated by the Tirana Ministerial Conference. The revised ESG is expected by 2026, with adoption planned for the 2027 Ministerial Conference. This revision is driven by the goals of enhancing transparency and strengthening student protections across the European Higher Education Area.

Respondents noted that QA systems are expanding beyond teaching and learning to include overall institutional performance, including research — a domain historically underrepresented in QA processes, even under the current ESG (2015) framework. In more mature systems, QA units engage in comprehensive internal quality management, manage external accreditations, and align evaluation practices with institutional missions and goals. As one respondent noted, QA professionals must be able to “navigate various accreditation frameworks, understand institutional structures, and unlock data and knowledge across university units.”

This expanded scope significantly raises the expectations for QA professionals, while at times being responsible for quality assurance of teaching and learning and simple satisfaction surveys are now expected to be able to develop tailored monitoring and evaluation tools that reflect the diversity of institutional functions and academic disciplines. This demands both technical proficiency and a contextual understanding of organizational processes. In systems adopting total quality assurance models, QA functions often overlap with those of institutional research units, requiring expertise in data analysis, monitoring and evaluation, and diagnostic tools. One interviewee emphasized:

You need to understand learning analytics, assessment analytics... how to deal with large quantities of data, how to extract insights, how to narrate a picture out of quantitative information.

Beyond data literacy, QA professionals are now required to understand regulatory frameworks at institutional, national and international levels. International accreditation was identified as another rapidly growing

QA responsibility. Institutions are increasingly pursuing field-specific accreditations — in areas such as medicine, engineering, business, or music — which require familiarity with a range of international standards, regulatory systems, and evolving accreditation procedures.

Despite these growing demands, respondents from countries with less mature QA systems, including Georgia, highlighted persistent limitations in analytical capacity. Many QA units continue to rely on basic descriptive statistics, often due to limited training and staff backgrounds. The adoption of AI tools and learning analytics — considered essential for modern QA — remains uneven, with significant skill gaps in data use for forecasting and improvement. Additional concerns were raised about the conceptual underdevelopment of QA within institutions. QA offices are often oriented toward external compliance, with limited engagement in internal quality enhancement. Deficiencies in infrastructure for real-time data collection, integration of data into decision-making, and the absence of procedures for evaluating online and blended learning programs were cited as major challenges — particularly pressing in the post-pandemic context.

Respondents emphasized the importance of embedding QA into broader institutional learning and development processes. Rather than functioning as isolated compliance units, QA offices should support evidence-informed planning, innovation, and accountability across all levels of university life.

Ultimately, the findings underscore a clear need for capacity building in QA-related roles. This includes not only technical training in data and accreditation but also the development of broader competencies in communication, organizational learning, and evaluation. As QA continues to evolve as a central pillar of higher education system development, the demand for skilled professionals in this domain is expected to grow substantially.

3.2.4 Supporting academic excellence: the growing role of faculty development

The study emphasized the growing need for systemic support to enhance academic excellence in teaching and learning, and supporting the academic development. These functions are usually carried out by teaching and learning management and faculty development structures — commonly institutionalized through centers or departments for teaching and learning, academic development offices, or centers for teaching excellence — which were consistently recognized as critical, yet underdeveloped, components of higher education systems, particularly in the post-Soviet context.

Faculty development units are expected to foster the professional growth and academic performance of teaching staff. Their core responsibilities often include promoting innovative pedagogies, supporting methodological advancement, aligning instructional practices with learning outcomes and competence development, and strengthening the integration of teaching and research. This work is typically carried out by academic developers working with individual faculty members or academic program teams. In many institutions, these units are also responsible for curriculum design, digital and on-site teaching infrastructure, and the broader technical and operational management of academic program delivery.

In more developed contexts, teaching and learning units that play a central role in academic operations also encompass the function of academic development. Beyond that, these units are responsible for the holistic management of the academic process — from planning and budgeting to classroom allocation, learning environment management, and curriculum development. This comprehensive mandate calls for highly skilled professionals with expertise in pedagogy, instructional design, digital technologies, and academic planning. Respondents noted that the effectiveness of these units largely depends on their institutional maturity and scope.

However, this level of integration and functionality is not consistent across systems. In the Caucasus region, for example, faculty development or academic excellence centers are often quite underdeveloped. Instead, they tend to offer only generic training workshops. Respondents also described the teaching and learning departments as having narrow, administrative functions. Even more problematic are the outdated human resource structures that focus narrowly on administrative and contractual tasks, lacking the strategic orientation required for long-term academic staff development. As one interviewee emphasized, faculty development

must be seen as a continuous, strategic process — particularly in this region, as the underdeveloped legacy of years of struggle in the post-Soviet context still lingers.

As one participant noted, faculty support units must be grounded in current pedagogical practice and remain closely connected to evolving student needs. Without active teaching experience or direct engagement with learners, development staff risk losing credibility and failing to provide relevant guidance.

In sum, the findings highlight an urgent need to expand and strengthen faculty development infrastructures. Effective academic support systems must be strategically positioned, adequately resourced, and attuned to the contemporary realities of academic work. As the expectations for teaching, learning, and research continue to grow, institutions will require qualified professionals and robust support structures to ensure their academic staff can meet evolving demands with excellence and relevance.

3.2.5 Transforming research support and management systems

A recurring theme across the interviews was the critical need to enhance institutional capacity for directly supporting researchers and academic staff throughout the entire research lifecycle. Respondents emphasized that research managers must possess a deep understanding of academic work, scholarly publishing, funding mechanisms, and both national and international policy developments.

Particular areas of support identified by participants include guiding faculty through the grant writing process, assisting in partner identification and the formation of international research consortia, and providing effective research project management. Support with publication strategies — such as selecting appropriate journals and increasing research visibility — was also seen as essential.

Several respondents underscored that individuals in research support roles must have first-hand experience with publishing in peer-reviewed journals and participating in grant-funded projects. Without such experience, research support professionals are perceived as lacking the credibility, insight, and practical knowledge needed to advise or collaborate meaningfully with academic staff.

The findings also revealed a growing emphasis on transforming research assessment practices to better reflect values such as quality, impact, and societal relevance. Institutions are increasingly moving away from narrow, publication-based metrics and adopting more holistic frameworks under the banner of Responsible Research Assessment (RRA). These frameworks seek to acknowledge the societal contributions of research, promote open science practices, and evaluate outcomes that extend beyond conventional scholarly indicators.

Respondents noted that embracing these new approaches requires a nuanced understanding of both quantitative methods, such as bibliometric analysis, and qualitative assessment tools. It was also highlighted that the research assessment practice needs to be integrated into the whole research management cycle.

The findings revealed a significant lack of opportunities for acquiring competencies in research management and support systems. To address these gaps and better align institutional practices with global trends, there is an urgent need to modernize academic programs in research and innovation management. This should be complemented by targeted short-term professional development programs focused on specific skill areas. Emphasis should be placed on embedding interdisciplinary, practice-based modules that address research management and assessment models, science policy, digitalization, and technology transfer. Additionally, as research increasingly takes place within large-scale, collaborative partnerships, the ability to manage research project consortia — particularly in international contexts — was identified as an essential and growing competence in the field.

3.2.6 Innovation and entrepreneurship: broadening the scope

Across the interviews, innovation and entrepreneurship consistently emerged as areas requiring development and stronger institutional support. However, their understanding, definition, and implementation varied wide-

ly across contexts. While innovation is often narrowly equated with digital technology and startup culture, the findings emphasize that it encompasses a much broader spectrum of competencies and institutional functions that drive systemic transformation.

Innovation was described not only as the creation of new technological solutions, but also as the capacity to rethink systems, reframe problems, and adapt organizational processes. This includes innovations in teaching methods, research frameworks, institutional governance, and community engagement. Participants stressed that effective innovation requires more than creativity — it demands strategic follow-through, project management, and evaluation. In this context, design thinking was highlighted as a valuable methodology for opening up new ways of thinking, transforming structures and models, and fostering co-design and adaptability. Respondents underscored the need to create institutional space for experimentation, prototyping, and the revision of outdated practices to meet emerging academic and societal needs.

A strong link was made between innovation and entrepreneurship. Participants emphasized the importance of cultivating an entrepreneurial mindset within higher education, where innovation serves as a mechanism to create both social and economic value. This includes commercial entrepreneurship — startups, intellectual property rights, and product development — as well as social entrepreneurship focused on addressing societal challenges and engaging local communities. These approaches call for interdisciplinary thinking, collaboration, and strong communication competencies.

Technology transfer and commercialization were frequently highlighted as underdeveloped areas within institutional innovation systems. Several respondents pointed to the need for dedicated units capable of translating academic research into marketable solutions and facilitating partnerships with industry. These efforts require competencies in research communication, fundraising, intellectual property management, patenting, and navigating technology readiness processes. While some institutions have established research and commercialization offices, many still lack the structures, staff, or expertise to operate them effectively.

The findings also pointed to the critical role of innovation policy, which remains weak or fragmented in many countries. For instance, participants from Georgia noted the lack of functional national structures responsible for setting innovation priorities and enabling multi-sectoral coordination. Without coherent policy frameworks, institutions face challenges in aligning their efforts with national development goals or leveraging international funding opportunities.

Finally, the interviews revealed an urgent need to build the professional capacity required to lead and sustain innovation in higher education. This includes programs and training that integrate innovation studies, strategic innovation management, entrepreneurship, technology transfer, design thinking, and social change. Professionals in these roles must be equipped to understand complex ecosystems, translate knowledge into practice, and facilitate institutional transformation from within.

The findings presented in this section not only highlight the emerging challenges and evolving priorities within the higher education sector but also provide a critical foundation for curriculum development. They help define the core themes that academic programs should address and point to key areas of employment that require updated knowledge and expertise. Moreover, the analysis points to the skills and competencies needed to navigate sectoral transformations and maintain long-term professional relevance. Drawing on these insights, the next section will further elaborate on the specific knowledge, skills, and competencies currently in demand across higher education and the broader labor market.

3.3 Professional Competencies and Knowledge Areas for Higher Education Specialists

“Ability to navigate ambiguity is huge.”

This section consolidates the findings related to the competencies identified as essential for higher education professionals to remain relevant in the field and responsive to labor market needs and expectations. These findings form a foundation for developing the learning outcomes of the MA program, which aims to bridge the educational dimension — what and how learning should occur — with the labor market dimension — addressing anticipated needs and competency gaps.

Learning outcomes are conceptualized and defined differently across various policy frameworks. According to the European Qualifications Framework (EQF), learning outcomes are defined as “statements of what a learner knows, understands, and is able to do on completion of a learning process” (Council of Europe, 2017). They are typically structured around three components: **knowledge** (a body of facts, principles, theories, and practices related to a field of work or study), **skills** (the ability to apply knowledge and use know-how to complete tasks and solve problems), and **competence** (the demonstrated ability to use knowledge and skills, together with personal, social, and methodological abilities, in work or study situations, and for professional or personal development) (European Commission, 2008; Kennedy et al, 2009).

In some frameworks, competence is further described through dimensions such as **responsibility, autonomy, attitudes, or values**, reflecting ongoing scholarly and policy debates about how best to represent its essence, especially given the inherently interwoven nature of these elements. The findings of this study also reflect this complexity. Throughout the interviews and discussions, questions arose regarding whether certain topics constitute disciplinary knowledge or transferable skills, or whether specific issues should be treated as standalone subjects or cross-cutting themes.

While taking into account the structure and definitions provided by the EQF — and recognizing the inherently interconnected nature of knowledge, skills, and competencies — this section does not aim to strictly categorize the findings. Instead, it offers a comprehensive outline of what higher education professionals should know, what they should be able to do, and how they should approach their work in order to keep pace with and contribute to the evolving higher education landscape. Based on the analysis and the peculiarities of the MA program, the findings will be structured in four blocks: Main Issues, Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks, Research, and Transversal Competencies. Each of these sections to some extent addresses the knowledge, skills, and competencies, and might also overlap with each other.

3.3.1 Navigating the ambiguity — an emerging meta-competence

Before examining the specific areas of competence, it is essential to foreground a cross-cutting meta-competence that emerged consistently across the interviews: the ability to navigate ambiguity. This capacity is especially relevant in the current era marked by geopolitical uncertainty, rapid technological advancement, and profound societal transformation — all contributing to a heightened sense of unpredictability and a destabilized outlook on the future. Respondents emphasized the importance of being equipped to operate effectively in such fluid and complex environments, describing this competence as the ability to “navigate ambiguity,” “be ready for change and ready to change,” “be comfortable with uncertainty,” “delve into the unknown,” and “not just ask questions, but find the answers.”

While often categorized as a transversal skill, it is important to underscore that the *ability to navigate ambiguity* is not necessarily an inherent ability acquired in isolation. Rather, it is an outcome of integrated and well-developed knowledge, skills, and dispositions across multiple domains — forming a kind of professional instinct essential for responding to the unknown and guiding action in uncertain contexts.

The following sections will outline and contextualize the concrete knowledge, skills, and competencies identified by the research that were marked as essential for higher education professionals.

3.3.2. Issues in and of higher education

This section presents the key issues identified as essential areas of expertise for higher education professionals. It outlines their significance and practical relevance, highlighting why these issues matter and how they should be engaged with in professional contexts.

The analysis revealed a distinction between two categories of issues: (1) foundational themes that provide students with a broad understanding of higher education systems, policies, and values; and (2) functional areas that equip students with the specific knowledge and competencies required to engage with concrete tasks and roles within higher education systems and institutions.

Higher education systems, policy and geopolitics

The study emphasized that a comprehensive and critical command of how different higher education systems are developed, structured, and governed is essential. Participants highlighted the significance of understanding the complex ecosystem in which higher education operates — including its institutional arrangements, regulatory frameworks, policy environments, and societal functions. This includes familiarity of how geopolitical shifts, global trends, political pressures, and national priorities shape their trajectories. This foundational knowledge allows navigating and assessing system-level and institutional transformations with clarity and strategic insight.

Related Knowledge, Skills, and Competencies:

- Critical engagement with the historical, political, and cultural forces shaping higher education
- Comparative understanding of higher education systems, governance models, policies and reform dynamics
- Ability to map system-level and institutional ecosystems
- Competence in navigating the interface between local institutional practices and global policy agendas

This area forms the analytical backbone of the program, equipping graduates to navigate and influence higher education at both institutional and policy levels.

The essence and mission of higher education

Reclaiming and rearticulating the essence and mission of higher education emerged as a foundational domain of knowledge and ethical orientation in light of the complicated geopolitical shifts and market-driven tendencies in higher education. This knowledge is essential for the academic community at large, with respondents emphasizing the importance of instilling the relevant values and understanding among higher education professionals.

Respondents emphasized that higher education professionals must go beyond mere acknowledgment of core academic values; they must actively engage in reflecting on, upholding, and defending them — particularly in contexts shaped by political instability, authoritarian tendencies, rising populism, and the increased of neoliberal and managerialist pressures.

This area of learning calls for a critical examination of the evolving purposes and functions of the university through historical, philosophical, and sociological lenses. It emphasizes understanding the university as a public good, a democratic institution, and an epistemic space dedicated to critical inquiry and societal transformation.

Respondents especially highlighted the need for administrative professionals in higher education to cultivate attitudes and dispositions aligned with the academic ethos. warning against bureaucratic and technocratic

tendencies that threaten to hollow out the university's core academic mission.

Related Knowledge, Skills, and Competencies:

- Demonstrate a deep understanding of foundational higher education values
- Critically analyze the historical, philosophical, and sociological evolution of higher education
- Identify and critically evaluate the tensions between academic values and managerialist or neoliberal policy agendas
- Develop the ability to articulate, uphold, and advocate for the societal role of the university
- Apply contemporary tools of public communication and engagement to actively participate in and shape discourse around the mission and future of higher education.

Organizational studies and leadership in higher education

The study emphasized organizational and institutional studies, academic leadership, and change management as foundational pillars of the program aimed at preparing future higher education professionals. These areas are especially critical in post-Soviet contexts, where structural inertia, rigid hierarchies, and outdated governance models continue to hinder institutional adaptability and innovation amid growing complexity and shifting societal demands.

To address these challenges, the program must cultivate a deep and critical understanding of how universities are structured, governed, and situated within broader sociopolitical and cultural environments. Organizational studies should frame higher education institutions as complex and evolving systems, highlighting their hierarchical and power-dynamic peculiarities.

Respondents emphasized a widespread lack of theoretical grounding in higher education organizational studies among university professionals. Without this foundation, staff struggle to grasp institutional logic, interpret hierarchies, or critically examine and challenge governance and decision-making processes. The growing influence of managerialism and New Public Management (NPM) within academia was seen as an essential topic requiring analytical tools to examine its impact on academic culture, autonomy, and institutional integrity. The program should provide students with theoretical and practical lenses to critically evaluate such trends.

Leadership must also be addressed not only as a set of transversal competencies but as a domain of conceptual and ethical inquiry. The program should equip students to understand various leadership styles, exercise change agency within academic institutions, and navigate the cultural and value-laden dimensions of academic life. This will enable graduates to foster inclusive, reflective, and context-sensitive approaches to institutional transformation.

Related Knowledge, Skills, and Competencies:

- Analyze the structure and governance of higher education institutions within broader social, political, and historical contexts
- Critically engage with organizational theories and models of change
- Evaluate and challenge managerial and organizational setting in higher education through relevant theoretical frameworks, and assess their implications for institutional values, autonomy, and academic practices.
- Demonstrate informed and context-sensitive academic leadership, drawing on diverse leadership theories
- Develop and apply change management strategies tailored to specific institutional contexts

Strategic management and institutional research

The findings underscored the importance of strategic development as a critical domain for employment for higher education professionals, a function that requires significant development, particularly in the former Socialist contexts. Respondents emphasized that in order to achieve institutional transformation, sustainability, or international relevance, universities must be equipped with professionals who possess not only operational knowledge but also strategic foresight and the analytical capacity to navigate complex institutional environments and external changes. Respondents stressed the need for strategic thinking competencies, to think creatively, envision alternative futures, and challenge outdated assumptions.

Participants consistently pointed to strategic planning as inseparable from being able to assess the institutional capacity and build relevant structures and systems, making the strategies feasible and sustainable. As one respondent explained, “when you set up strategic goals, you understand that you will need structures and systems that properly respond to these needs — which means that you also need people who are capable of doing this kind of thing.”

The interconnection between strategic planning, strategic budgeting, and institutional research was emphasized throughout the interviews. Integration of strategic planning with strategic budgeting and the capacity to allocate resources accordingly, ensuring that financial resources are aligned with institutional priorities and that funding decisions reinforce long-term goals.

Respondents highlighted that institutional research plays a pivotal role in supporting decision-making, allowing leadership to monitor the implementation of action plans, anticipate challenges, and long-term visions. One respondent stressed: “If people are able to do some institutional research and systematically reflect on their own practices, I’d love to see that in a program, because this is very often lacking — and people are cooking in their own shoes for too long.” In light of this, respondents identified a shortage of professionals with analytical and data literacy skills, capable of supporting data-informed strategic development, who are able to generate insights from institutional data, synthesize external trends, benchmarks, and national or international policy directions that affect the institution’s future.

Additionally, partnerships and international collaborations were underscored as a rising dimension of strategic development. Respondents emphasized that higher education professionals need to understand models of transnational cooperation, navigate political complexities, and engage in meaningful international collaborations.

Related Knowledge, Skills, and Competencies:

- Design and manage institutional strategies and change initiatives, demonstrating critical awareness of internal governance structures and the evolving external landscape of higher education.
- Apply institutional research and data analysis tools to support evidence-informed decision-making and policy development within higher education contexts.
- Evaluate institutional priorities and financial data to ensure alignment between budgets and strategic goals, fostering sustainable and effective resource allocation.
- Assess geopolitical dynamics and establish international engagement strategies, developing collaborative models that respond to the complexities of transnational higher education.
- Lead innovative and adaptive practices in complex environments, engaging diverse stakeholders and envisioning alternative institutional futures through reflective and strategic action.

Higher education financing

The study identifies higher education financing as a vital area of focus in the program for two core reasons. First, financial constraints were consistently reported as a persistent structural challenge across all contexts, with particular urgency in post-Soviet countries such as Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. These systems

suffer from chronic underfunding, overreliance on tuition fees and donor aid, and an absence of stable, long-term financial strategies. Second, there is a significant shortage of professionals with the necessary understanding of higher education financing — both in terms of the broader policy landscape and the skills needed to apply in different institutional and academic tasks.

To address these gaps, the program must equip students with the ability to analyze and navigate various higher education financing models, including public investment approaches, tuition-based and performance-based funding, and global trends such as income diversification and public-private partnerships. Respondents noted that reforms frequently fail not solely due to financial shortages but also due to limited institutional capacity to align financial planning with strategic goals.

The program should prepare students — regardless of whether they are financial specialists — to engage with budgeting, project financial planning, funding diversification, financial reporting, and regulatory frameworks. Beyond technical skills, students must also develop an understanding of the social, political, and ethical dimensions of financing models, especially as they relate to access, equity, and sustainability in higher education.

As institutions face increasing pressure to respond to global shifts in funding mechanisms and accountability, graduates must be equipped to support development of resilient financial strategies that support institutional development while upholding the public mission of higher education.

Related Knowledge, Skills, and Competencies:

- Critically analyze national and global higher education financing models and their implications for equity, access, and sustainability.
- Interpret and apply funding frameworks and budgeting principles in the context of higher education institutions.
- Develop and manage budgets for academic units, institutional projects, or strategic initiatives
- Evaluate and integrate diversified funding sources — including tuition, grants, donor contributions, and public-private partnerships — into institutional financial planning.
- Assess and communicate the social, political, and ethical impacts of financing decisions, promoting transparency, accountability, and institutional resilience.

Quality assurance

The study underscores the growing significance of quality assurance (QA) in higher education at institutional, national, and international levels. At the institutional level, QA is evolving from a static, compliance-driven function into a strategic, data-informed process that drives continuous improvement in teaching and learning. A notable emerging trend is the integration of research activities into QA systems — an area historically underrepresented in existing frameworks.

Despite these advancements, respondents expressed concern over the overly technical and bureaucratic nature of QA processes, which can obscure their developmental purpose. When detached from institutional growth, QA risks becoming a box-ticking or document-editing exercise. Addressing this requires a broader conceptual grounding in QA, including its underlying models and principles, framed within the wider context of institutional research and organizational learning. This approach calls for advanced skills in designing tailored evaluation tools and conducting data analysis to inform curriculum enhancement, strategic planning, and institutional transformation.

Another central mandate of QA offices is preparing institutions for external evaluations, including national and international accreditations. As QA becomes increasingly integral to internationalization, professionals must be able to navigate diverse accreditation systems, standards, and procedures across global contexts.

In light of the growing prominence of quality assurance and the widespread criticisms it attracts, the study underscores the need to cultivate a critical and comparative perspective on QA policies and models — equipping professionals to evaluate and challenge prevailing approaches while remaining alert to the potential shortcomings of the broader “quality movement.”

Related Knowledge, Skills, and Competencies:

- Critically evaluate the conceptual and theoretical foundations of quality assurance, applying comparative perspectives to assess national, institutional, and international frameworks and policies.
- Develop and apply tailored quality evaluation models, tools, and data analysis systems to inform various academic, scholarly or institutional processes.
- Navigate and manage diverse accreditation processes at national and international levels, interpreting and applying relevant standards, regulations, and procedures.

Academic development

The study underscores faculty/academic development and, particularly, instructional design as essential pillars for strengthening teaching and learning in higher education. In mature systems, teaching and learning units or academic development centers play a strategic role in enhancing pedagogical practices, aligning instruction with learning outcomes, integrating research and teaching, and supporting curriculum innovation. However, in post-Soviet contexts, these structures often remain underdeveloped, narrowly administrative, or limited to generic training workshops, lacking the strategic orientation required for long-term academic staff development.

With the changing nature of learners and the accelerating digital transformation of higher education, faculty increasingly require targeted support to adapt instructional design to diverse learning needs and contexts. This entails diversifying teaching and learning approaches, aligning them with emerging competency-development goals, and employing interactive, student-centered methods. It also involves transitioning between delivery modes — from traditional in-person instruction to online and hybrid formats — each carrying distinct pedagogical, technological, and operational considerations. Successfully navigating these shifts demands highly qualified higher education professionals capable of facilitating and guiding transformative changes in instructional design and practice.

The study also revealed that the credibility and effectiveness of staff involved in instructional design are greatly enhanced when they themselves have active teaching experience. Such experience deepens their sensitivity to the realities of the classroom, ensures the relevance of the approaches they recommend, and strengthens faculty trust in their guidance.

Ultimately, the program should prepare graduates to lead and support instructional innovation, integrating pedagogical expertise, digital fluency, and strategic academic planning to ensure teaching and learning remain relevant, effective, and inclusive.

Related Knowledge, Skills, and Competencies:

- Apply conceptual and theoretical foundations of instructional design to develop pedagogically sound approaches for diverse learner profiles and educational contexts.
- Design, adapt, and evaluate curricula for in-person, online, and hybrid modes of delivery, recognizing the distinct pedagogical, technological, and operational requirements of each format.
- Facilitate faculty development initiatives that promote innovative, evidence-based teaching practices and align instructional strategies with institutional learning outcomes.
- Integrate digital tools and learning technologies into instructional design to enhance engagement, accessibility, and learning effectiveness.

- Build trust with academic staff, provide relevant and context-sensitive guidance, and foster a culture of continuous instructional improvement.

Research management and innovations ecosystem

The study underscores the urgent need to strengthen institutional capacity for comprehensive research management and support across the entire research lifecycle. Professionals in these roles must combine a deep understanding of national and international policy developments in research, science, and innovation with expertise in research funding schemes, management models, and assessment frameworks.

Key functions include establishing systems for tracking and assessing research performance; guiding faculty through research funding schemes and proposal writing; identifying partners and forming international research consortia; managing research projects; and supporting publication strategies that enhance both research visibility and impact.

A notable shift in this domain is the growing adoption of Responsible Research Assessment (RRA) moving beyond narrow, publication-based metrics toward frameworks that value quality, societal relevance, and open science. This requires both a nuanced understanding of academic and scholarly work and mastery of relevant quantitative tools (e.g., bibliometric analysis) and qualitative methods.

The study also revealed a critical gap lies in technology transfer and commercialization functions that remain underdeveloped in many contexts. Advancing these areas requires building infrastructure that fosters collaboration between researchers, industry, and government, enabling the translation of academic research into market-ready solutions. Therefore, developing competencies in research communication, fundraising, intellectual property management, patenting, and navigating technology readiness processes was identified as a significant skill in demand.

By combining expertise in research management, responsible assessment, and technology transfer, program graduates will be equipped to foster research and innovation ecosystems bridging the gap between academic research and societal application.

Related Knowledge, Skills, and Competencies:

- Critically analyze national and international policy developments in research, science, and innovation
- Guide and support faculty through all stages of the research lifecycle, including grant writing, partner identification, formation of international research consortia, and publication strategies.
- Design and implement systems for research management, performance tracking, grant acquisition, partner identification, and consortium building
- Apply and evaluate Responsible Research Assessment frameworks to ensure and encourage quality, societal impact, and open science.
- Plan and manage technology transfer processes, including research communication, intellectual property management, patenting, and commercialization, adapting strategies to local and global policy and market contexts.
- Foster collaboration between academia, industry, and government to strengthen institutional innovation systems and translate research outputs into market-ready or socially impactful solutions.

Digital transformation and artificial intelligence

The study identifies digitalization as a transformative megatrend reshaping governance, research, teaching, and learning in higher education. The program should prepare professionals who are well-versed in diverse practices for leading, designing, and managing digital transformation strategies within higher education

contexts. Graduates must be able to envision the digitalization of both administrative and academic processes, integrate digital tools into teaching and research, and address the ethical and regulatory challenges accompanying these changes — particularly in contexts where digitalization strategies are fragmented and resources are limited, such as in the post-Soviet space.

Artificial intelligence (AI), while part of the broader digital transformation, is emerging as a distinct and disruptive force with unique ethical, operational, and governance implications. Graduates should be skilled in using a range of AI tools to support various academic and administrative tasks, while remaining mindful of their limitations and committed to upholding academic integrity. As technologies evolve, new ethical challenges inevitably arise; therefore, continuous monitoring, critical evaluation, and reflective use of AI across different dimensions of academic and institutional work are essential competencies.

Related Knowledge, Skills, and Competencies:

- Critically analyze global trends in higher education digitalization and AI adoption, identifying opportunities, risks, and context-specific challenges.
- Design the digital transformation strategies, informed by an awareness of diverse practices in higher education, to enhance academic and administrative processes.
- Integrate educational technologies and AI tools into teaching, learning, and assessment in ways that uphold academic integrity and address diverse learner needs.
- Develop and enforce institutional policies for ethical AI use, data governance, privacy protection, and digital equity.
- Critically evaluate the implications, limitations, and emerging ethical challenges of AI and digital tools across academic and administrative functions. Anticipate and respond to regulatory and technological changes in online, hybrid, and digitally enhanced education.
- Facilitate professional development for faculty and staff in digital pedagogy, AI literacy, and adaptive instructional design, ensuring responsiveness to evolving learner needs.

Sustainability and higher education

The study revealed that sustainability in higher education is not only a growing topic to be incorporated into curricula but also a transversal competence that should be embedded in regular institutional and academic activities. This underscores the need to translate sustainability from abstract discourse into concrete actions and behavioral change within the academic context and everyday life. Therefore, graduates should be equipped with the capacity to move sustainability in higher education from rhetorical commitment to meaningful, institution-wide practice. This entails the ability to embed sustainability as a cross-cutting agenda in curricula, research, governance, and operations, aligned with the SDGs and responsive to environmental, social, and economic challenges.

To achieve this, students must develop an informed and critical understanding of the broader context of sustainability studies and examine its role in higher education. They should also be able to analyze how sustainability policies are designed, by whom, and how they address global and regional disparities in implementation — particularly in resource-limited contexts.

The program should focus on a critical exploration of how universities can integrate sustainability into teaching, research, and community engagement, ensuring that initiatives are grounded in authentic practice rather than symbolic gestures, while avoiding “greenwashing” and over-reliance on buzzwords.

A core aim will be to foster critical reflection on trade-offs, barriers, and costs, enabling students to design actionable, context-sensitive sustainability strategies. Importantly, sustainability in higher education should be understood not only as an institutional agenda but also as a shared responsibility, requiring individual

members of the academic community to adopt sustainable behaviors and plan their work with a clear commitment to environmental stewardship.

Related Knowledge, Skills, and Competencies:

- Critically analyze the role of sustainability in higher education, consider the global, regional, and institutional policies and practices
- Evaluate and design sustainability policies and practices in higher education, identifying mechanisms that ensure authenticity, avoid “greenwashing,” and foster meaningful structural and behavioral change.
- Integrate sustainability as a cross-cutting agenda in curricula, research, governance, and operations.
- Demonstrate personal and professional responsibility for environmental stewardship by incorporating sustainability principles into daily academic and institutional practices, modeling behavior that supports institutional and societal transformation.

3.3.3 The Role of theoretical perspectives in the higher education curriculum

The study revealed an ongoing debate about the extent to which theoretical perspectives should be embedded in Master’s programs in higher education. Respondents identified a widespread lack of theoretical grounding in many such programs, noting that while graduates are often able to describe how systems or institutions function, they frequently lack the conceptual tools to interpret, critique, and explain how these systems are shaped.

Given significant developments in higher education and science studies, respondents stressed the importance of incorporating contemporary theoretical debates into the curriculum. Without this foundation, graduates may struggle to critically examine and challenge existing systems, institutional logics, practices and to become the change agents. The theoretical component, they emphasized, should provide analytical frameworks to uncover underlying patterns, generate meaningful explanations, and connect observed challenges to broader systemic dynamics across global, national, and institutional levels.

As one respondent observed:

“I see a huge problem in the lack of good theorization in higher education ... very limited range of theories are used for higher education Programs. And they’re often very technocratic.”

Respondents with experience leading similar programs acknowledged the frequent pressure to prioritize immediate, practical skills over conceptual learning, as students may resist theory-heavy content. However, they stressed the distinction between preparing graduates merely to execute routine operational procedures and preparing them to understand why those procedures exist, how they are shaped, and how to influence or change them.

This tension between practical skills and theoretical depth links to one of the core competencies identified in this study — navigating ambiguity, which is essential for higher education professionals. Theoretical literacy enables graduates to operate effectively in abstract and uncertain contexts, situating their work within shifting policy, organizational, and socio-political landscapes.

To address these challenges, the findings highlight the need to integrate diverse theoretical frameworks throughout the program — ranging from higher education and science policy studies to organizational theory, critical theory, change theory, and policy analysis. Such integration would allow students to move beyond descriptive accounts toward critical, conceptually informed engagement with the evolving higher education landscape.

Related Knowledge, Skills, and Competencies:

- Demonstrate knowledge of key theoretical frameworks in higher education and science studies, and critically evaluate their relevance to policy, governance, and organizational practices.
- Integrate theoretical and practical perspectives to interpret, explain, and address complex challenges in higher education at global, national, and institutional levels.
- Apply critical and analytical skills to frame, analyze, and propose solutions to real-world institutional and policy issues using appropriate conceptual tools.
- Drawing on theoretical insights, navigate abstract and ambiguous contexts and link conceptual understanding with meaningful change in higher education practice.

3.3.4 Uncovering the tension between the practical and theoretical teaching

While the previous section underscores the importance of embedding theoretical perspectives in the curriculum, it is worth highlighting separately that interviewees identified a persistent tension between the growing demand for “practical skills” and the perceived undervaluing of theoretical understanding in higher education programs. This tension reflects a broader public discourse that often frames higher education as overly theoretical and insufficiently aligned with employability.

Labor market representatives strongly emphasized the need for graduates to possess enhanced practical and transversal skills, often urging programs to prioritize these over ‘theoretical content’. In contrast, respondents with academic backgrounds stressed that theory is indispensable: without it, graduates lack the ability to understand the frameworks within which they operate, critically engage with those frameworks, and envision possibilities for change and transformation. **Paradoxically, the absence of theoretical grounding undermines the very skills that employers frequently demand — such as navigating ambiguity, adapting to complex environments, and acting as agents of change.**

A closer examination of this debate reveals a persistent linguistic and conceptual distortion in the way “theoretical learning” is understood, which also illuminates the roots of its criticism. The “theoretical knowledge” is often conflated with content-based knowledge — factual information, emerging issues, and policy debates in the field — rather than with conceptual and analytical frameworks that explain higher education phenomena. While the study emphasizes that both content knowledge and theoretical understanding are widely regarded as essential, it also revealed that the source of much criticism lies in their predominant modes of delivery. Across numerous contexts, theory and content continue to be presented through traditional, lecture-based, and reading-heavy formats that privilege the passive transmission of information. Such approaches not only limit engagement and render knowledge acquisition inefficient, but also fail to connect learning to real-world institutional and policy contexts and fail to build relevant competencies.

Alumni of similar programs reinforced this point, noting that theory became one of the most valuable when embedded in applied assignments directly connected to real-world institutional or policy contexts. When taught this way, students demonstrated deeper engagement and a greater capacity for critical and analytical thinking.

The study, therefore, calls for an intentional integration of theoretical and content knowledge with practical, real-life policy and institutional problems. Achieving this requires thoughtfully designed teaching strategies and assignments combining conceptual understanding with applied competencies, enabling graduates to navigate, influence, and transform higher education systems.

3.3.5 Research methods and working with the data

The study revealed broad agreement among employers and academic experts that research competencies should be regarded not merely as tools for academic scholarship but as transversal skills with value across

the full range of higher education roles. The capacity to design and conduct inquiries, collect and interpret relevant data, and generate meaningful conclusions was viewed as essential for functions spanning academic research, teaching, administration, policy analysis, and institutional leadership. The research component, respondents noted, is underdeveloped in many comparable programs. Strengthening it — particularly through applied, real-world projects — would produce graduates ready to adapt research tools to operational and strategic problem-solving in higher education.

The findings stressed that research methodology training should be embedded throughout the program, building from a strong foundational base toward advanced competencies in data collection, analysis, and reporting. Bridging the traditional divide between qualitative and quantitative approaches emerged as a key theme: graduates should be confident in using both traditions, understand when and how each is most appropriate, and appreciate their potential when used in combination. This methodological flexibility is vital for applying research skills across contexts such as institutional research, policy evaluation, performance assessment, and market analysis for program development and student recruitment, while being aware of their analytical limitations and capabilities.

Another major theme concerned the capacity to work effectively with both quantitative and qualitative data, not only in generating new data but also in making use of existing information. Universities were described as “data-rich but analysis-poor.” Likewise, it was emphasized that vast national and international datasets are available but often underutilized, while a wide range of existing qualitative data remains largely unrecognized as useful for the research. Graduates should therefore be able to identify relevant data sources, process information for specific purposes, and apply analytical tools to reveal trends, diagnose issues, and propose evidence-based solutions.

This capacity is particularly critical in two specialized domains highlighted as valuable in higher education research: **institutional research** and **policy evaluation**. Institutional research involves analyzing operational and strategic data to inform governance and decision-making, designing and interpreting institutional indicators, and using analytics as early warning systems to monitor student progression, program quality, and other key performance areas. Policy research and evaluation require mastering tools such as logical frameworks, indicators, and monitoring techniques to assess the effectiveness of higher education policies and programs. In both domains, the ability to visualize findings clearly — through dashboards, infographics, and analytical reports — was stressed as essential for ensuring that data meaningfully informs decisions at all levels of the institution.

Looking ahead, respondents highlighted the transformative role of AI and data-driven technologies in research and analysis. Graduates should be AI-literate — able to integrate AI tools into research design and data analysis — while also addressing associated ethical, epistemic, and privacy concerns.

Ultimately, the findings indicate that graduates should leave with robust analytical and critical thinking skills applicable far beyond traditional research roles. Graduates should be able to conduct literature reviews, evaluate research quality, navigate diverse paradigms, and select appropriate methods. They should also be confident in conducting institutional, policy, and market research; working with qualitative and quantitative data; and communicating findings to varied audiences. These capabilities underpin a professional habit of reflection and evidence-based action — essential for thriving in the complexity and uncertainty of contemporary higher education. The study also underscored the research and analytical mindset as a key enabler for navigating ambiguity and responding to the fast-changing environmental factors shaping higher education.

Related Knowledge, Skills, and Competencies:

- Demonstrate comprehensive knowledge of qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-method research paradigms, including philosophical foundations, methodological applications, and ethical, epistemic, and data privacy considerations, with awareness of AI-assisted research practices.
- Design and implement research projects in higher education using the appropriate or combined methodologies for complex, real-world problems.

- Critically appraise and synthesize scholarly and policy literature, identifying methodological quality, limitations, and applicability to specific institutional, policy, or system contexts.
- Collect, manage, and analyze both quantitative and qualitative data from appropriate data sources, enabling the meaningful findings and conclusions.
- Apply research evidence to institutional research, policy evaluation, and strategic planning, using indicators, monitoring tools, and analytical frameworks to assess governance, quality assurance, and academic program development.
- Visualize and communicate research findings effectively using reports, dashboards, and infographics tailored to diverse audiences, supporting informed decision-making across institutional, policy, and system levels.
- Demonstrate a sustained research and analytical mindset to navigate ambiguity, adapt to fast-changing higher education environments, and engage in continuous professional reflection and evidence-based action.

3.3.6 Transversal Competencies

The previous sections have contested the conceptual divide between transversal and subject-specific knowledge and skills, revealing that many ostensibly subject-specific issues and their related competencies function simultaneously as transversal competencies. Moreover, the development of transversal competencies is fundamentally intertwined with subject-specific learning, creating a complex interdependence rather than a separation.

Various international organizations, including UNESCO, OECD, and the European Union, as well as national regulatory frameworks, have proposed classifications and hierarchies of transversal competencies. This analysis adopts the European Commission's definition, which positions transversal competencies as those with the highest level of reusability. These competencies are often referred to as *core skills*, *basic skills*, or *soft skills*, and represent the cornerstone of personal development — remaining applicable across various occupations, industries, and life situations rather than being confined to specific subjects or jobs (ESCO, n.d).

Building on this framework, this section identifies several key transversal competencies that emerge as critical for success in contemporary higher education environments, while acknowledging their complex relationship with disciplinary expertise. It should also be noted that the different transversal skills are also implicated in on another and their classification is conditional, based on the contexts they were mentioned in the interviews.

Communication and Interpersonal Competencies

Communication skills represent the most frequently cited and emphasized competency cluster among respondents. This category encompasses multiple dimensions of effective interaction and information exchange. The findings highlighted that communication competencies extend far beyond the simplified treatment of oral and written communication often found in educational programs. Instead, they encompass a concrete set of skills that should be actively approached as the means to strategically shape interaction, build relationships, and foster understanding and trust. This encompasses the sophisticated ability to select appropriate forms, tonalities, terminologies, and formats for specific contexts and intended outcomes.

Oral Communication and Real-time Responsiveness were positioned as fundamentally irreplaceable by artificial intelligence. One respondent emphasized:

When you need to deliver on the spot so that you don't have like an AI helping to say what to say or think or alternative solutions, this kind of creativity and originality and the background work and the knowledge... I think this is something you cannot replace with AI.

This encompasses presentation skills, debating competencies, and the capacity to engage meaningfully in critical discussions, as well as the ability to convey concise and impactful messages that are carefully attuned to the expectations and needs of different audiences.

Written Communication competencies presented a significant professional development challenge, with respondents noting “widespread deficiency in written communication skills, including academic and professional writing.” The scope of writing products encompasses a wide range of items, from simple official email texts and professional correspondence to research reports, grant funding proposals, and blog posts. Particular emphasis was placed on writing in native languages (specifically Georgian) and adapting content for different audiences, ensuring “the quality of the text is good and sensible, and then that it is relevant for the target audience.”

Strategic Communication Mastery emerged as a change-making capability. When facing resistance, “the communication style and the strategy is the changemaker.” This involves understanding whom to approach and how, what to ask for, and what to expect. This also encompasses the skill to be aware of relevant actors and stakeholders in the educational field, understand their scope of work, power, and interests, and navigate communication with them accordingly. Additionally, high-level stakeholder communication skills and experience were emphasized, with higher education professionals needing to be aware of “the nature of such communication and what is to be negotiated at what level.”

Leadership

Leadership competencies, as emphasized in the findings, challenge a critical misconception that leadership is solely a top-level function tied to hierarchical positions. Instead, leadership competence was reframed as situational capacity that emerges when individuals step forward to guide processes, regardless of their formal rank or title.

Taking the lead was highlighted as a critical and “desperately needed” competence, emphasizing the capacity of each individual to initiate action, take ownership, assume responsibility, and propose strategic solutions, regardless of one’s formal organizational position. As one respondent noted:

There are people who need to lead projects, there are people who need to lead initiatives, and there are people who need to lead the process. There are people who need to lead just a group for a couple of hours, days, or weeks, and leadership skills are desperately needed and very much underdeveloped at most higher education institutions.

Strategic problem-solving encompasses the ability to analyze complex situations and propose actionable strategies. It was emphasized that while finding and managing solutions is important, it is a critical skill to be able to notice, identify, and problematize issues. Leaders in this context are those who can see beyond immediate problems to identify underlying causes and suggest comprehensive solutions.

Conflict resolution and crisis management represented a critical area, emphasizing the attitude of being able to resolve rather than avoid. One respondent noted, “Sometimes we are struggling with something, and only after years we discover that there are actually strategies and hacks to handle those. So you, you’re avoiding conflicts rather than being able to negotiate and resolve.” Therefore, the capacity to actively engage with challenging circumstances, negotiate, and seek out resolutions was emphasized as critical, rather than avoiding difficult situations that ultimately complicate the overall healthy dynamics of processes and relations in the professional setting.

Team coordination involves “managing teams having the sense of degree of control and delegation, not to micro-manage too much.” This type of leadership focuses on facilitating group effectiveness through appropriate guidance and support rather than exercising hierarchical control. It emphasizes enabling others’ contributions while maintaining overall coordination and direction toward shared goals.

Cultural intelligence and sensitivity

Cultural competencies were identified as foundational for effective collaboration, institutional or system change, and generally for navigating professional contexts, particularly in diverse and international settings. Cultural sensitivity operates at multiple levels, starting from small disciplinary groups or departmental cultures and extending to institutional, national, and international contexts.

Cultural sensitivity regarding organizational awareness involves understanding “cultural awareness in the organizational setting, or the local at any level, peculiarities of the groups of people you work with.” This awareness is crucial not only to select strategies that better reach and work with change or other initiatives, but professionals must demonstrate this awareness to receive trust and reliability from colleagues and stakeholders.

The significance of cultural understanding was also highlighted in relation to ***international projects and development work***. Without anchoring collaboration in cultural awareness, participants warned, even well-designed initiatives may fail to deliver the desired outcomes. As one respondent explained, cultural practices inevitably inform policymaking, and “it can backfire quickly if you don’t have the sensitivities of who’s in the room and how they are coming to the work.”

Intercultural communication competence was further identified as indispensable for professionals working in international environments. This competency requires not only technical communication skills but also openness to diversity and the ability to navigate cultural differences constructively in collaborative settings.

Multilingual proficiency

Language competencies were also identified as critical enablers. Respondents noted that “multilingualism is valued, with English fluency being critical, alongside familiarity with other languages for academic and professional purposes.” English was seen as the global lingua franca, yet knowledge of additional languages was recognized as vital for international education and collaboration. Multilingual proficiency was linked to professional opportunities, cross-cultural understanding, and the ability to operate effectively in diverse settings. Respondents framed it as a competence that not only supports academic mobility but also strengthens intercultural communication and trust.

Processing large volumes of information

The study highlighted that in an era of information abundance, where there is a rapid flow of large amounts of information, including various texts, numbers, and visuals, the competence of processing vast quantities of information is becoming crucial, and the gap in such competence is becoming increasingly noticeable. This skill also implies knowing how and from where to extract and validate information and synthesize insights. Professionals need the ability to read quickly and grasp essentials, while understanding the logic of quantitative indicators. Therefore, the ability to acquire, filter, and categorize large volumes of information, distinguish between primary and secondary importance, and draw contextually situated conclusions is highly in demand.

Creative and alternative solutions

The respondents highlighted openness to innovative and creative approaches as qualities and competencies that distinguish effective professionals and enable institutional advancement. This is also a skill that could put individuals in more advantageous situations compared to AI, as humans have a more experiential sense of situations, which gives them the ability to be original, creative, and find unconventional alternative solutions to persistent challenges.

Design thinking emerged as critically underapplied yet essential for fostering creative approaches. One respondent highlighted: “Design thinking is a crucial skill, requiring the ability to conceptualize and navigate ambiguity.” It was emphasized that this approach allows professionals to “design experiences to unlock the innovation, have to allow for the truly innovative ideas to emerge.” This approach also involves bringing

different expertise together to co-own and co-design solutions. This competency serves as a bridge between individual creativity and collective innovation, enabling professionals to facilitate environments where unconventional solutions can emerge through collaborative processes.

This process was highly linked to another key and increasingly valuable competence: **Facilitation**. “Facilitating the groups, different meeting, events” enables effective group processes, meetings, and events, supporting collaborative decision-making and institutional development that channels creative approaches into practical outcomes. As one respondent described, facilitating design thinking implies “almost asking for an expert in allowing others to be experts.”

Organizational competencies

Project management was highlighted as a core enabling competency, underpinning the ability to organize complex tasks, manage workflows, deliver outcomes, and sustain collaboration. Respondents stressed the importance of familiarity with frameworks, timelines, sequencing, and accountability structures. These managerial skills were consistently framed as essential complements to subject expertise. As one participant explained, higher education professionals “still need to be experts in their specific fields, but they also need more of these generic managerial skills” — project management, portfolio management, negotiation, and the ability to steer initiatives with multiple partners. Together, such capacities enable professionals to “wiggle [their] way through complexity, but also stay on task and on time,” ensuring that expertise translates into coordinated institutional progress.

Time management was described as a particularly urgent area of deficiency. Respondents emphasized that meeting deadlines and organizing workloads represent not only technical abilities but also a broader professional culture.

Closely tied to time discipline, **work ethics** were described as fundamental to professional effectiveness. Respondents linked these directly to trust, reliability, and the capacity to create supportive environments for collaboration. Ethical collaboration and ethical leadership were repeatedly highlighted as qualities that sustain credibility. One interviewee explained: “work ethics build trust and [a] reliable atmosphere, [supporting] ethical collaboration” — emphasizing that these qualities are not abstract ideals but practical necessities for institutional functioning.

Personal qualities and learning competencies

Curiosity and openness to learning were identified as both personal traits and professional enablers. Curiosity was described as a key driver of personal and professional growth, fostering exploration of uncharted areas of the field and workplace. Respondents emphasized its role as one of the main tools for “navigating the ambiguity” while simultaneously keeping one’s “learning radar on, remaining open to suggestions, and cultivating an active learner mindset.” In this sense, curiosity sustains adaptability and strengthens the capacity to respond creatively to emerging challenges.

Observation and listening were described as subtle but crucial competencies that complement curiosity and support continuous learning. These skills attune professionals to notice patterns, inquire more deeply, and reflect critically. Respondents stressed that observation and listening go beyond simply seeing and hearing: they involve asking meaningful questions, recognizing what is unsaid or invisible, and engaging openly with unfamiliar perspectives. Such practices enable professionals to better understand how systems operate, critically assess their own work, and build constructive relationships with colleagues.

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To summarize, the study reveals a significant insight about transversal competencies in higher education: they cannot be understood or developed in isolation from each other or from the broader knowledge foundation that gives them meaning and purpose. The significance of transversal competencies lies in their role as the

connective tissue that enables higher education professionals to integrate knowledge, skills, and dispositions across diverse and complex contexts. They are not supplementary add-ons but essential capacities for collaboration, leadership, innovation, and resilience. ***A central implication of the findings is that these competencies must be deliberately embedded into program delivery and actively practiced if they are to move beyond abstract ideals. Instructors play a pivotal role in this process, ensuring that students continually engage with these competencies through varied assignments, collaborative projects, and reflective activities.*** When integrated into curricula in this intentional way, transversal competencies become lived practices cultivated, refined, and mastered as part of students' professional formation and their preparedness to navigate the complexities and uncertainties of contemporary higher education.

3.4 Analysis of the Existing MA Programs in Higher Education

This section analyzes MA programs in higher education offered in Georgia and abroad that prepare professionals for the higher education sector. On the one hand, such analysis helps to understand the content and structure of existing programs, their main focus and goals, and the types of professionals they aim to prepare, as well as the key knowledge and competencies they seek to develop. On the other hand, it provides insights into the current landscape of program offerings, allowing for an assessment of the field's scope, distinctiveness, and competitiveness. The analysis encompasses all programs offered in Georgia, and the programs from abroad

3.4.1 Analysis of the programs in Georgia

Georgia currently offers nine MA programs in Education Administration or Education Science that incorporate elements related to higher education or prepare specialists for work across multiple educational sectors, including higher education. These programs are distributed across three public and six private universities. This analysis is based on publicly available program descriptions, though detailed study plans and course lists were inaccessible for three programs, representing a minor limitation.

Among these programs, two are titled MA in Education Science, while the remaining seven are titled MA in Education Administration. The main distinction between these two types lies in their focus: programs in Education Science emphasize pedagogical theories, teaching philosophies, and educational approaches, whereas Education Administration programs explicitly aim to prepare education administrators and managers. Two programs offer English as the language of instruction, indicating an orientation toward international student recruitment.

The extent of specialization in higher education varies considerably across programs. Only two programs explicitly offer separate tracks: one for higher education and another for general education, differentiated primarily through mandatory elective courses. One program organizes this differentiation through two courses in Institutional Management and Quality Management, with options tailored to higher education, vocational education, general education, and early childhood education. In one case, the sole distinction between educational sectors appears in the practical component, which carries 2 ECTS credits and requires students to complete fieldwork in an institution corresponding to their chosen educational level. In the remaining programs, the core curriculum is shared across all educational sectors, with differentiation occurring only through elective courses or remaining absent altogether.

Practical components are mandatory in all six programs that have published detailed descriptions. These range from 2 to 12 ECTS credits and vary in format, including internships, practical projects, reflective learning, and action research-based practices.

Research components also vary across programs, spanning 5 to 15 ECTS credits. Most programs include an introductory research methods course, occasionally divided into separate Quantitative Methods and Qualitative Methods modules. Additional offerings often cover quantitative analysis or action research, with two programs incorporating Academic Writing as part of the research component. All programs require an MA thesis, weighted at 20, 24, or 30 ECTS credits.

Program objectives generally converge on preparing educational administrators, leaders, and specialists equipped with knowledge of educational systems, policies, and pedagogies. A notable recent trend is the increasing emphasis on training quality assurance officers, reflecting the growing institutionalization of and demand for this function within the Georgian education sector. Furthermore, four of the nine programs place particular emphasis on the legal frameworks and regulatory foundations of the education system. Notably, none of the existing programs address issues such as science policy or research management.

The analysis reveals that none of the existing programs focus exclusively on higher education as a distinct field of study. While the breadth of program offerings appears relatively substantial for the scale of Georgia's higher education sector, the higher education dimension remains predominantly marginal where it exists. It is embedded within broader educational administration and policy frameworks rather than constituting a coherent, specialized focus.

This review identifies a clear gap and opportunity for developing a dedicated higher education curriculum. Such a program would integrate contextual, theoretical, and methodological perspectives with rich competencies training in research, policy analysis, and institutional management. Incorporating strong international and comparative approaches would enhance both the program's applicability and its attractiveness to international students, positioning it as a distinctive offering within the regional and broader educational landscape.

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3.4.2 Mapping the regional and global landscape of MA programs in higher education

The initial process of identifying MA Programs for inclusion in this analysis revealed a highly uneven global landscape in the provision of graduate Programs specializing explicitly in higher education. In many countries, MA Programs with a dedicated specialization in higher education do not exist at all. Instead, higher education-related topics are frequently embedded within broader master's Programs in educational leadership, administration, or education policy. Only a relatively small number of Programs offer clearly defined and comprehensive specializations focused specifically on higher education as a distinct field of study and professional practice.

Regional landscape: South Caucasus, Turkey, Eastern Europe, and Central Asia

The analysis indicates that, in this region, higher education as a distinct field of study remains weakly institutionalized, with very limited program offerings focused exclusively on higher education. Instead, most programs are embedded within broader frameworks of education management, educational administration, or leadership. However, in some contexts, higher education is marginally addressed or largely overlooked.

In Armenia and Azerbaijan, the programs are primarily oriented toward the organization and management of educational institutions. These programs aim to prepare education managers capable of working across general education, higher education, and, in some cases, diaspora educational institutions. Program goals emphasize developing critical and problem-solving perspectives in education management, equipping graduates to devise practical and risk-aware responses to governance challenges, while foregrounding values of responsibility, shared governance, and stakeholder engagement.

Programs in Turkey display a more differentiated landscape, including offerings explicitly labelled as higher education studies alongside programs in educational administration, planning, and adult education. Program goals strongly emphasize mastery of organizational operations in higher education institutions, the effective use of management technologies, and the development of competencies that support the sustainable development of higher education institutions. Notably, some Programs incorporate organizational theory, systems analysis, and change management, as well as engagement with critical texts on the politics of education, indicating a comparatively stronger theoretical and critical orientation.

Across Eastern European contexts, particularly in the Baltic states, MA Programs are largely framed under educational sciences, educational management, or educational innovation and leadership. These programs typically address all levels of education, with higher education forming only one component of a broader educational landscape. Programs particularly emphasize innovations, technologies, and evidence-based change, cultivating leadership identity and professional competence. While research training is often well developed, higher education-specific theory, governance, and policy analysis tend to remain implicit or secondary.

Within Central Asia, the program landscape remains limited but shows emerging specialization in higher education, particularly in Kazakhstan. Leadership-focused programs with explicit higher education tracks articulate goals related to leading change within higher education institutions, understanding national, regional, and international reform contexts, and integrating research, policy analysis, and professional practice. Compared to other parts of the region, these programs demonstrate a clearer articulation of higher education as a professional and analytical domain, including stronger emphasis on research projects, engagement with higher education systems and policy, and preparation for doctoral study or policy-oriented careers. Nevertheless, the overall number of such offerings remains small, and their reach is still limited.

Where higher education master's programs are located globally

Globally, many countries do not offer specialized MA Programs in higher education at all. Where such Programs do exist, they tend to be concentrated in particular geographic hubs.

Most notably, specialized MA programs in higher education are especially prevalent within Anglo-American higher education systems. In the United States and Canada, these programs are well established and predominantly oriented toward higher education leadership, administration, and student affairs, reflecting the strong professionalization of university management and student services in these contexts. In the United Kingdom, higher education programs more commonly emphasize policy, governance, and comparative and international perspectives, situating higher education systems within global policy frameworks. In Australia, the dominant orientation lies in management and leadership, frequently linked to institutional performance, quality assurance, and organizational change.

Within the European context, offerings remain comparatively limited. A notable exception is the Erasmus Mundus Joint Master in Research and Innovation in Higher Education (MARIHE)¹, delivered by a consortium of seven universities. This Program represents a distinctive European model, with a strong focus on higher education systems, policy analysis, organizational dynamics and institutional governance, combined with an explicitly international and comparative orientation.

Beyond Europe and the Anglo-American context, Asia emerges as another important regional hub for MA Programs in higher education, particularly in Hong Kong and Japan. Programs in these contexts display diverse profiles, encompassing higher education policy, philosophy, systems analysis, management, and historical perspectives on higher education.

Analysis of MA programs in higher education globally

This section presents findings from the analysis of master's programs in higher education across diverse

¹ The project is implemented in cooperation with MARIHE team from the Tampere University

geographic contexts. Adopting a thematic and integrative approach, the analysis focuses on how programs articulate their goals, structure learning experiences, define key knowledge and competencies, and envision the professional trajectories of graduates.

The findings highlight both shared patterns of convergence in the professionalization of higher education and regional differences rooted in academic traditions, institutional cultures, and labor-market expectations.

Program goals: Preparing professionals for a changing higher education landscape

Program goals are predominantly framed in response to the perception of higher education as a sector under pressure and transformation. Programs consistently emphasize the need to prepare professionals who can operate within environments characterized by change, uncertainty, and competing demands for quality, equity, efficiency, and international relevance.

A dominant shared goal is the preparation of professionals who can engage critically with higher education systems and institutions, rather than simply implement predefined procedures. Graduates are expected to understand how higher education functions as a social, political, and organizational system and to contribute to its development through informed decision-making.

While the language varies: leadership, governance, innovation, quality, teaching excellence, or policy analysis, the underlying aspiration is similar - to form reflective, analytically capable actors who can lead and manage change.

Differences emerge in how programs conceptualize the primary locus of professional action. In some regions, particularly the UK, continental Europe, and Japan–Hong Kong, higher education is framed as a policy- and system-level field, and programs aim to prepare professionals capable of engaging with governance, policy, and the academic field. In contrast, North American programs tend to articulate goals around institutional practice and student affairs, while programs in Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa emphasize academic practice, teaching, and learning leadership.

Program structure: Integrating theory, practice, and inquiry

Despite regional variation, Program structures display a high degree of convergence. Most programs follow a core–elective–culminating component model, designed to balance foundational knowledge with contextual specialization.

Core components typically introduce students to higher education systems, governance, policy, or foundational concepts. Electives allow thematic concentration — such as leadership, quality assurance, student development, teaching and learning, or internationalization. Almost all Programs culminate in an integrative requirement, such as a master’s thesis, applied research project, capstone, or professional portfolio.

Structural differences reflect differing assumptions about professional preparation. European and some Asian programs tend to adopt longer, research-oriented structures, culminating in a substantial thesis. North American and Canadian programs more frequently use course-based, cohort-oriented, and part-time structures, often replacing a thesis with a capstone or applied project. Programs in Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa typically combine coursework with practice-based inquiry or minor dissertations.

Key knowledge and competencies

Across regions, programs converge around a shared set of core knowledge domains and competencies, though they emphasize them differently.

First, **system and institutional understandings** are foregrounded. Graduates are expected to understand how higher education institutions operate and how systems are governed, including issues of policy, funding, quality assurance, teaching and learning, and innovation.

Second, **analytical and research literacy** emerges as a near-universal competency. While only some Programs explicitly prepare graduates for academic research careers, almost all emphasize the ability to

engage with research, interpret data, evaluate policies or Programs, and use evidence to inform decisions. Research is framed less as an end in itself and more as a tool for professional judgment and institutional learning.

Third, **leadership and change competencies** are consistently emphasized. Whether framed as managerial leadership, academic leadership, policy leadership, or system stewardship, Programs seek to prepare graduates who can lead initiatives, manage complexity, and contribute to institutional or system-level change.

Fourth, many Programs highlight **ethical awareness, reflexivity, and social responsibility**, particularly in relation to equity, inclusion, and the public role of higher education. This is especially prominent in North American, Canadian, South African, and some European Programs, where normative commitments are explicitly articulated.

Regional emphases vary. Student development and student services competencies are most explicit in the United States and Canada. Teaching and learning expertise is central in Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, and parts of Latin America. Policy analysis, quality assurance, and governance competence dominate in Europe and the UK. Theoretical, historical, and philosophical knowledge is particularly strong in Japan, Hong Kong, and selected European contexts.

Target audiences: Who these programs are designed for

Across regions, programs are primarily designed for professionals already working in or closely connected to higher education, rather than for pre-service students. Admission criteria, delivery formats, and curricular design often assume prior professional experience and practical familiarity with educational institutions.

Nevertheless, notable variations exist. North American and Canadian programs often target early- to mid-career professionals seeking entry into or advancement within specific professional roles, particularly in administration or student services. UK, European, and Asian Programs tend to attract more heterogeneous cohorts, combining practitioners, policy professionals, and students oriented toward doctoral study or analytically focused careers. The shared assumption that students are working professionals has also shaped Program design across regions, encouraging greater flexibility in modes of delivery. This is particularly evident in North America and the UK, where part-time, hybrid, and fully online formats are increasingly common.

Career paths

Program goals and curricula implicitly and often explicitly define expected career trajectories. Across regions, graduates are prepared for roles within higher education institutions, policy bodies, quality assurance agencies, and related organizations.

In the United States and Canada, programs clearly map onto specific professional pathways, such as student affairs leadership, institutional administration, enrolment management, or academic and institutional evaluation roles. European and UK programs more often prepare graduates for policy-making and analytical roles, including work in ministries, agencies, international organizations, and institutional strategy units. Programs in Australia–New Zealand–South Africa emphasize academic development, teaching leadership, and institutional leadership, with some pathways leading toward doctoral study. Programs in Japan–Hong Kong strongly support research and academic careers, as well as analytically oriented policy roles. In Latin America, graduates are frequently prepared for institutional leadership, consultancy, and reform-oriented roles, with internationalization emerging as a distinct pathway in some contexts.

Taken together, these findings suggest that master's programs in higher education globally are engaged in a shared project of professional formation, but that this project is shaped by differing visions of what higher education professionals are, and should be, responsible for. Across regions, programs seek to produce competent, reflective, and analytically grounded professionals, yet they diverge in whether these professionals are imagined primarily as system analysts, institutional leaders, student-focused practitioners, scholarly educators, or capacity-building managers.

4. DEFINING HIGHER EDUCATION PROFESSIONALS

“I’m not sure that we’re very good at educating intellectuals, and by educating and by intellectuals, I mean people who have solid subject specific compos, but they’re able to put these in a broader context”.

This section summarizes the study’s findings by (i) situating higher education professionals within the contemporary higher education landscape, (ii) outlining the key professional qualities and competencies revealed by the research, (iii) highlighting their evolving roles and career pathways, and (iv) professionalization prospects.

4.1 Situating the Higher Education Professionals in the Contemporary Context

The higher education professional today operates at the intersection of institutional complexity, political volatility, and rapid societal transformation. Positioned within systems marked by supercomplexity (Barnett, 2000), these professionals operate at the confluence of academic, administrative, and civic domains, where competing expectations and rapid change demand both intellectual versatility and ethical judgment. Their role extends far beyond technical or managerial functions: they are expected to interpret, mediate, and lead within increasingly fluid and uncertain environments.

Furthermore, in response to the growing complexity and competitiveness of higher education systems within and beyond the universities, the roles and responsibilities of higher education professionals have proliferated. Despite the growing significance of higher education professionals, persistent ambiguity surrounds their professional identity, roles, and the recognition of their academic and professional training. The study revealed that many employers and university representatives remain unaware that graduate programs specifically prepare specialists in this field. As a result, such roles are frequently filled by staff from other disciplines who rely on transferable skills and on-the-job learning. While this type of expertise can be valuable in specific functional areas, it risks reducing higher education work to a set of routine administrative procedures, detached from the broader institutional, systemic, and cultural contexts that shape universities. This ad hoc approach narrows professional formation and undermines the development of distinct knowledge, competencies, and the visionary foresight required to ensure higher education’s responsiveness to increasingly diverse societal needs and expectations.

Additionally, the interdisciplinary nature of higher education workplaces presents an additional challenge, as graduates from other or function-specific and more commonly known fields, such as law, communications, administrative sciences, or management, frequently occupy key institutional positions. Although such expertise is valuable for operational success, a lack of understanding of the distinct nature, values, and missions of higher education — and the tendency to treat universities as conventional organizations — can lead to various dysfunctions. This approach leaves the professionals working in the higher education field without the specialized knowledge essential for addressing the sector’s unique challenges and for contributing to the development and advancement of academic systems. Therefore, the formation of professional identities and qualifications requires professional development initiatives that cultivate expertise in higher education systems, governance, and principles, enabling staff to align their roles with the academic ethos and strategic mission of higher education.

In this contested landscape, the professional identity of higher education specialists is constituted through an integrated portfolio of knowledge, competencies, and dispositions that enable them to navigate ambiguity, uphold academic values, and adapt to complex institutional and societal transformations.

4.2 Becoming the Higher Education Professional: Thinking, Engaging with, and Leading in Ambiguity

At the foundation of professional competence lies a comprehensive understanding of higher education as both a system and a mission. The higher education professional reads systems, parsing policies, interpreting organizational cultures, and analyzing power dynamics that shape institutional life in the field. They grasp how systems are organized and governed, how policies evolve, and how global and national pressures shape development trajectories of higher education space. Equally, they must *reclaim and articulate the mission* of higher education as a democratic institution and epistemic space for critical inquiry, especially under conditions of political instability, authoritarian drift, and neoliberal pressure. These professionals recognize universities not as ordinary organizations, but as cultural and intellectual ecosystems that generate knowledge, uphold academic freedom, and contribute to the societal good.

Approaching work through research and data analysis, not merely as methodological tools, but as a mindset applied in daily practice, has emerged as a key competence, enabling higher education professionals to continuously observe, explore, and engage with complex institutional environments. Mastering and integrating theoretical perspectives into their work, using frameworks as analytical tools to identify underlying patterns, understand systemic relationships, and develop nuanced interpretations of complex phenomena, distinguishes the most capable higher education professionals. This integration enables them to situate problems within broader institutional and societal contexts, framing them beyond surface symptoms and diagnosing root causes through theoretical and contextual analysis, what one might call the mark of an “educated intellectual.”

The study reveals that transversal competencies, including communication, leadership, cultural intelligence, and creativity, form an interconnected ecosystem that enables professionals to succeed and create engaging, responsive, and forward-looking practices and environments.

Communication serves as the foundational layer, allowing professionals to express themselves with precision and tact, navigate stakeholder relationships, negotiate competing interests, facilitate discussions, and share knowledge effectively. This enables them to collaborate, build shared understanding, and foster dialogue across hierarchical and disciplinary boundaries in diverse contexts. *Leadership* emerges not as hierarchical authority but as the capacity to take initiative and assume responsibility across projects, teams, and initiatives of varying scales. *Cultural intelligence* provides the contextual awareness necessary for effective collaboration and change management equip professionals with the professional sensitivity to operate within increasingly complex contexts. Creativity and design thinking empower professionals to innovate, experiment, and adapt in response to persistent institutional and systemic challenges.

Central to the professional identity of higher education professionals is the capacity to “navigate ambiguity,” described as being “ready for change and ready to change,” “comfortable with uncertainty,” able to “handle complexity” and “delve into the unknown.” This capacity is far more than a standalone skill or innate trait; it emerges from the integration of contextual knowledge, theoretical and critical understanding, and practical capability. Together, these elements form a professional instinct that enables higher education professionals to respond thoughtfully and effectively to uncertainty and complexity in their institutional and societal environments.

Finally, the higher education professionals are the ones who think conceptually, act operationally, communicate strategically, and lead ethically. They are expected to ask critical questions, make informed decisions, and contribute to the transformation of educational settings within complex and contested environments. The role demands *intellectual curiosity, systemic thinking, ethical commitment*, and the capacity to engage in *critical dialogue and transformative action*.

4.3 Roles and Career Prospects for Higher Education Professionals

The findings reveal a diverse landscape of career opportunities for graduates of higher education pro-

grams. These professionals occupy roles spanning higher education and research institutions, ministries and other governmental bodies, non-governmental organizations, inter- and intranational organizations. Graduates of master's programs in higher education who wish to pursue academic and research careers often continue into doctoral studies, while others enter professional practice within or beyond academia.

Universities remain the primary employers, offering career opportunities across critical institutional functions contributing to strategic development, institutional effectiveness, and academic quality. Key employment areas include, but are not limited to:

- Institutional research and analysis
- Strategic development and planning
- Quality assurance and accreditation support
- Teaching and learning support focused on academic development
- Research support and grant management
- Internationalization offices managing global partnerships and mobility programs
- Student success services, advising, recruitment, and retention strategies
- Digital transformation, educational technology integration, and AI governance

Beyond universities, **governmental policymaking and intermediary organizations** provide significant employment opportunities, including:

- Ministries of education and national agencies
- Accreditation and quality assurance agencies operating at national and international levels
- Non-governmental organizations
- International organizations

Additionally, the **private and consultancy sectors** represent emerging career avenues. These encompass private companies working on the development of educational practices, policy research centers, program evaluation consultancies, and strategic advisory roles for universities and governments.

The key roles in these sectors include:

- Designing and implementing educational policies
- Quality assurance specialist
- Policy analysis and analysis
- Educational project management
- Educational Consultants
- Technological innovation
- Capacity development
- Advocacy and mediation

The academic trajectory of higher education professionals involves graduates pursuing doctoral studies in higher education or related fields, preparing for research-intensive careers and potential academic leadership.

It should be noted that while a master's degree alone rarely leads directly to senior academic positions, it serves as a valuable stepping stone — equipping graduates with conceptual frameworks, research skills, and professional networks that support entry into PhD programs, and eventual leadership roles in academia and other higher education venues.

4.4. Toward a Broader Vision of Professionalization

Although career opportunities for higher education professionals are expanding, their full potential remains constrained by systemic barriers. Institutional hierarchies and entrenched traditions often limit recognition of this emerging field compared to established disciplines such as law, economics, or management. Moreover, limited awareness among employers and graduates about the scope and value of specialized higher education roles continues to narrow visibility and career mobility.

The professionalization of higher education specialists is an evolving process. Strengthening these career pathways within and beyond universities requires coordinated action to raise awareness among employers about the distinctive competencies developed through higher education specialized programs, recognizing higher education professionals as a distinct occupational group with strategic value for the sector.

Ultimately, master's programs in higher education serve not only as training grounds for practitioners and researchers but also as platforms for redefining the profession itself. Addressing current gaps through collaboration among universities, policymakers, and employers will be essential for cultivating a skilled, forward-looking workforce capable of advancing higher education in a rapidly transforming landscape.

5. TARGET STUDENT PROFILES AND ENROLLMENT STRATEGY

The research indicates that the MA in Higher Education program should attract a diverse but purposefully selected group of students reflecting the multidimensional nature of higher education work. Candidates are expected to come from varied professional and disciplinary backgrounds but share a commitment to deepening their understanding of higher education systems, policies, and institutional dynamics. The recruitment strategies should consider the target segments of prospective students, the ongoing dynamics of the higher education field and plan the recruitment campaign and processes accordingly.

5.1 Profile of Prospective Students and Admission Focus

While the program should remain open to candidates from a variety of professional and academic backgrounds, student recruitment should strategically prioritize entry- and mid-career professionals working in higher education and related sectors. These individuals are often seeking opportunities to reflect on and re-frame their professional experience, deepen their understanding of higher education systems, and strengthen the key competencies that enhance both their career progression and their contribution to the field.

The first target group includes professionals who work or aspire to work in higher education and research institutions, seeking to broaden their contextual understanding and advance within various institutional functions such as academic development, quality assurance, or internationalization.

A second key group comprises policy advisors and professionals from ministries, NGOs, and international organizations who aim to translate their knowledge of higher education into practical applications in policy design, evaluation, and reform. For these candidates, the program offers both the conceptual grounding and applied frameworks necessary to enhance their analytical and policymaking capacities.

In parallel, the program should actively attract research-oriented students motivated by intellectual curiosity and long-term academic aspirations. For these candidates, the MA in Higher Education can serve as a pre-doctoral program, building the critical research, analytical, and theoretical competencies required for doctoral studies in Europe or internationally. The program's strong theoretical and methodological foundation, combined with its comparative and international orientation, provides an ideal platform for PhD preparation.

Finally, the program may also appeal to a broader curiosity-driven cohort, students who wish to explore higher education as a cultural, social, and institutional phenomenon without fixed career goals. This group contributes to the intellectual diversity of the program, enriching classroom dialogue with multiple perspectives and experiences.

Given this diversity of motivations and backgrounds, the study recommends that the program maintain a balanced design that integrates academic rigor with professional relevance. By combining conceptual exploration with applied learning opportunities, the program can enable students to tailor their studies to their professional ambitions or scholarly trajectories, ensuring flexibility and coherence across different learner profiles.

Targeting the local and international students

The MA in Higher Education is designed to attract both national and international students, reflecting the global and comparative orientation of the field. The decision to offer the program in English positions it as an inclusive academic space accessible to a wide range of learners from different regions and professional backgrounds.

Georgian students are expected to form the core of the initial cohorts, particularly those already employed in universities, governmental bodies, or international projects. For this group, the program serves as a path-

way to professionalize their roles, enhance their competencies, and strengthen their prospects for career advancement and leadership within the higher education sector.

At the same time, international students represent both a major opportunity and a current challenge. Presently, fewer than ten international students are enrolled in education science programs in Georgia, highlighting the need for targeted efforts to internationalize the student body. By emphasizing the program's globally relevant content, which integrates national, regional, and international perspectives on higher education systems, the MA offers a strong foundation for cross-contextual learning and practice.

5.2 Student Recruitment Strategy

The student recruitment strategy for the MA in Higher Education should reflect both the evolving dynamics of the Georgian higher education sector and the program's international aspirations. While higher education in Georgia is still a developing field, it presents diverse career prospects and increasing opportunities for professional advancement. Therefore, recruitment efforts should strategically target staff currently employed in universities and educational institutions, emphasizing how the program enhances their professional competencies, leadership capacity, and career trajectories.

At the same time, the strategy must recognize the uncertainties affecting the higher education sector, including political instability, limited international collaborations, and constrained engagement in global projects. *Rather than viewing these challenges as deterrents, they should be framed as a call for qualified higher education professionals capable of navigating and addressing such complexities and uncertainties. Positioning the program as a pathway for cultivating these high-level competencies can strengthen its relevance and appeal among prospective students.*

National recruitment focus

Domestically, recruitment should prioritize Georgian higher education staff, administrators, and early-career academics who seek to professionalize their roles and expand their expertise in higher education systems, governance, and policy. Outreach efforts should include collaboration with universities, ministries, and international education projects operating in Georgia.

International recruitment focus

Internationally, the program has strong potential to attract students from neighboring regions, including the South Caucasus, Central Asia, and Eastern and Central Europe, as well as from Asian and African countries such as India, China, Jordan, Israel, Egypt, and Nigeria, which currently represent the largest sources of international students in Georgia. However, the field of education sciences remains underrepresented among international applicants, with fewer than ten international students currently enrolled across Georgian universities. Consequently, targeted international promotion of higher education as a field of study is essential.

The program's English-language instruction and international partnerships, particularly through Erasmus+ mobility schemes and bilateral collaborations with European universities, create an opportunity to position the MA as a gateway to European doctoral programs. This feature can significantly enhance its attractiveness among research-oriented international students seeking pre-doctoral training grounded in analytical, theoretical, and comparative perspectives.

Positioning and market differentiation

Recruitment prospects are influenced by both regional competition and global mobility trends. Advanced systems in countries like India and China attract many students domestically, while the high cost of living in regions such as Western Europe or Hong Kong pushes others to seek affordable yet internationally connected alternatives. In this landscape, Georgia can position itself as a regional education hub offering high-quality,

English-taught graduate education that is globally relevant yet accessible. Marketing efforts should emphasize Georgia's strategic geographic and cultural position between Europe and Asia.

Sustainability and retention

For long-term sustainability, the study underscores the importance of establishing strong, high-performing early cohorts, whose success and satisfaction will serve as the program's most powerful form of promotion. The program should also consider flexible delivery modes, such as hybrid or part-time options, to accommodate working professionals, a key demographic in the Georgian and regional higher education workforce. Additionally, highlighting opportunities for international mobility, applied projects, and research collaboration can enhance the program's profile and ensure student retention.

By integrating national and international recruitment efforts, aligning messaging with the program's distinctive strengths, and maintaining flexibility in delivery and engagement, the MA in Higher Education can cultivate a diverse, motivated, and globally minded student body that contributes to both the local and international advancement of the higher education field.

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