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Youth in Post-Conflict Regions: Socio-Psychological Problems and Attitudes Toward Higher Education (The Case of Armenia)

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the functioning of the higher education system in post-conflict societies as perceived by young people, using the Armenian context as a case study. The article synthesizes findings from a range of international studies to identify key characteristics and challenges typical of post-conflict environments. It explores how long-term and short-term military conflicts affect higher education across different countries. **Methods.** The study involved 625 participants aged 18–35 residing in Armenia. An interdisciplinary approach was adopted, combining both qualitative and quantitative research methods, including group and individual interviews. A comparative analysis was conducted between higher education challenges in Armenia during the pre-war period and those observed after the conflict, emphasizing youth perceptions. Results: Issues present before the conflict (up to early 2020) have intensified in the post-war period (late 2020 to 2023), alongside new challenges linked to ongoing instability, psychological trauma, and health concerns. Despite this, the perceived value of higher education among young people has grown, with many viewing it as a critical means for overcoming personal and societal crises. **Discussion.** The findings provide a foundation for developing strategies to reform the higher education sector in post-conflict contexts. The study highlights the increasing importance of understanding youth perspectives in rebuilding educational systems and fostering societal recovery.

Keywords

Higher education, post-war society, socio-psychological challenges, student youth

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Introduction

The education system of any society is fundamentally shaped by the need to address specific social challenges. As a result, it is closely linked to both internal dynamics and external factors that influence societal functioning. Ultimately, the education system functions as a mechanism to meet the societal demand for shaping a particular type of citizen. Changes in educational goals, priorities, and instruments are often driven by political processes, including public debates and competition among political forces, which can lead to reforms, especially in higher education (Pashkov, 2015).

Transformations in Post-War Societies

Armed conflicts lead to profound societal transformations that directly affect the functioning of higher education institutions. Scholars such as Giddens (2009) and Kaldor (2007) argue that the nature of warfare has significantly changed over the past three decades. These so-called "new wars" place information technologies at the center of military strategy and operations, prioritizing them over traditional material resources (Kaldor, 2012; 2013; Chinkin et al., 2020).

Post-war societies exhibit a range of distinct socio-demographic characteristics (Höglund & Kovacs, 2010), including:

- significant demographic challenges;
- an increase in single-mother households and the emergence of so-called “women’s societies”;
- elevated crime rates;
- declining social cohesion and trust (Fiedler & Rohles, 2021).

In the Armenian context, societal transformations following the First Artsakh War (1992–1994) have been analyzed from sociological, psychological, historical, and ethno-political perspectives. Kotanjian (1992) highlights the rise of national and ethnic consciousness, the intensification of ethnic conflicts, and the spread of national movements during the 1990s. These developments underline the unique character of post-conflict societies and emphasize the importance of studying the adaptation mechanisms used by different social groups. Among the most common psychological consequences of armed conflict for children and youth are post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and depression (War Child UK, 2013). Other frequent disorders include acute stress reactions, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, panic disorder, childhood-specific anxiety disorders, and sleep disturbances. These conditions often co-occur, with older children being particularly vulnerable (War Child UK, 2013).

Woods (2011) identifies several key psychological effects of war on young people:

- trauma;
- post-traumatic stress disorder;
- decreased confidence in the future.

War negatively affects young people’s educational performance, peer relationships, and overall life satisfaction. Longitudinal studies confirm that both direct exposure to conflict and living in post-conflict environments can have detrimental effects on mental health. However, protective factors, especially support from family and community, can help mitigate these consequences (Betancourt et al., 2019).

Anthropological and ethnographic research conducted in post-conflict regions such as Sierra Leone, Kosovo, and Bosnia and Herzegovina reveals common patterns among youth. These include changes in employment practices and widespread use of avoidance and silence as coping strategies (Palmberger, 2018). Many young people view conflict-related experiences as oppressive and seek to distance themselves from politicized social discourse (Eastmond et al., 2012).

Studies on the impact of conflict on higher education systems highlight several critical disruptions: destruction of infrastructure, displacement of students and faculty, curriculum revisions, and heightened gender inequalities (Chinkin et al., 2020). Universities in countries such as Syria, Iraq, Ukraine, and Afghanistan have faced major challenges in maintaining academic continuity and quality. These disruptions often lead to long-term educational decline, with serious consequences for socioeconomic development (Mulatedzi, 2024).

Despite these difficulties, both students and academic staff have demonstrated significant resilience. International cooperation and support from global educational organizations have been crucial in maintaining access to education and rebuilding higher education systems after conflict. Such efforts are essential for promoting long-term peace, stability, and development (Kayyali, 2024).

Youth, in particular, are forced to revise their aspirations and strategies for achieving them in response to post-war social transformations. Therefore, analyzing how young people adapt within higher education in post-conflict contexts is vital for informing future development strategies and addressing educational challenges during crises.

Analysis of Youth Studies in Pre-War Armenia

Research on Armenian youth prior to the outbreak of armed conflict points to several systemic challenges in the education sector (Movsisyan, 2022; Avetisyan et al., 2023), including:

- rising school dropout rates, especially among boys;
- misalignment between educational content and labor market needs;
- delays in incorporating technological advancements into education;
- unequal access to vocational education, particularly in rural areas;
- weak integration of teaching, research, and practical training;
- low levels of student engagement in educational processes.

Studies show that both compulsory and higher education in Armenia suffered from serious quality issues even before the conflict (Movsisyan, 2022). The main contributing factors were:

- a disconnect between strategic management and quality assurance;
- limited involvement of stakeholders in quality assurance processes;
- weak impact of internationalization on curriculum development;
- lack of comprehensive internal and external evaluation mechanisms;
- underdeveloped internal documentation systems for quality control.

For students, "quality of education" primarily means labor market relevance and acquisition of competitive skills. By contrast, policymakers tend to emphasize compliance with national educational standards, while faculty focus on the effectiveness of teaching practices (Movsisyan, 2022).

Generally speaking, in youth studies, the issues of employment and education are typically examined in relation to one another. Many studies in Armenia also emphasize the disrupted connection between education and the labor market (Movsisyan, 2022). Higher education is not a guarantee of employment in Armenia, as a significant proportion of the unemployed hold university degrees (Statistical Yearbook of Armenia, 2024, p. 126).

Survey data from students in Yerevan between 2015 and 2019 (Grigoryan et al., 2017; Zaslavskaya, 2017, 2019; Berberyan, 2018) reveal strong feelings of alienation from the education system. Several categories of student alienation in the sphere of pre-war higher education can be identified. First, there are manifestations related to the educational process, including low levels of engagement in lectures and seminars, weak motivation for independent study, limited interest in coursework, and a focus on formal indicators such as obtaining high grades and acquiring a diploma in a purely formal manner. Second, there are forms of alienation connected to university life, such as a low sense of involvement in institutional activities, limited trust in university administration, and a perceived lack of participation in decision-making processes within the university. Third, manifestations related to professional preparedness and the labor market include an incomplete understanding of one's future professional competencies and a high level of anxiety regarding future employment. An important finding was students' limited understanding of the roles and functions within the higher education system. Many expressed a desire for greater involvement in curriculum development and academic decision-making, reflecting confusion about institutional responsibilities. Moreover, over 80% of students considered it acceptable for peers to obtain grades through informal means (e.g., bribes or personal connections), indicating a concerning normalization of academic misconduct.

Social alienation also contributed to emigration intentions: 67.3% of students reported a desire to eventually leave Armenia. Their main motivations included better job prospects, access to higher-quality education, and improved living standards. Notably, only 45.3% believed that Armenian higher education could ensure decent employment, while over 30% doubted the system's ability to produce competent professionals. Among those intending to emigrate, only 48% envisioned their future in Armenia. A strong correlation was observed between levels of student alienation and intensity of migration aspirations.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to identify the main socio-psychological issues in the field of higher education among Armenian youth in the context of post-war societal transformations, and to compare these with pre-war issues where possible.

Methods

The following methods were employed in the study:

1. Traditional document analysis was conducted on materials related to the social adaptation of young people within the framework of the "person–environment" system. This included an examination of the current status of youth, statistics on social change, analytical reports, descriptions of the legislative framework, and other relevant documents.

2. Quantitative Survey. A representative sample of Armenia's youth population aged 18–35 was surveyed, with a sampling error of no more than 0.05 and a significance level of 0.05. A total of 625 young individuals from across the Republic of Armenia participated. A stratified, random, four-stage cluster sampling method was applied. The survey identified factors influencing young people's perceptions of problems in higher education in the post-war period.

3. In-depth interviews with key informants were conducted to explore young people's interpretations of higher education issues related to the military conflict and the pandemic, as well as their expectations and future plans. Expert interviews also provided practical policy suggestions for addressing the needs of young people.

4. Focus Group Discussions. The main objective of the focus groups was to examine young people's perceptions of the current situation, their expectations, potential behavioral changes, and dominant response patterns.

In total, 12 individual interviews and 8 group discussions with young people were conducted, along with 6 expert interviews involving university professors, researchers, psychologists, and sociologists working with youth. A purposive sampling method with combined and independent selection criteria was used. The combined criteria included the following typical groups:

- Three age groups: 18–22, 23–29, 30–35;
- Two gender groups: male, female;
- Three residential areas: village, regional city, Yerevan;
- Two employment statuses: employed, unemployed.

An additional criterion was participation in the military conflict: the sample included youth who had directly participated in the war and forcibly displaced young people from Artsakh.

Results

The pandemic and armed conflict had a profound impact on youth engagement in education. The transition to distance learning during the pandemic, alongside hostilities and security concerns, significantly hindered the realization of the right to education for many young people.

Following the military conflict, polarization became a defining feature of Armenian youth. As noted in the National Report (2022), "the human development of young people has been extremely uneven." According to the expert survey results, this inequality was evident in several domains: education, employment, health, political engagement, and civic participation.

It is particularly noteworthy that unemployment was cited as the most pressing issue by young people even before the war. However, in the post-conflict period, this problem gained new urgency. Unemployment was increasingly mentioned alongside emigration, financial hardship, and the lack of quality education as primary concerns. This shift likely reflects several factors: heightened migration intentions after the war, and a growing perception of education as a viable means of overcoming unemployment (see Table 1).

Table 1
Problems of youth in the post-conflict period

Issues raised by young people	Percentage of voters
Unemployment	70,9
Emigration	29,6
Difficult financial situation	24,6
Bad habits	22,9
Lack of quality education	16,0
Paid education	15,5
Lack of opportunity to spend free time	11,5
Lack of entrepreneurial mindset	9,3
Lack of opportunities for self-expression	9,1

Issues raised by young people	Percentage of voters
Uncertainty in everyday life and the future	7,0
Lack of civil liability	3,8
Strained relations with parents	3,7
Lack of sports facilities	3,5

It is no coincidence that, whereas in the past personal connections were prioritized when seeking employment, young people now place education at the forefront. According to the study, vocational education and qualifications have become more influential factors in youth employment than personal connections. Specifically, 35.2% of respondents identified vocational education as the primary factor in securing employment, while 19.1% cited knowledge of foreign languages. Interestingly, 12.7% mentioned physical appearance, and 30% still considered personal connections important (see Table 2). However, in the pre-conflict context, over 67% of respondents had named personal connections as the main factor in gaining employment, highlighting their previously dominant role (Galstyan, 2023).

Table 2

Factors of employment through the eyes of youth in the post-conflict period

Factors	I completely disagree	I disagree	I agree	Completely agree
Personal skills and social privity	14,6	9,7	44,9	30,7
Education, specialization and qualification	9,0	16,5	39,3	35,2

SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

Factors	I completely disagree	I disagree	I agree	Completely agree
Personal connections	12,4	30,0	27,7	30,0
Experience	15,4	36,0	30,0	18,7
Knowledge of foreign languages	27,3	34,8	18,7	19,1
Appearance	27,7	39,3	20,2	12,7

In 2021, 31% of young people in Armenia were unemployed and not engaged in education or training, with 63% of them being women. In 2020, both the pandemic and the armed conflict disrupted the full participation of youth in the education system (WB Data, 2021). The war exacerbated the challenges of distance learning caused by the pandemic. Youth respondents assessed the quality of education critically, particularly regarding survival in military conflict conditions. They emphasized the lack of training in media literacy, first aid, area orientation, basic weapons knowledge, and psychological preparedness to handle fear, tension, and stress.

Below are excerpts from interviews with respondents:

"Many people died in vain simply because they did not pay attention to education. They didn't think about the danger, didn't try to understand their location, the speech of locals if relocated, or which road went where and why... Many died because of this, nearly 25%."

(Group discussion, male, 18–22 years old, urban resident)

"We need to rethink all this. People should be more prepared. Even if they don't have a driver's license, they should know how to drive or use weapons if necessary. Most drivers were afraid to drive — that was a major problem in the army. I wasn't a designated driver, but I ended up driving because others refused out of fear."

(Personal interview, male, 20 years old, rural resident)

Fear has become a persistent condition for young people following the epidemic and the war. As Ulrich Beck notes, fear is a defining feature of the "risk society" (Beck, 1992). In such societies, the future appears uncertain, trust in the future diminishes, and actual risks are perceived as individual failures, undermining the potential for collective action. Emergencies tend to become normalized (Beck, 1992).

In 2020, the education of children and youth forcibly displaced from Artsakh faced serious difficulties. According to research, upon arrival in Armenia, they experienced challenges adapting to new living and learning conditions. Psychological stress and panic hindered their ability to study effectively. A socially secure environment was essential for adequate adaptation in the field of education (Abrahamyan, 2023; Berberyan, 2023). The study revealed clear signs of socio-psychological issues, especially among youth who had experienced personal loss. One of the key contributors to panic, stress, and trauma mentioned by participants was media — particularly news and misinformation spread through social networks. Notably, a pattern of social media withdrawal was observed among some younger participants (aged 18–19), which can be described as a form of digital retreatism in post-war societies. Respondents also stressed the importance of psychological and spiritual conversations, noting a lack of opportunities to engage in them.

"Psychological conversations are important. There are many doctors, but they need to talk to veterans. There are cases of psychological issues after the war."
(Group discussion, male, 18–22 years old, urban resident)

While youth research often suggests that religion plays a minor role in the lives of young people, several participants highlighted an increased engagement with faith and the church.

"I was in Artsakh during the war, and never in my life had I experienced such feelings—fear and loss. The first thing that has helped me begin to adapt to this situation after the war was that I became closer to the Church and to my faith. Previously, I did not fully realize its significance; I would go to church and light candles out of a sense of obligation. I stayed in Yerevan until November 7 and left Artsakh late, but I could not bring myself to go to church or pray. We had no information about my father until November 1, when we were told that they were under siege in Lachin. On the very day I finally went to the church in Abovyan, my father was the first to call me and said: "I'm okay, we are descending to Stepanakert." Since that day, I have come to value the role of the Church and my faith in my life even more deeply."

(Group discussion, female, 18–22 years old, Yerevan)

Young people strongly emphasized the need to address the consequences of the military conflict, particularly in relation to mental health recovery.

"I want to focus on people who were affected by the war — those who took part in it. I can say from my own experience that every moment lived freely reminds me of friends who died, and the health that was lost."

(Personal interview, male, 18–22 years old, urban resident)

Another post-war educational issue raised by respondents concerns the content of the curriculum. There was particular emphasis on revisiting how history is taught. Participants also expressed a desire to make education more pragmatic and solution-oriented, aimed at overcoming the specific challenges of post-war life.

Suggestions for curriculum updates included the introduction of mental health education, the promotion of healthy lifestyle practices, and information on avoiding harmful habits.

Youth unemployment remains a major issue in Armenia, consistently higher than in other age groups. The high rate of youth unemployment reflects underutilized potential, particularly among girls aged 15–24. Post-conflict data shows a general decline in youth employment, except among those aged 30–34 though even this group saw a decrease in employment in 2020. Employment distribution by sector also changed, with agriculture being a significant area (see Table 3).

Table 3

Comparative characteristics of employed youth in 2019 and 2022

Employment Rate	2019	2022
Number of employees in the 15-19 age group	14,000	12,900
Number of employees in the 20-24 age group	74,800	61,900
Number of employees in the age group 25 – 29 years	126,200	107,000
Number of employees in the age group 30 – 34 years	140,500	146,200

Employment Rate	2019	2022
Employment rate	37,2	35,3
Women's Employment Rate	29,4	26,6
Men's Employment Rate	44,8	43,5
Employment rate in the city	36,5	32,8
Rural Employment Rate	38,2	39,3
Percentage of youth employed in agriculture	19	16
Percentage of young people employed in construction	10	11
Percentage of young people employed in industry	9	9
Percentage of youth employed in services	63	64

Employment Rate	2019	2022
Percentage of people with higher education among employed 42 youth	42	36
Percentage of people with basic general education among employed youth	5	6
Percentage of people with secondary, secondary specialized and vocational education among employed youth	53	58

Note. Sources: *Labor Market in Armenia, 2021, Statistical Committee*, <https://armstat.am/am/?nid=82&id=2447>, *Labor Market in Armenia, 2023, Statistical Committee*, https://armstat.am/file/article/lab_market_2023_9.pdf

It is noteworthy that unemployment had long been identified by young people as a key problem even before the military conflict. However, in the post-war period, this issue has taken on new dimensions. Alongside unemployment, young people increasingly mention emigration, difficult financial conditions, and the lack of quality education as primary concerns. This shift may be attributed to several factors: migration intentions intensified after the conflict, and education came to be viewed as an effective means to overcome unemployment. Notably, while personal connections used to be a priority in job seeking, young people now place education first.

In the study, vocational education and professional qualifications emerged as stronger factors influencing employment than personal connections. Specifically, 27.7% of respondents identified vocational education as the main employment factor, 27.3% noted knowledge of foreign languages, and 27.6% mentioned appearance. Meanwhile, only 12.4% of young people identified personal connections as a key factor. This contrasts sharply with pre-war data, where over 67% of respondents cited personal connections as the primary employment factor.

The proportion of young people seeking formal and non-formal education to enter the labor market has increased compared to pre-war times. Prior to the conflict, fewer young people actively pursued education as a pathway to employment. Thus, it can be concluded that education as an adaptive practice has become more widespread among

youth in post-war Armenia. Approximately 15.7% of young people now plan to pursue a profession, compared to 8.2% before the conflict (Abrahamyan, 2023).

During the COVID-19 quarantine, most Armenian youth participated in online courses and engaged in self-directed learning. The growing popularity of non-formal education following the conflict may be linked to this pre-existing trend toward self-education and online learning during the pandemic.

Gender differences emerged in perceptions of personal agency in overcoming the consequences of military conflict: young women tend to assess the importance of their own personality in coping with post-conflict challenges lower than young men do. Additionally, with increasing education levels, young people tend to attribute less influence to their personal traits in overcoming these consequences.

Discussion

Summarizing the findings, the transformations in young people's perception of higher education and its role in adaptation practices in post-war Armenia appear complex and somewhat contradictory. While many pre-war problems persist, they are now overlaid with new challenges linked to the military conflict, security concerns, and future uncertainty. Issues such as access to education and its quality remain relevant. In addition, post-war realities have introduced new challenges, including uncertainty, the constant threat of renewed conflict, mental health problems, and incomplete realization of the right to education. These factors compel young people to continuously seek new adaptive strategies in conditions of persistent uncertainty (Berberyan, 2023; Avetisyan et al., 2022).

Whereas pre-conflict problems of higher education mainly concerned unemployment and the mismatch between curricula and labor market demands (Berberyan, 2018), the post-war period highlights mental health concerns and the need for education to address survival, stress management, and psychological trauma. Furthermore, the perceived importance of higher education has increased among youth after the conflict. If pre-war students exhibited relatively high alienation from higher education (Zaslavskaya, 2019), post-war students demonstrate greater engagement and instrumental valuation of education as a means to overcome material and psychological hardships.

In the post-war context, young people emphasize the importance of aligning higher education with modern information technologies. One of the major concerns is the lack of media literacy education, which is seen as critical.

Comparing these findings with studies from other countries affected by conflict, it is evident that prolonged wars can severely damage or even collapse higher education systems, as seen in Syria and Afghanistan (Kayyali, 2024). In contrast, shorter conflicts create a unique educational environment where, despite disruptions, new factors emerge that contribute to the development and increased social value of higher education in post-war societies (Alkol, 2024; Fanthorpe & Maconachie, 2010; Mysak,

2021). Maintaining this positive trajectory requires institutional reforms that address the evolving educational needs of young people amid contemporary transformations (Ermakov et al., 2022; Denisova et al., 2022).

Conclusion

Researching and developing effective mechanisms for implementing institutional innovations in higher education systems is one of the most urgent tasks for many countries in post-war contexts. These mechanisms will largely determine how quickly and effectively societies can overcome post-war challenges that might otherwise impede the development of critical social institutions. Youth research plays a vital role in identifying and addressing these challenges in post-war societies.

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Conflict of Interest Information

The author has no conflict of interest to declare.