

Bridging the Theory-Practice Gap in a Transitional HEI:

A Mixed-Methods Evaluation of Teaching and Student Experience

Hrachia Kazhoyan¹, Lilit Hakobyan¹ & Yeva Hovhannisyan¹

¹ Yerevan Haybusak University, Yerevan, Armenia

Correspondence: Dr. Hrachia Kazhoyan, Vice-Rector for Development and Quality Assurance, Yerevan Haybusak University, Yerevan, Armenia. E-mail: hkazhoyan@haybusak.am

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Abstract

Purpose: This study evaluates teaching effectiveness and pedagogical quality within a transitional university in Armenia navigating post-Soviet reforms toward alignment with the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). It aims to examine student and faculty perceptions of instruction, identify systemic barriers to student-centred learning (SCL), and formulate actionable strategies to bridge the gap between educational policy and classroom practice.

Design/methodology/approach: A sequential mixed-methods design was employed across three distinct stages. Stage 1 involved an anonymous survey of 200 students measuring perceptions of teaching clarity, feedback constructiveness, and pedagogical preferences, analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics (ANOVA (Note 1), *t*-tests (Note 2)). Stage 2 comprised semi-structured qualitative interviews with 12 exemplary faculty members identified through student evaluations to explore instructional philosophies and operational challenges. Stage 3 brought together 16 university leadership, academic staff and students for a capstone group discussion to triangulate data and co-design an institutional policy roadmap.

Findings: Inferential testing demonstrates significant disparities in student evaluations based on self-assessed academic performance ($F(2,197) = 6.04, p = 0.003, \eta^2 = 0.058$), whereas overall satisfaction does not differ significantly across gender ($t(198) = -1.06, p = 0.293, d = -0.15$). The data reveal a distinct theory-practice gap, with students overwhelmingly prioritizing applied, interactive learning over passive, lecture-based delivery. A stark institutional dichotomy exists between dedicated, mentor-oriented teachers and disengaged instructors relying on outdated methods. Key obstacles include severe clinical training deficits in medical fields, underutilized simulation facilities, administrative inefficiencies, and inconsistent feedback mechanisms, particularly for average-performing students.

Research limitations/implications: Study constraints include lower participation among law and economics students due to anonymity concerns, as well as reliance on self-reported measures in a single institution. Theoretically, the paper extends student-centred learning frameworks to post-Soviet HEI transitions. Methodologically, the three-stage sequential design provides a replicable framework for future researchers to conduct multi-institutional, longitudinal studies tracking EHEA alignment across the region.

Practical implications: The study provides a structured, phased roadmap for HEI administrators, including immediate laboratory audits, multifaceted faculty performance evaluations incorporating student feedback, peer-led professional development, and mandatory credit-bearing practical training modules.

Social Implications: Addressing the theory-practice divide directly enhances professional competence among graduates, particularly in healthcare fields, improving public service quality, strengthening workforce readiness, and advancing sustainable higher education reform across post-Soviet transitional societies.

Originality/value: This paper provides empirical insight into the operational realities of SCL implementation within post-Soviet transitional contexts. It offers a validated evaluation framework and transferable strategy for transitional HEIs seeking structural alignment with EHEA quality standards.

Keywords: student-centred learning, higher education reform, theory-practice gap, mixed-methods research, Armenia, Bologna process, quality assurance, post-Soviet transition

1. Introduction

Since formal accession to the Bologna Process in 2005, Armenia has undertaken structural reforms to integrate its higher education system into the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). This transition requires moving away from the centralized, teacher-centric Soviet paradigm toward a modern framework grounded in student-centred learning (SCL) and systematic internal quality assurance.

Although fundamental Bologna mechanisms, such as the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) and national accreditation structures, have been formally adopted, a persistent gap remains between macro-level policy declarations and micro-level classroom execution. Institutional progress across traditional Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) is frequently constrained by administrative inertia, rigid organizational hierarchies, and a legacy enduring "teacher-as-authority" instructional culture. While HEIs struggle to move beyond symbolic compliance, students increasingly demand applied teaching methodologies, interactive instruction, and tighter alignment with market expectations. (ANSA, 2015; Huisman, 2019; Hovakimyan et al., 2021).

Transitioning to SCL shifts the instructor from the "sage on the stage" to the "guide on the side". Rooted in constructivist theory, (Note 3) SCL posits that learners actively construct knowledge by integrating new information with prior experience. This approach emphasizes collaborative peer interaction, critical thinking, problem-solving skills, and active engagement, shifting focus from memorization to "learning how to learn" (Bhardwaj et al., 2025). In professional and clinical fields, SCL requires experiential learning, including practicals, simulation labs, and case-based exercises to produce job-ready graduates (Pai & Mayya, 2022).

To address these imperatives, this study critically evaluates the educational environment of a major transitional private HEI in Armenia. The primary objectives are to:

- (1) Quantitatively analyse student perceptions of teaching clarity, faculty feedback, and institutional support across demographic and performance subgroups
- (2) Qualitatively examine the pedagogical philosophies and operational barriers of exemplary faculty members
- (3) Pinpoint systemic friction points constraining practical skill acquisition
- (4) Formulate a data-driven, actionable strategic policy roadmap to bridge the institutional theory-practice gap.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Context

2.1 Quality Assurance and Student-Centred Pedagogy

Integrating internal quality assurance mechanisms with SCL is a core pillar of EHEA alignment. Modern higher education evaluation frameworks emphasize that teaching effectiveness cannot be measured solely by faculty qualifications or institutional inputs; it must be assessed through student learning experiences, perceived instructional clarity, and the constructiveness of academic feedback (Mastrokoulou et al., 2022). Effective instructional delivery relies on actionable, timely feedback that enables learners to bridge performance gaps. When feedback mechanisms are non-differentiated or concentrated primarily on high-achieving students, lower- and average-performing cohorts experience academic detachment, diminishing their overall perception of institutional quality (Winstone et al., 2019).

2.2 Pedagogical Transitions in Post-Soviet and Regional Contexts

Transitional HEIs across Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) and the South Caucasus share historical structural legacies stemming from the Soviet higher education model. This heritage was characterized by centralized curriculum planning, heavy reliance on passive lecture delivery, rote memorization, and an authoritarian instructional posture. Studies examining educational transitions in Georgia, Ukraine, Poland, and the Baltic states indicate that while structural reforms (e.g., ECTS adoption, degree cycle standardization) occur rapidly, deep pedagogical transformation proceeds slowly. Faculty members often lack formal training in modern adult learning theories, leading them to rely on legacy methods even within newly accredited programmes (Curaj et al., 2020; European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2024).

2.3 Methodological Triangulation in Educational Evaluation

Mixed-methods research designs provide a robust framework for educational evaluation by strategically combining quantitative breadth with qualitative depth. Explanatory and exploratory sequential designs allow researchers to triangulate student evaluation surveys with qualitative faculty inquiries and institutional stakeholder reviews (Pregoner, 2024). Mixed methods research provides a more comprehensive understanding of educational phenomena by offering the strength of triangulated insights, while revealing challenges related to methodological complexity, resource demands, and the integration of diverse findings (Ponce & Pagán Maldonado, 2015).

Because mixed methods design leverages the strengths of one method to offset the shortcomings of another, they can provide greater confidence in inferences and capture the complexity of the student experience in educational settings. For instance, an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design can use quantitative findings to inform qualitative interviews (Wang et al., 2022). Thus, triangulated insights cross-validate empirical findings, mitigate self-reporting biases, and provide institutional leaders with the reliable diagnostic data needed for strategic curriculum redesign.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design and Institutional Context

This study employed a three-stage sequential mixed-methods design. The research was conducted at a major private transitional HEI located in Yerevan, Armenia. The university serves both domestic students and a substantial international student body (primarily from India and Iran) across faculties of General Medicine, Dentistry, Law, and Humanities. International medical cohorts are oriented toward global licensing examinations, including the United States Medical Licensing Examination (USMLE) and the Professional and Linguistic Assessment Board (PLAB) test.

3.2 Sampling and Participants

Stage 1: Student survey (N = 200)

A voluntary convenience sampling strategy was used to recruit students across all academic programs. A total of 200 valid responses were obtained. The sample comprised 124 female (62.0%) and 76 male (38.0%) students. Age distribution favoured traditional university age: less than 22 years (n = 118, 59.0%), 23–26 years (n = 54, 27.0%), 27–30 years (n = 18, 9.0%), and over 31 years (n = 10, 5%). By academic discipline, medical/health sciences represented 68.0% (n = 136), humanities 18.0% (n = 36), and law and economics 14.0% (n = 28). Potential selection bias associated with voluntary sampling was acknowledged, as lower participation was observed among law and economics students due to anonymity concerns.

Stage 2: Teacher interviews (n = 12)

Purposive sampling was executed to select 12 exemplary faculty members. Selection criteria required teachers to have been explicitly named by multiple students in Stage 1 open-ended responses as outstanding educators demonstrating superior pedagogical rapport and clarity.

Stage 3: Capstone discussion (n = 16)

A total of n = 16 institutional stakeholders were purposively selected, consisting of 3 executive leadership members (2 Vice-Rectors), 4 department heads (Medicine, Economics, Law, Humanities), 8 senior faculty representatives and 2 students. This composition ensured balanced administrative, academic, and student representation for policy validation.

3.3 Ethical Considerations

The Ethics Committee formally reviewed, discussed with the research team, and approved the study protocol. All participants provided informed consent prior to data collection. Anonymity was guaranteed; no personally identifiable information was stored. Survey responses and audio-recorded interviews were encrypted and stored on secure digital platforms accessible only to the research team.

3.4 Data Collection Instruments and Pre-Testing

Administered via SurveyPlanet (surveyplanet.com), the Stage 1 survey instrument assessed student perceptions using six 5-point Likert scales (1 = Very Low/Not at all to 5 = Very High/Entirely) measuring instructional clarity (Q6), constructiveness of teacher feedback (Q9), teacher responsiveness to student suggestions (Q10), adequacy of teaching materials (Q13), overall educational quality (Q15), and institutional support for professional growth (Q14). Open-ended items captured qualitative descriptions of effective and ineffective teaching practices.

After receiving the first 20 responses, participant debriefs confirmed item clarity and reading comprehension, and Cronbach's alpha was computed to evaluate internal consistency. The pilot batch demonstrated strong internal consistency ($\alpha = .84$). Across the full dataset, the overall scale internal consistency is even higher: $\alpha = (6/5) \times (1 - 6.390/24.011) = 0.881$, confirming high reliability.

3.5 Data Analysis

While analysing survey data, in addition to descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations), inferential statistical testing was performed, including independent-samples t-tests and analysis of variance (ANOVA) to test for demographic and performance interaction effects. Effect sizes were calculated using Cohen's d and partial eta-squared (η_p^2). (Note 4)

Qualitative interview transcripts from Stage 2 were analysed following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis framework:

- (1) Data familiarization (repeated reading of verbatim transcripts).
- (2) Initial code generation (systematic line-by-line coding).
- (3) Searching for themes (collapsing codes into broader thematic nodes).
- (4) Reviewing themes (verifying themes against raw text).
- (5) Defining and naming themes (refining thematic definitions).
- (6) Producing the report (selecting narrative extracts linked to research questions).

4. Results and Findings

4.1 Quantitative Survey Analysis

4.1.1 Student Perceptions and Inferential Testing

To examine the relationship between student self-assessed academic performance and perceptions of institutional quality, responses were cross-tabulated and subjected to inferential testing.

Table 1 presents mean quality evaluations and support for professional growth categorized by self-assessed academic performance level.

Table 1. Average Quality Ratings by Self-Assessed Academic Performance

Self-Assessed Performance (Q4)	Mean Rating: Overall Education Quality (Q15)	Mean Rating: Support for Professional Growth (Q14)
Excellent	3.8	3.9
Good	3.2	3.2
Average	2.5	2.6

Ratings are on a 5-point scale.

One-way ANOVA testing reveals statistically significant differences across self-assessed academic performance levels (Q4) for both overall education quality (Q15: $F(2,197) = 3.53, p = 0.031, \eta^2 = 0.035$) and perceived support for professional growth (Q14: $F(2,197) = 4.54, p = 0.012, \eta^2 = 0.044$). Students rating their academic performance as "Excellent" evaluated institutional quality and career development support significantly higher than those reporting "Average" performance. However, even the "Excellent" cohort's average rating remains below 4.0 out of 5, indicating systemic room for improvement across all segments. This also means that dissatisfaction is not confined to a single subgroup.

Figure 1 shows that participants who rated their self-assessment higher also perceived the overall quality of education to be significantly higher, while Figure 2 highlights the extent to which self-assessment influenced professional growth.

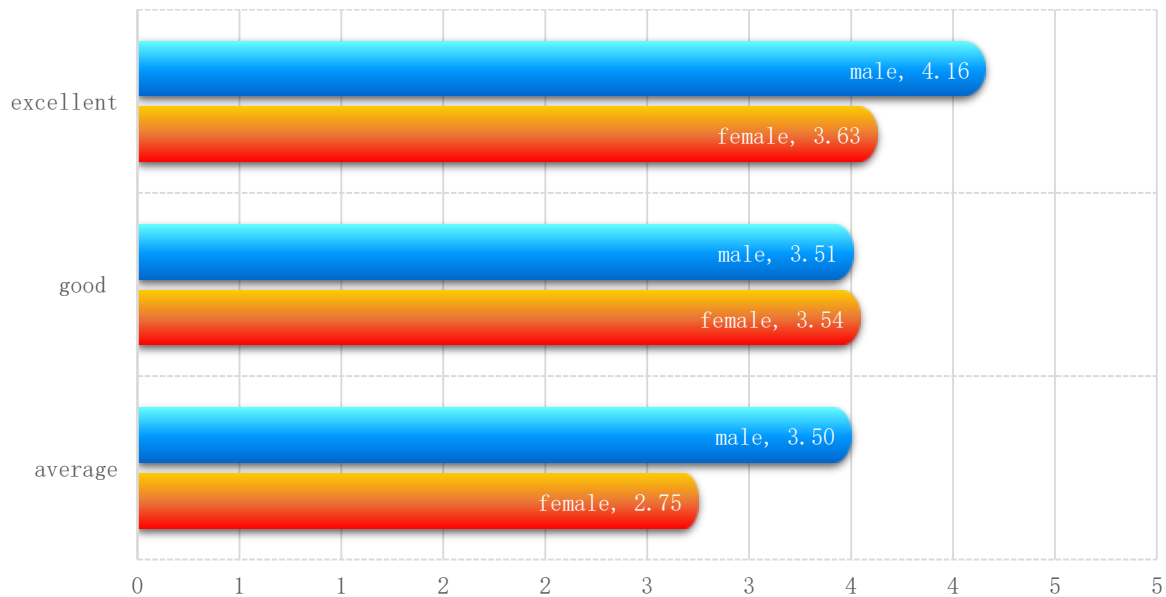


Figure 1. Self-assessment vs. education quality (1-very low, 5-very high) (Note 5)

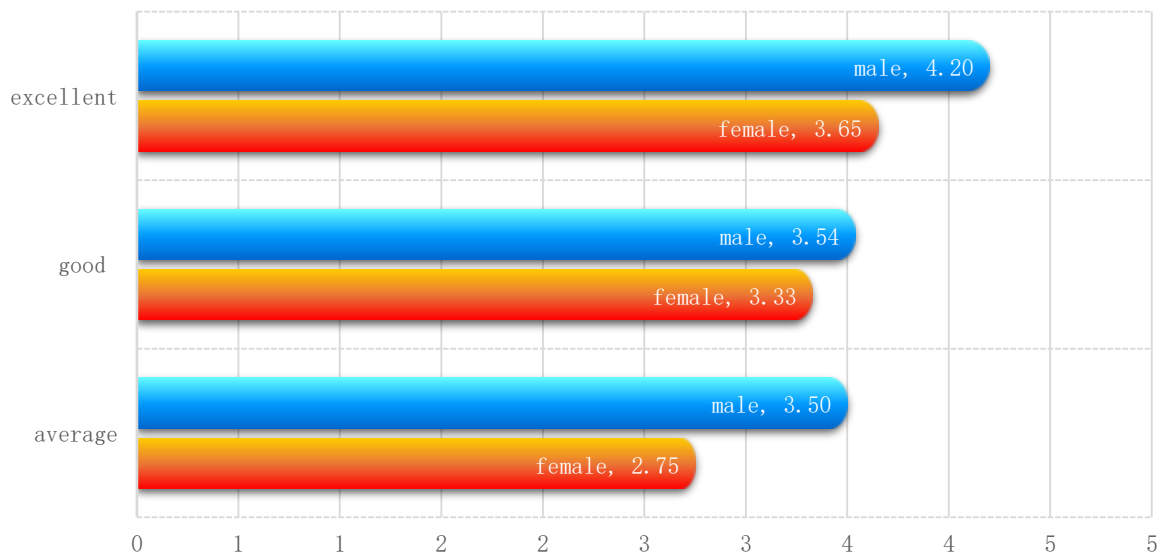


Figure 2. Self-assessment vs. professional growth (1-not at all, 5-a great deal)

4.1.2 Evaluation of Teaching Staff and Pedagogical Approaches

The quality of the teaching staff and the effectiveness of their pedagogical methods are the bedrock of any academic institution's success. Experience in this domain is profoundly polarised. The data paints a picture of an institution that houses both highly dedicated, effective educators and a significant number of instructors whose methods are perceived as outdated, disengaged, or unprofessional.

Student ratings of teaching staff are generally positive but reveal areas of concern. For the question “How clear are your teachers’ explanations of those subjects?” (Q6), most ratings are 4s and 5s. However, a shift is visible in the responses to Q9, “How constructive are your teachers' recommendations?” and “To what extent do your teachers consider your suggestions?” (Q10). Here, the scores are noticeably lower, with many 3s and a greater share of 1s and 2s. This suggests communication issues which can lead students to perceive a lack of agency in their educational process.

4.1.3 Gender and Perception of Teacher Clarity

An independent-samples t-test revealed no statistically significant difference in perceived teacher clarity (Q6) between female ($M = 4.22, SD = 0.92$) and male students ($M = 4.04, SD = 0.99; t(198) = 1.27, p = 0.205, d = 0.19$). Both gender groups evaluated instructional explanations favourably, indicating that clarity in teaching delivery is perceived consistently across male and female cohorts without gender-based disparity. That small difference in how male and female students perceive the clarity of teachers' explanations may suggest subtle variations in teaching styles that may resonate differently with male and female students. It should also be noted that, at the university, the share of female teachers is substantially higher. Gender differences emerge on other structural items, such as up-to-date professional literature (Q13: $t(198) = 2.24, p = 0.026$). Further qualitative research could investigate the causes of this gap in detail.

4.1.4 Perception of Teacher Feedback

A significant finding is the strong positive correlation between how students rate their own academic performance and their evaluation of the constructiveness of their teachers' feedback (Q9) and responsiveness to students' suggestions (Q10). This is confirmed by one-way ANOVA testing, which reveals a statistically significant relationship between self-assessed academic performance (Q4) and instructional evaluations. Higher-performing students systematically report higher ratings for teacher clarity ($p = 0.018$), feedback constructiveness ($p < 0.001$), consideration of student suggestions ($p = 0.046$), and overall composite satisfaction ($p = 0.003$).

Students who self-assess their academic performance as 'excellent' give their teachers an average feedback score of 4.5 out of 5. They perceive their teachers more positively (Figure 3).

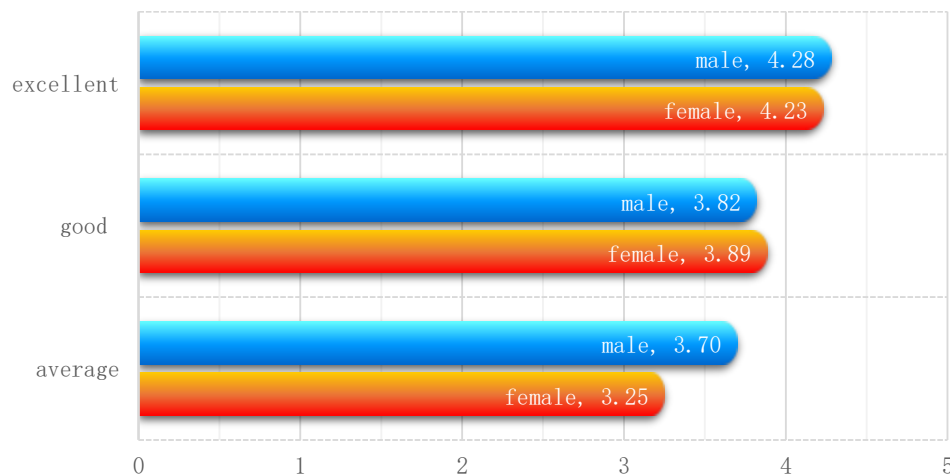


Figure 3. Self-assessment vs. teacher feedback (1- not at all, 5- entirely)

This suggests either that high-achieving students may be better equipped to understand and apply the feedback they receive, thus valuing it more, or that faculty feedback may be unintentionally tailored more toward high-performing students, leaving others feeling that the advice is less helpful or constructive. This is a critical area for faculty development.

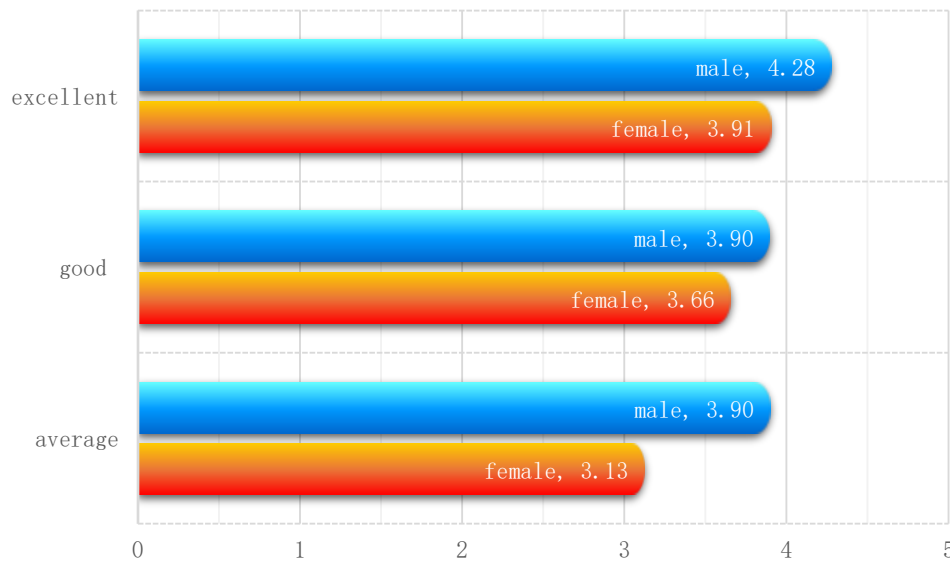


Figure 4. Self-assessment vs. teachers' responsiveness (1- not at all, 5- always)

4.1.5 Exemplary Effective Approaches vs. Ineffective and Unprofessional Practices

Student satisfaction with teaching is highly variable and heavily dependent on the individual instructor. The survey data highlights a cohort of exemplary, highly respected lecturers alongside numerous accounts of ineffective, disengaged, and unprofessional teaching practices. Interviews with these exemplary teachers reveal a deep commitment to a student-centred, interactive, and mentorship-focused pedagogy, which stands in sharp contrast to the passive, lecture-based methods students criticize. This “lottery of quality” indicates a lack of standardized pedagogical oversight and consistent quality assurance across departments. Across all 200 respondents, the average teaching clarity score was high (4.1 out of 5), indicating that students generally find their instructors' explanations clear. In contrast, the average score for the constructiveness of feedback was lower at 3.7, suggesting that, while explanations are clear, the feedback on student work could be more constructive and impactful.

Students frequently named specific instructors as exemplars, consistently valuing those who:

- (1) show respect and build rapport, demonstrating a “friendly approach” and fostering an atmosphere of mutual respect rather than fear
- (2) link theory to practice and use “real-life experience with the patient,” “clinical cases,” and “practical examples,” which are seen as most effective
- (3) are “strict and demanding” but fair
- (4) use interactive methods. The most attractive teaching approaches, such as “discussions” and “group work”, were overwhelmingly described as interactive.

Conversely, students were particularly condemnatory of ineffective teaching methods and unprofessional behaviour, such as “the lecturer explains in bookish words,” outdated material, or a mocking attitude or offensive vocabulary. Some online classes were considered ineffective, and some online instructors didn’t show up. The most common complaint was against instructors who were pedagogically disengaged and relied on passively reading from PDFs or slides.

4.1.6 Overwhelming Preference for Practical Learning

The most consistently articulated theme across all data sources is the critical deficiency in practical, hands-on learning. Students report a stark contrast between the university's advertised facilities, such as the simulation centre and clinics, and their actual access to these resources, leaving them feeling that their education inadequately prepares them for professional practice. This concern is mirrored by faculty, who also cite inadequate practical training and difficulties in organizing clinical exposure as significant problems.

This study gives a clear mandate for a more applied and interactive educational model. When asked, “What is the most attractive teaching approach for you?”, practical and interactive methods were the most frequent student

responses across all specializations. This signals a demand for hands-on learning, case studies, and active participation, rather than passive listening to lecture-based instruction.

Obviously, students' demand to learn new skills arise from practising or observing their teachers or other professionals in action to realize they can do that too, or that they are not there yet. Moreover, once they grasp how essential the specific expertise they lack is to master their profession, they will devise a roadmap to acquire it, which, in turn, will drive their studies. That could be a rationale for prioritizing practice over lecturing or, in other words, putting the horse before the cart.

4.1.7 Pervasive Administrative Friction

While scattered, quantitative ratings of overall educational quality masked deep-seated frustrations that were articulated in the qualitative data. Students voiced significant concerns regarding curriculum design that prioritized volume over comprehension, the ineffectiveness of online learning modalities, outdated resources, and a perceived lack of responsiveness from some faculty and administrative staff. Faculty members echo some of these concerns, particularly regarding time constraints in the curriculum and institutional barriers to modernizing teaching methods.

Open-ended comments frequently highlighted organizational issues, particularly the need for better communication regarding class schedules and administrative processes. Students expressed frustration over last-minute changes and a perceived lack of empathy and consideration for their "situation" and time.

Summarising the survey, the following recommendations were derived:

- (1) The correlation between academic performance and feedback scores suggests a need for faculty training focused on providing constructive, differentiated feedback for students at all performance levels.
- (2) The strong demand for practical learning in medical fields highlights the need for curriculum reform efforts.
- (3) Minor gender-based differences in perception suggest that promoting a wide variety of teaching and communication styles could create a more uniformly positive experience for all students.
- (4) Different perceptions across age groups suggest that younger students may need more robust academic advising and support systems to succeed and build confidence.

4.2 Qualitative Findings: Exemplary Pedagogical Practices and Operational Barriers

The qualitative phase involved in-depth interviews with 12 teachers whom students in the anonymous survey identified as having the best instructional approaches. It provided a unique perspective from the university's most effective educators.

Additionally, a group discussion was held with academic staff to examine the survey findings and future policy directions, providing an institutional perspective on the issues raised. Like the in-depth interviews, it also revealed that highly regarded teachers are grappling with significant systemic challenges.

4.2.1 The Perspective of Exemplary Teachers

Interviews with dedicated teachers revealed a powerful counter-narrative and model for institutional excellence. These committed instructors define their role not merely as lecturers or information providers but as mentors and guides. Their philosophy is built on several core principles:

- (1) A student-centred approach and cooperative relationship drive effective teaching, where the teacher is perceived as an older colleague or sometimes even as a peer
- (2) The instructors who champion interactive and applied methods report that students retain approximately 80% of the material when actively engaged.
- (3) To motivate and maintain student engagement, the ideal teacher must possess deep, up-to-date knowledge and act both as a pedagogue and psychologist.

4.2.2 Discipline-specific Challenges

As Table 2 illustrates, the call for practical/clinical training is overwhelmingly concentrated in the general medicine and stomatology programmes. This is the defining problem for the Medical Institute.

Table 2. Primary Learning Obstacles by Academic Specialization

Primary Obstacle	General Medicine	Dentistry	Law & Humanities
Lack of practical/clinical training	★★★	★★★	☆
Poor explanation	★★	★★	★★
Excessive materials/pacing	★★	☆	☆
Ineffective online classes	★★	☆	☆

Note: ★★★ = Primary and most frequent obstacle; ★★ = Significant and frequent obstacle; ☆ = Mentioned obstacle.

4.2.3 Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis of deep-dive interviews with exemplary faculty revealed three primary thematic clusters:

Theme 1: The Educator as Mentor and Guide

Theme 2: The Practical Training Deficit

Theme 3: Institutional and Technical Barriers

Theme 1: The Educator as Mentor and Guide

There was a strong consensus that the role of a modern teacher extends beyond knowledge transmission. It is viewed as a "great mission" centred on fostering professional and ethical development. Effective educators see themselves as mentors and role models, acting as cooperative partners in students' learning journeys and promoting shared responsibility. The lecturer's primary role is to serve as a "guide," providing a foundational base of knowledge and tools that empower students to engage in independent learning. As one senior medical instructor observed: "Teaching is a collaborative mission. When we treat students as junior colleagues, create open discussions, and ground theoretical concepts in real clinical cases, knowledge retention increases dramatically – students retain over 80% of the material."

Theme 2: The Practical Training Deficit

The convergence of quantitative survey responses, qualitative faculty interviews, and capstone discussion outputs highlighted a severe structural deficit in practical, hands-on clinical training. This deficit manifests as insufficient curriculum time for core subjects, forcing teachers to hold extra classes and limiting clinical exposure, as arranging face-to-face patient interaction is challenging due to hospital reluctance and language barriers that hamper international students' communication with patients. Another frequently mentioned problem was that the university's existing high-tech simulation centre is not being used to its full potential in an organized manner.

Theme 3: Institutional and Technical Barriers

Faculty identified several institutional obstacles that hinder their effectiveness. First, teachers struggle with student passivity and a perceived lack of intrinsic motivation for their chosen profession. They also expressed a strong desire to move from inefficient paper-based assignments to modern digital platforms (like Google Education Workspace) to streamline feedback and resource management.

The group also highlighted a need for greater institutional consistency and follow-through on new programmes and policies. Table 3 synthesizes student- and faculty-reported learning obstacles disaggregated by academic domain.

Table 3. Learning Obstacles by Academic Domain

Primary Obstacle	General Medicine (n=98)	Stomatology / Dentistry (n=38)	Law & Humanities (n=64)
Deficit in Practical / Clinical Training	Primary (High Severity, 84.7%)	Primary (High Severity, 86.8%)	Minor (Low Severity, 12.5%)
Non-Constructive Feedback / Poor Explanation	Moderate (42.8%)	Moderate (39.5%)	Moderate (46.8%)
Excessive Material Pacing / Volume	Moderate (38.7%)	Minor (18.4%)	Minor (15.6%)
Ineffective Lecture Modalities	Moderate (35.7%)	Minor (15.8%)	Minor (10.9%)

Medical and dental cohorts reported acute dissatisfaction regarding clinical placements. Students noted a stark contrast between advertised university facilities—such as high-tech simulation centres and dental clinics—and their actual operational access. Faculty validated these concerns, identifying three systemic barriers:

- (1) High-tech simulation laboratories are underutilized because core course syllabi lack embedded simulation hours.
- (2) Contracted regional hospitals and clinics frequently restrict medical students from direct patient interaction.
- (3) International medical students face severe language barriers when attempting to communicate with local Armenian-speaking patients during hospital ward rounds.

5. Discussion

5.1 Concept of Student-Centredness

The group discussion with academic staff revealed an awareness of these issues and the beginning of a strategic response. The discussion highlighted a shift toward developing a university-wide "Concept of Student-Centredness," which would apply not only to teaching but also to admissions, student services, and overall governance. A working group, including students, will be established to further develop this concept.

Students' explicit demand for "practical" learning (quantitative finding) was directly mirrored by faculty concern about the "practical training deficit" (qualitative finding). This reveals a core misalignment between student expectations, pedagogical goals, and curriculum structure.

Furthermore, while teachers aspire to be mentors and guides, systemic issues, such as administrative disorganization, insufficient class time, and outdated tools, consume their time and energy, preventing them from fully realizing this ideal. The issue of student motivation, raised by teachers, may be partially linked to a curriculum that does not sufficiently engage them through the practical application they desire.

Finally, the group discussion revealed that the term "student-centeredness" itself lacked a clear, unified definition within the university. This ambiguity prevented the coherent development and implementation of policies to address the issues uncovered in this research.

5.2 Syntax and Implementation Framework for SCL in Health Sciences

To resolve the theory-practice gap, transitional HEIs must implement a structured pedagogical syntax that operationalizes SCL within traditional curricula. Rather than relying on unstructured active learning, health science and professional programs require a clear, three-phase instructional sequence (Figure 5):

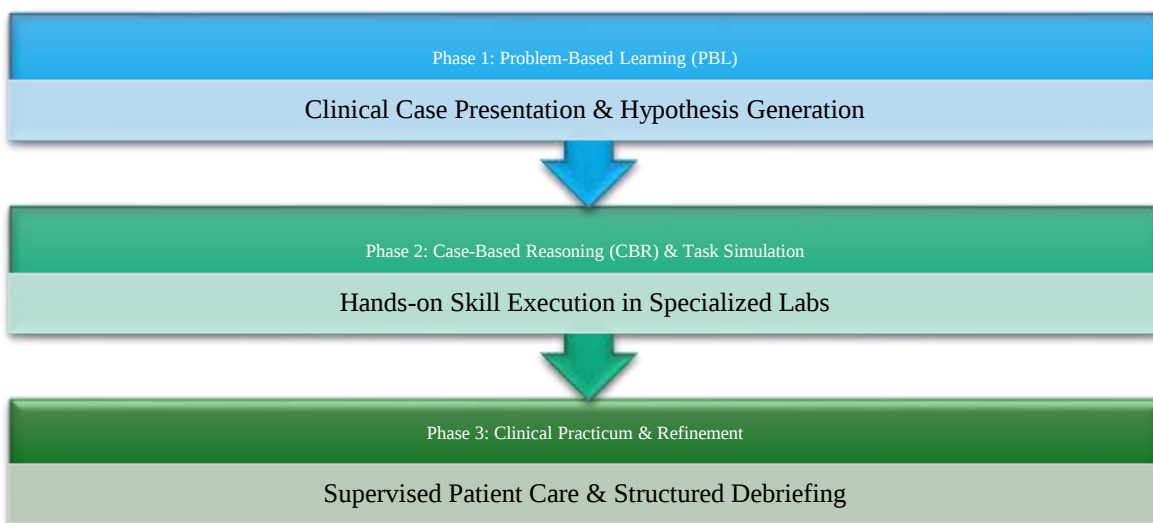


Figure 5. Operationalizing SCL within Traditional Curricula

- (1) In the Problem-Based Learning (PBL) Phase, instruction begins with authentic clinical cases where students identify knowledge gaps, formulate hypotheses, and conduct self-directed inquiries.

(2) The Case-Based Reasoning (CBR) and Task Simulation Phase immediately applies theoretical concepts within simulation laboratories using standardized task trainers and high-fidelity mannequins. This step builds clinical confidence before exposure to human patients.

(3) During the Clinical Practicum Phase, students execute supervised bedside clinical routines, followed by structured debriefing and 360-degree performance feedback.

5.3 Triangulation with Regional and Post-Soviet Educational Transitions

The empirical findings align with broader literature examining higher education transitions across CEE and South Caucasus countries. Studies in Georgia, Ukraine, and Poland similarly observe that macro-level structural alignment with EHEA guidelines (e.g., credit accumulation, accreditation standards) often outpaces micro-level instructional transformation. Legacy institutional cultures frequently preserve teacher-centric authority structures, resulting in passive lecture delivery.

Furthermore, statistical validation of the feedback gap, where average-performing female students report the lowest perceived support, highlights a critical flaw in traditional assessment cultures. In transitional HEIs, faculty development must focus on formative assessment strategies that provide differentiated, constructive feedback to non-elite student cohorts, thereby fostering equitable academic growth. This approach aligns with recommendations by Martin-Alguacil et al. (2024), who emphasize that structured feedback mechanisms enhance academic self-efficacy, particularly for students transitioning through traditional higher education frameworks. (Note 6)

6. Recommendations

The research not only diagnosed problems but also solicited solutions, yielding specific, actionable recommendations from students, faculty, and academic staff. Based on the synthesized findings and the outcomes of the stakeholder group discussion, the following recommendations were proposed.

6.1 Cultivate University-wide Student-centeredness

The university should move beyond focusing on "student-centred teaching" to develop a holistic concept of student-centeredness that applies to all facets of the university, including admissions, administration, and student services. A working group, led by the Head of the Education Methodology Unit, should be formed to develop and "ground" this new concept. Crucially, this group must include student representatives to ensure their experiences and perspectives are central to the policy-making process.

6.2 Invest in a Unified Digital Platform

The university should prioritize adopting and implementing a modern digital education platform to streamline assignments, improve communication, and provide timely feedback, addressing a key pain point for both students and faculty.

6.3 Conduct a Comprehensive Curriculum Review

A systematic review of all curricula should be undertaken with the specific goal of increasing the time allocated to core subjects and integrating more robust, mandatory practical and clinical training components.

Many recommendations targeted teaching quality. Students explicitly called for administrative action to "review the teaching staff" and "get rid of bad lecturers." Students strongly and uniformly opposed passive teaching modalities such as online classes and lectures based solely on reading slides.

6.4 Mandate for Practicality

The most frequent and forceful suggestions focus on addressing the critical deficit in hands-on learning. Students demand more practical training and hospital exposure, "clinical duties," and "access to the simulation hall." They also advocate for a more integrated learning model where theory is not taught in isolation but is immediately followed by practical application or case studies.

6.5 Curricular and Administrative Suggestions

Beyond the classroom, participants in the group discussion offered recommendations for broader structural changes. Some students and faculty questioned the curriculum's pacing and organization, identifying insufficient time for core subjects as a significant challenge. There are also calls for the university to provide updated literature and "proper notes."

6.6 Strategic Recommendations

To resolve the core institutional dichotomy and bridge the theory-practice gap, the study developed a structured, phased implementation framework (Figure 6).

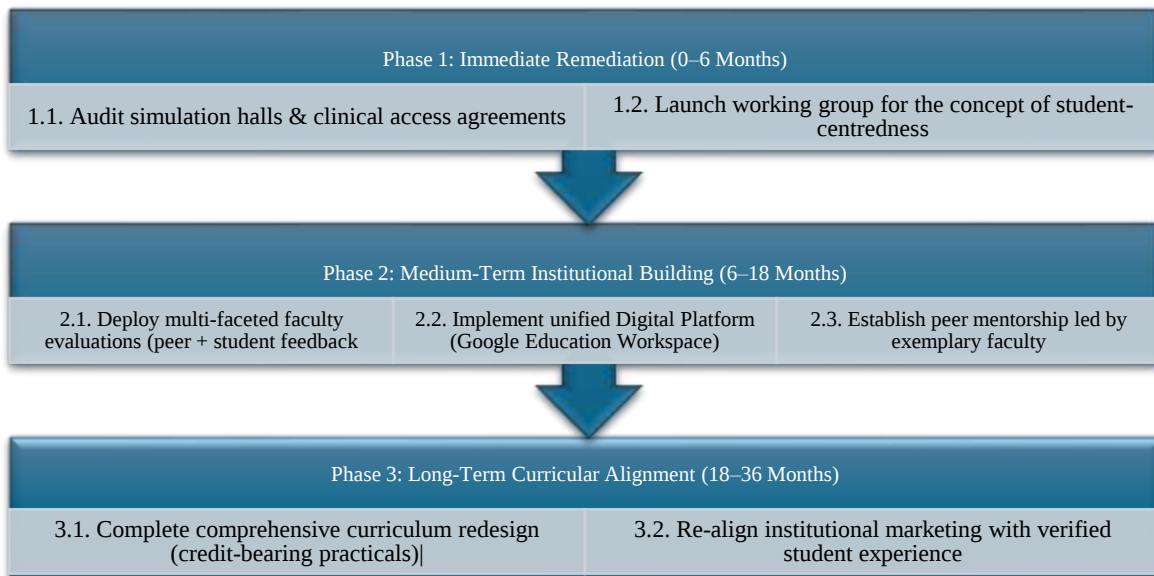


Figure 6. Phased implementation framework

7. Conclusion

This study provides a strategic roadmap for comprehensive educational reform within a transitional Armenian higher education institution. The empirical evidence shows strong alignment between students and faculty: both groups strongly advocate for an interactive, practical, and mentor-driven learning environment. However, a persistent divide remains between these shared aspirations and the reality of daily classroom practice.

The central insight of this research is that the university is largely perceived by students, and corroborated by its own faculty, as an overwhelmingly theoretical institution operating within inherently practical disciplines. The urgent demand for clinical exposure, direct patient interaction, and simulation-based learning reflects a vital need to safeguard students' professional efficacy and future market readiness. This structural deficiency is further magnified by a distinct disparity in teaching quality, wherein the transformative impact of exemplary, highly praised educators is continually undermined by disengaged lecturing practices and outdated methodologies.

Ultimately, the data reveal two parallel, conflicting institutional realities coexisting within a single university: the contemporary university characterized by demanding, practically oriented, and mentor-driven faculty who model high pedagogical standards and foster student self-efficacy, and the legacy university marked by pedagogical indifference, passive lecture delivery, reliance on outdated materials, and restricted access to practical infrastructure.

This study demonstrates that bridging the theory-practice gap in transitional HEIs requires eliminating the internal dichotomy between modern, student-centred educators and disengaged, lecture-based instructors. Empirical evidence confirms that students and exemplary faculty share a unified vision for interactive, practical, and mentor-driven education. However, institutionalizing this vision requires overcoming structural deficits in clinical training, administrative disorganization, and non-differentiated feedback practices.

8. Limitations and Future Research

Beyond its immediate institutional context, this research holds significant implications for higher education systems in transition across the South Caucasus and Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). However, its limitations include the reliance on self-reported data within a single private university and reduced participation among law and economics cohorts. Future research should extend this evaluation framework through multi-institutional, longitudinal designs tracking student clinical competence and post-graduation employment outcomes across transitional HEIs in CEE and the South Caucasus.

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Notes

Note 1. Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) is a statistical test that compares the means of three or more groups at the same time to see whether at least one group mean differs from the others (Montgomery, 2019).

Note 2. An independent-samples t-test in statistics compares the means of two separate and unrelated groups to see whether their means differ (Fisher, 1939).

Note 3. Constructivist theory posits that learners actively construct their own understanding and knowledge of the world through experiencing things and reflecting on those experiences, rather than passively absorbing information (Larochelle et al., 2009). It emphasizes building on prior knowledge, using cognitive processes of assimilation and accommodation to update mental schemas.

Note 4. Cohen's d and partial eta squared (η_p^2) are standardized measures of effect size used to quantify the practical magnitude of a statistical finding independently of sample size. While Cohen's d measures the standardized distance between two group means, partial eta squared estimates the proportion of variance explained by a specific predictor in Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) models (Lakens, 2013).

Note 5. Charts derived from quantitative survey cross-tabulations.

Note 6. In their analysis of SCL in health sciences, Martin-Alguacil et al. (2024) frame constructive feedback as a continuous, bidirectional process essential for transitioning students from passive lecture reception to active clinical reasoning.

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Author Contributions

Author contributions follow the CRediT (Contributor Roles Taxonomy). Use only the contributor roles applicable to this manuscript.

Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Writing (incl. ed.), and Supervision: Associate Prof. Dr. Hrachia Kazhoyan, <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3848-5413>

Investigation – interviews and discussion co-facilitation: Lilit Hakobyan, <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-8111-1208>

Investigation – interviews and discussion co-facilitation: Yeva Hovhannisyan, <https://orcid.org/0009-0009-0572-9611>

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Data Availability Statement

The bilingual datasets and transcripts (in Armenian and English) generated and analyzed during this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Use of Artificial Intelligence

The authors used Google Gemini 3 and Microsoft Copilot for web search, language editing, and grammar improvement, and Google NotebookLM for transcribing and preliminary analysis of the interviews and group discussions. Before using them, the authors independently validated all transcripts and analytical outputs.

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