



Higher Education Internationalization in the Context of Ongoing Economic-Political Transitions: Insights from Former Soviet and Eastern Bloc Nations

Hungarian Educational Research Journal
2016, Vol. 6(1) 3–19
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<http://herj.lib.unideb.hu>
Debrecen University Press



DOI: 10.14413/HERJ.2016.01.01.

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Abstract

In this introductory essay to the special issue, we discuss the importance of regional and national contexts for understanding internationalization of higher education and provide contextual information about the cluster of former Soviet and Eastern bloc nations. Drawing from findings from the three studies included in the special issue, we also identify themes that may characterize the internationalization of higher education in former Soviet and Eastern bloc nations. We conclude the essay by discussing the value of comparative research on internationalization of higher education and identifying directions for future research.

Keywords: higher education, international education, comparative education, universities, educational quality, faculty mobility, student mobility

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Recommended citation format: Orosz, K. & Perna, L. W. (2016). Higher Education Internationalization in the Context of Ongoing Economic-Political Transitions: Insights from Former Soviet and Eastern Bloc Nations. *Hungarian Educational Research Journal*, 6(1), 3-19, DOI: 10.14413/HERJ.2016.01.01.

Introduction

“Internationalization” is generally assumed to be a positive and important characteristic of higher education (Marmolejo, 2010). Also known as international education, international studies, transnational education, and more (de Wit, 2002), “internationalization of higher education” has multiple dimensions and is inconsistently defined (Cummings & Bain, 2009; Egron-Polak, 2013; Friesen, 2013; Maringe, 2010). Like Campbell and Gorgodze (2016, this volume) and others (de Wit, 2002; Marginson & van der Wende, 2007; Maringe & Foskett, 2010), we understand higher education internationalization to be a response to globalization. According to the American Council on Education (2012), higher education institutions may engage in several types of activities to promote internationalization including: “incorporating global perspectives into teaching, learning, and research; building international and intercultural competence among students, faculty, and staff; and establishing relationships and collaborations with people and institutions abroad” (p. 3).

Approaches to higher education internationalization vary across regions (Marmolejo, 2010). Responses to the 4th annual Global Survey of Internationalization of Higher Education from 1,336 of 6,879 contacted higher education institutions in 131 nations around the world show regional variations in such aspects of the internationalization of higher education as: expected benefits, internal and external drivers, risks to institutions and society, internal and external obstacles, geographic priorities, values and principles, most important activities, funding, incorporation into the formal curriculum, and more (Egron-Polak & Hudson, 2014). For instance, outgoing mobility is reported to be the highest priority of internationalization in Europe and Latin America and the Caribbean, whereas international research collaborations are the highest priority for higher education institutions in Africa, Asia and the Pacific, and the Middle East. Recruiting fee-paying international undergraduates is one of the top three priorities only in North America (Egron-Polak & Hudson, 2014). The United States has tended to emphasize globalization of the curriculum, area studies, and foreign language study, whereas Europe has tended to emphasize networking and mobility (de Wit, 2002). Responses from leaders of 200 of 500 invited higher education institutions in six regions (South America, North America, Middle East, Asia, Australia and New Zealand, and Sub-Saharan Africa) reveal that internationalization at “western” universities – including institutions in North America – is driven mainly by “a commercial imperative,” whereas internationalization in Asian and Middle Eastern nations tends to emphasize cultural rationales. Leaders of higher education institutions in “southern” nations (Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Mexico, Zimbabwe, South Africa, Botswana, and Mozambique) tend to see internationalization as a mechanism for improving their institutions’ curriculum (Maringe, Foskett, & Woodfield, 2013: 10).

Regional variation in approaches to internationalization is not surprising, given the many variations across regions in historical, political, economic, cultural, and other contextual characteristics (de Wit, 2002; Maringe, 2010). Contextual differences also

contribute to variations in approaches to internationalization among countries in the same region (Luijten-Lub, van der Wende, & Huisman, 2005; Matei & Iwinska, 2015). Higher education systems within a broadly conceived “Europe” differ in terms of accessibility (Triventi, 2014) and the forms of higher education internationalization that have developed over time (Luijten-Lub, van der Wende, & Huisman, 2005; Matei & Iwinska, 2015).

Recognizing the importance of attention to both regional and national contexts, this special issue provides an in-depth examination of higher education internationalization in three nations (Georgia, Hungary, and Kazakhstan) that are located in one region: the cluster of former Soviet and Eastern bloc nations. Anne Campbell and Sophia Gorgodze (2016) explore the origins, goals, and perceived outcomes of higher education internationalization in Georgia, drawing on data from interviews with university staff and governmental policy makers. Gabriella Pusztai and colleagues (2016) draw from a review of prior research, survey data, and institutional records to describe patterns of international student and faculty mobility at Hungarian universities. Zakir Jumakulov and Adil Ashirbekov (2016) explore internationalization activities and the forces that drive them in the Republic of Kazakhstan, incorporating information from publicly available governmental and institutional documents. The three papers demonstrate distinct approaches to internationalization of higher education in each nation. Taken together, the papers also suggest some themes that may characterize the internationalization of higher education in this region more generally. In this introductory essay, we discuss the importance of regional and national contexts for understanding internationalization of higher education and identify four themes that cut across the three papers in this special issue. We conclude by reiterating the value of comparative research on internationalization of higher education and identifying directions for future research.

The Role of Context in Understanding Internationalization of Higher Education

To understand internationalization of higher education in any region or nation, we must understand key characteristics of the regional and national contexts. A total of 22 countries are included in the group of “former Soviet” (n=15) and “former Eastern bloc” (n=7) nations. The 15 sovereign states that were once part of the Soviet Union are Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Estonia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan (Bühler, 2001). The seven sovereign states that constituted the so-called Eastern bloc (i.e., the region east of the Soviet Union and under its direct political influence) are: Bulgaria, the Czech Republic and Slovakia (as Czechoslovakia), the eastern part of Germany (as the German Democratic Republic), Hungary, Poland, and Romania (Bunce, 1985). Collectively, former Soviet and Eastern bloc nations had a population of 383.7 million in 2015, constituting approximately half a percent of the world’s population (authors’ calculations based on the CIA World Factbook, n.d.). The collective land area represented by these nations was 6.5 million square kilometers in 2014, representing

approximately half a percent of the world's total land area (authors' calculations based on The World Bank, n.d./a).³

Nations of the former Soviet Union and Eastern bloc share the economic, political, and cultural history associated with being a formal part, or satellite state, of the Soviet Union. These nations all underwent major economic and political transitions following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in the 1990s and have since been transitioning from a centrally-planned economy to a market economy. Education and earnings are typically positively correlated, but the relationship tends to be smaller in centrally planned economies than in market economies because governments in centrally planned economies determine the distribution of workers across industries based on criteria other than supply and demand (Arabsheibani & Mussurov, 2007) and because centrally planned economies tend to have egalitarian wage structures (Clark, 2003). With the restructuring of national labor markets that followed the dissolution of the Soviet Union, many former Soviet and Eastern bloc nations experienced periods of high unemployment (e.g., Abrahart, 2000; Rashid & Rutkowski, 2001). Labor market restructuring throughout the 1990s “[placed] a heavy burden on the education and training sectors of the economy” of former Soviet and Eastern bloc nations (Clark, 2003: 28). Decisions about higher education and training were governed during Soviet times by industrial sectors (e.g., agriculture, health, transportation) and the “size of educational programs was largely determined by their affiliated economic sector or enterprise” (Heyneman, 1998: 26). This “vertical” structure of postsecondary education and training resulted in predictable employment for graduates but also over-specialization of postsecondary educational and training programs (Heyneman, 1998). The transition to a market economy marked a shift “away from the previous control by specific sectors to one free of sector-specific control” in the higher education systems of former Soviet nations (Heyneman & Skinner, 2014: 61).

The higher education systems of former Soviet and Eastern bloc nations also share some similar characteristics. Prior to the transition, higher education institutions in Soviet and Eastern bloc nations had no authority to allocate resources and had no access to information that could have facilitated educational management and planning because “budgets and statistics were controlled by ministries separate from their own sector” (Heyneman, 2010: 77). At the time of the transition, the “structure, curriculum content, governance and admission procedures, for the most part, were identical across all fifteen of the [former Soviet] republics” (Heyneman & Skinner, 2014: 59). During the past two decades, many former Soviet and Eastern bloc nations have adopted similar higher education reforms, including “establishment of a non-state sector, the introduction of user fees in the public sector, national tests to replace graduation exams in secondary school and admission exams to higher education, per capita funding, loans for education, differentiation and stratification of the institutional landscape” (Froumin & Smolantseva,

³ Population and land area totals do not include present day Germany, as only the eastern part of what is today's unified Germany was part of the Eastern bloc.

2014: 205). The higher education systems of former Soviet and Eastern bloc nations also share the continued challenge of corruption, including payments for grades, admission to a particular higher education institution or degree program, and institutional accreditation and professional licensing (Heyneman, Anderson, & Nuraliyeva, 2008; Heyneman & Skinner, 2014).

Despite the similarities, nations of the former Soviet Union and Eastern bloc are not a monolithic group – and are not even always considered to be one regional group. Some consider former members of the Soviet Union to be part of Asia (with labels like Eurasia or Central Asia, e.g., Heyneman & Skinner, 2014; Silova, 2010; Drummond & Gabrscek, 2012), whereas others consider countries of the Eastern bloc to be part of Europe (applying labels like Central Europe or Eastern Europe, e.g., Kozma & Polónyi, 2004).

Nations of the former Soviet Union and Eastern bloc also vary in terms other characteristics. Table 1 shows that Muslim is the largest religious group in Central Asian and Eurasian countries (Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) but Catholic is the largest religious group in Central European nations (Czech and Slovak republics, Hungary, and Poland) and Orthodox Christian is the largest religious group in nations of Eastern Europe and the Caucasus (Belarus, Bulgaria, Georgia, Moldova, Russia, and Ukraine, CIA, n.d.). Former Soviet and Eastern bloc nations also vary in ethnic composition. Table 1 shows that Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Poland are relatively ethnically homogeneous, with more than 90% of the population considered ethnic Armenian, Azerbaijani, or Polish, respectively (CIA, n.d.). In contrast, only 64% of the population in the Czech Republic, 63% in Kazakhstan, and 61% in Latvia is ethnic Czech, Kazakh, and Latvian, respectively (CIA, n.d.). While most former Soviet nations and all Eastern bloc nations existed as sovereign states prior to the formation of the Soviet Union, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan only became sovereign states after declaring independence from the Soviet Union in 1990 or 1991 (Epstein et al., 2006).

Table 1. Characteristics of former Soviet and former Eastern bloc nations⁴

Country name	Relationship to the USSR	Population [2015]	Land area (in square km, 2014)	Largest religious group (% in population, 2010)	Largest ethnic group (% in population, 2009)	Level of economic competitiveness [2015]	Political regime [2015]	Transparency International score [2015]
Armenia	Member	3,056,382	28,470	Apostolic (92.6)	Armenian (98.1)	Efficiency-driven (2)	Hybrid regime	35
Azerbaijan	Member	9,780,780	82,659	Muslim (96.9)	Azerbaijan (91.6)	Transitional (1-->2)	Authoritarian	29
Belarus	Member	9,589,689	202,910	Orthodox (80)	Belarusian (83.7)	n.d.	Authoritarian	32
Estonia	Member	1,265,420	42,390	None / atheist (54.1)	Estonian (68.7)	Innovation-driven (3)	Flawed democracy	70
Georgia	Member	4,931,226	69,490	Orthodox (83.9)	Georgian (83.8)	Efficiency-driven (2)	Hybrid regime	52
Kazakhstan	Member	18,157,122	2,699,700	Muslim (70.2)	Kazakh (63.1)	Transitional (1-->2)	Authoritarian	28
Kyrgyzstan	Member	5,664,939	191,800	Muslim (75)	Kyrgyz (70.9)	Factor-driven (1)	Hybrid regime	28
Latvia	Member	1,986,705	62,190	Lutheran (19.6)	Latvian (61.1)	Transitional (2-->3)	Flawed democracy	55
Lithuania	Member	2,884,433	62,675	Catholic (77.2)	Lithuanian (84.1)	Transitional (2-->3)	Flawed democracy	61
Moldova	Member	3,546,847	32,880	Orthodox (93.3)	Moldovan (75.8)	Transitional (1-->2)	Flawed democracy	33
Russia	Member	142,423,773	581,800	Orthodox (20)	Russian (77.7)	Transitional (2-->3)	Authoritarian	29
Tajikistan	Member	8,191,958	139,960	Muslim (85)	Tajik (84.3)	Factor-driven (1)	Authoritarian	26
Turkmenistan	Member	5,231,422	469,930	Muslim (89)	Turkmen (85)	n.d.	Authoritarian	18
Ukraine	Member	44,429,471	579,320	Orthodox (67)	Ukrainian (77.8)	Efficiency-driven (2)	Hybrid regime	27
Uzbekistan	Member	29,199,942	425,400	Muslim (88)	Uzbek (80)	n.d.	Authoritarian	19
Bulgaria	Eastern bloc	7,186,893	108,560	Orthodox (59.4)	Bulgarian (76.9)	Efficiency-driven (2)	Flawed democracy	41
Czech Republic	Eastern bloc	10,644,842	77,230	None / atheist (34.5)	Czech (64.3)	Innovation-driven (3)	Flawed democracy	56
Hungary	Eastern bloc	9,897,541	90,530	Catholic (37.2)	Hungarian (85.6)	Transitional (2-->3)	Flawed democracy	51
Poland	Eastern bloc	38,562,189	306,210	Catholic (87.2)	Polish (96.9)	Transitional (2-->3)	Flawed democracy	62
Romania	Eastern bloc	21,666,350	230,030	Orthodox (81.9)	Romanian (83.4)	Transitional (2-->3)	Flawed democracy	46
Slovak Republic	Eastern bloc	5,445,027	48,088	Catholic (62)	Slovak (80.7)	Innovation-driven (3)	Flawed democracy	51

In addition to population size, land area, geographic location, religious and ethnic composition, and history of national sovereignty, nations of the former Soviet Union and Eastern bloc also differ in economic competitiveness. The positive correlation between education and earnings increased in former Soviet and Eastern bloc nations immediately after independence (e.g., Arabsheibani & Mussurov, 2007; Chase, 1998; Clark, 2003; München, Svejnar & Terrell, 2005), but the magnitude of the increase in returns to human capital varied among former Soviet and Eastern bloc nations (Newell & Reilly, 1999; Flabbi, Paternostro & Tiongson, 2007). The World Economic Forum now classifies the

⁴ Data sources: Population size estimates are from CIA (n.d.). Land area estimates are from The World Bank (n.d.). Largest religious group estimates and largest ethnic group estimates are from CIA (n.d.). Economic competitiveness levels range from 1 (low) to 3 (high) and are obtained from Schwab (2015). Political regime types are from The Economist Intelligence Unit (2016). Transparency International scores range from 1 (low) to 100 (high) and are from Transparency International (2015). Descriptive statistics for Germany are not reported, because only the eastern part of Germany was part of the Eastern bloc.

economies in most nations in the former Soviet and Eastern bloc cluster as “transitional” (Schwab, 2015). Table 1 shows that Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Moldova are transitioning from the first stage of economic competitiveness (factor-driven economy) and Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Poland, Romania, and Russia are transitioning from the second stage (efficiency-driven economy) to the third and final stage, an innovation-driven economy (Schwab, 2015). The economies of the former Soviet states of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are in the first stage (factor-driven), while the economies of the Czech and Slovak Republics, both formerly of the Eastern bloc, are in the third stage (innovation-driven) (Schwab, 2015).

Nations of the former Soviet Union and Eastern bloc are experiencing not only different rates of transition from centrally planned to market economies, but also different political transitions (Epstein et al., 2006; Levitsky & Way, 2002; McFaul, 2002). Table 1 shows that, by 2015, none of the former Soviet and Eastern bloc nations had moved from a predominantly authoritarian political system to a fully democratic political system, as defined by performance on measures of the electoral process and pluralism, civil liberties, government functioning, political participation, and political culture (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2016). Most former Soviet and Eastern bloc nations have a “flawed” democratic system (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2016). Four former Soviet nations (Armenia, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, and Ukraine) have a “hybrid” political regime, defined as a mixture of elements from democratic and authoritarian political systems. Seven former Soviet member states (Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) have authoritarian political systems (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2016). Some former Soviet authoritarian governments continue to impose political restrictions on travel abroad (Chankseliani, 2015).

Corruption in the public sector is another characteristic that defines this group of nations (Heyneman, Anderson, & Nuraliyeva, 2008), but varies across nations. Transparency International (2015) compiles and publishes an annual index of perceived corruption in 168 nations. Measured on a 100-unit scale, an index score of zero means that the public sector in a given nation is perceived to be highly corrupt and a score of 100 indicates that the public sector is perceived to be very clean (Transparency International, 2015). Although most former Soviet and Eastern bloc nations received middling scores in the most recent edition of the Transparency International (TI) index, Table 1 indicates that the public sectors are perceived to be considerably less corrupt in Estonia (TI score: 70) and Lithuania (TI score: 61) than in Uzbekistan (TI score: 18) and Turkmenistan (TI score: 19).

Former Soviet and Eastern bloc nations had remarkably similar higher education systems when the economic and political transition began, and their transition trajectories were remarkably similar as well (Heyneman, 2010). Nonetheless, the higher education histories of former Soviet and Eastern bloc nations differ in important ways. While higher education institutions in nations of the former Soviet Union were all part of a single, unified Soviet higher education system, the higher education institutions of

former Eastern bloc nations were not formally integrated into the Soviet system of higher education.⁵ In addition, with the exception of the Baltic states, former Soviet nations had no higher education institutions prior to the second World War, while nations of the former Eastern bloc did (Tomusk, 1998).

Given the many variations, no three nations can be representative of all former Soviet and Eastern bloc nations. Nonetheless, the three nations featured in this special issue represent heterogeneity on important dimensions. Two of the three nations were once part of the Soviet Union (Georgia, Kazakhstan) and one was part of the Eastern bloc (Hungary). The three nations have populations that range in size from 4.9 million in 2015 in Georgia, to 9.9 million in Hungary, to 18.2 million in Kazakhstan (CIA, n.d.). The largest religious group is Orthodox Christian in Georgia, Catholic in Hungary, Muslim in Kazakhstan (CIA, n.d.). According to the World Economic Forum's classification scheme, the economy of Kazakhstan is currently transitioning from the first (factor-driven) stage to the second (efficiency-driven) stage⁶, Georgia's economy is in the second (efficiency-driven) stage, and the economy of Hungary is transitioning from the second (efficiency-driven) stage to the third and final stage of economic competitiveness: innovation-driven economy (Schwab, 2015). Hungary's political system is characterized by the Economist Intelligence Unit (2016) as a flawed democracy, Georgia's as a hybrid regime, and Kazakhstan's as an authoritarian regime. Transparency International (2015) considers the public sectors of all three nations to be corrupt, but considerably more so in Kazakhstan (TI score of 28) than in Georgia and Hungary, with TI scores of 52 and 51, respectively. In 2013, the gross enrollment ratio (defined as total enrollment in tertiary education, regardless of age, expressed as a percentage of the total population of 18 to 23 year olds in the nation) was lower in Georgia (33%) than in Kazakhstan (55%) and Hungary (57%, World Bank, n.d./b). The share of the population age 25 or older that has attained at least a tertiary education in 2010 was not reported for Georgia, but was 15.4% in Kazakhstan and 17.7% in Hungary (World Bank, n.d./c).

Higher Education Internationalization in Former Soviet and Eastern Bloc Nations

Given the many variations across the three nations that are featured in this special issue, it is not surprising that each paper offers a unique "story" of the internationalization of higher education. Anne Campbell and Sophia Gorgodze (2016, this volume) draw on the perspectives of university staff and government employees at three Georgian

⁵ The authors are grateful for Stephen P. Heyneman for highlighting this important distinction in his feedback on an earlier version of this manuscript.

⁶ In 2014, the World Economic Forum rated Kazakhstan's economy in the same competitiveness category as that of Hungary: transitioning from an efficiency-driven to an innovation-driven stage. In 2015, the Kazakhstani government introduced a free floating exchange rate for the Tenge, which resulted in an unusually high inflation rate (6.7%). Because high inflation is typically a deterrent for foreign direct investment, this recent characteristic of Kazakhstan's macroeconomic environment led to the downgrading of its economic competitiveness in 2015 (Schwab, 2015).

universities to suggest the ways that internationalization activities in Georgia are influenced by western influences, national higher education accreditation processes, and internationally mobile faculty and students. Pusztai Gabriella and colleagues (2016, this volume) trace patterns of international student and faculty mobility in Hungary and argue that international mobility at Hungarian universities is a form of international knowledge brokerage. Zakir Jumakulov and Adil Ashirbekov (2016, this volume) identify a variety of governmental initiatives in Kazakhstan as internationalization activities and position these governmental initiatives in the larger national context of ongoing higher education reform.

Despite the distinctive approaches to and manifestations of internationalization of higher education, the following themes emerge across the three studies:

- Internationalization is perceived to be an important dimension of higher education but is not consistently defined;
- Mobility is a predominant internationalization activity;
- Internationalization is linked to quality assurance; and
- Regional, European, and global forces influence internationalization.

Internationalization is perceived to be an important dimension of higher education but is not consistently defined

Together, the three papers in this special issue suggest that, while internationalization is an important dimension of higher education in these three nations, it has not been explicitly or consistently defined. In Kazakhstan, the perceived importance of internationalization to higher education is articulated by the nation's leaders, as a government policy document specifies that, "national systems of higher education cannot be developed outside of global processes and trends, and without considering the demands of global labor market" (Jumakulov & Ashirbekov, 2016). But, Jumakulov and Ashirbekov also observe that Kazakhstan lacks "a specific national strategy for internationalization" and fails to articulate "a definition of internationalization." Similarly, in Georgia, at least some government officials as well as university employees refer to the "need to internationalize" and see internationalization as a "no-brainer" (Campbell & Gorgodze, 2016). But, Campbell and Gorgodze also imply the absence of a clear definition of internationalization, as they conclude their paper by calling for government and/or university leaders to establish a definition of internationalization that is relevant to the Georgian context.

Other studies (e.g., Bordean & Borza, 2013; Kushnarenko & Cojocari, 2012; Matei & Iwinska, 2015) have also noted the perceived importance of internationalization to higher education. Internationalization appears to be recognized by at least some policy makers and higher education leaders, administrators, and faculty members in former Soviet and Eastern bloc nations as a fundamental characteristic of higher education in the 21st century.

Despite the absence of clear and consistent definitions of internationalization, other data from the three papers suggest that “internationalization” will be a feature of higher education into the future. Current internationalization activities appear to be generative, encouraging further internationalization. For instance, Campbell and Gorgodze (2016) find that institutional and governmental stakeholders in Georgia perceive that faculty who earned advanced degrees abroad or had a research experience abroad are catalysts for additional international research collaborations and drive implementation of novel pedagogical approaches and curricular content at Georgian universities. They also perceive that the implementation of novel teaching methods makes Georgian universities more attractive for international students.

Other available research also suggests that current internationalization activities foster continued internationalization in former Soviet nations. For example, Kushnarenko and Cojocari (2012) speculate that joint publications between faculty members from universities of Moldova and international research partners may promote the expansion of English language instruction at universities in this former Soviet nation.

Mobility is a predominant internationalization activity

Although higher education internationalization is inconsistently defined or measured, the three papers in this special issue suggest that a primary manifestation is student and faculty mobility. Jumakulov and Ashirbekov (2016) identify several programs that are funded by the government of Kazakhstan with the goal of promoting outbound and inbound mobility of students and faculty. Pusztai and colleagues (2016) describe patterns of outbound and inbound student and faculty mobility in Hungary and conceptualize international mobility as a form of international knowledge brokerage that may benefit Hungarian students and faculty members at large. Campbell and Gorgodze (2016) identify benefits that staff and faculty at Georgian universities perceive to result from international mobility of students and faculty, including participation in international research projects, development of novel content for university courses and degree programs, and establishment of overseas institutional partnerships.

The outbound mobility rate (defined as the total number of students from the home country that is pursuing a tertiary degree abroad, relative to total tertiary enrollment in the home country) averaged across all former Soviet and Eastern bloc nations was 6.2% in 2013, while the average inbound mobility rate (defined as the total number of foreign students pursuing a tertiary degree in the home country, relative to total tertiary enrollment in the home country) was 3.1% (authors calculation; UNESCO Institute for Statistics, n.d.). In this volume, both Jumakulov and Ashirbekov (2016) and Pusztai and colleagues (2016) note that a substantial proportion of inbound student mobility is attributable to students from neighboring nations, and at least some of these inbound students from neighboring nations are ethnic Kazakhs and ethnic Hungarians, respectively. “Horizontal mobility” (Rivza & Teichler, 2007), defined as the education-related movement of students between national education systems of similar quality

and sometimes between neighboring nations, has been documented in prior research on former Soviet and Eastern bloc nations (e.g., Chankseliani, 2015; Heyneman & Skinner, 2014; Rivza & Teichler, 2007). Chankseliani (2015) found that three of the five most popular destination countries for mobile students in the former Soviet region were Russia, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan. Heyneman and Skinner (2014) found that, with the exception of the Baltic states, one out of four internationally mobile students from former Soviet nations studies in Russia.

Intra-regional mobility patterns of students from former Soviet and Eastern bloc states can be interpreted through the lens of world system theory (Chankseliani, 2015). Developed by Wallerstein (1974), world system theory categorizes nations as belonging to the global core, semi-periphery, or periphery based on the level of economic and political resources. Wallerstein proposed that the prosperity of core nations depends on their sustained economic and political influence over semi-peripheral and peripheral nations; the network of asymmetric economic and political ties between core, periphery, and semi-periphery constitutes the “world system.” Some have conducted empirical analyses that show that mobile students typically move from the periphery to the core (e.g., Gürüz, 2008; Perkins & Neumayer, 2014). According to Chankseliani (2015), Russia, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan are peripheral or semi-peripheral compared to global core nations such as the United States or United Kingdom, but are regional cores and semi-peripheries relative to the regional periphery of other former Soviet nations. Placement in the world system reflects historic, cultural, linguistic, economic, and political ties among nations.

Applying world system theory to the papers in this volume suggests that Kazakhstan may be peripheral to Western nations and even to the regional core of Russia, but a regional semi-periphery for other former Soviet states, as evidenced by the inbound mobility of students to Kazakhstan from Afghanistan, China, India, and Pakistan (Jumakulov & Ashirbekov, 2016). Similarly, Hungary may be characterized as a country on the global periphery but also considered a regional semi-periphery that drives “horizontal mobility” of students from neighboring countries and non-neighboring, peripheral countries such as South Korea (Pusztai et al., 2016). As with Kazakhstan, the “horizontal mobility” of international students to Hungary likely reflects historic, cultural, and linguistic ties with ethnic Hungarians living in neighboring nations as well as economic and political ties with former socialist nations that were established during the period of Soviet influence. Campbell and Gorgodze (2016) also note the influence of former Soviet ties on the composition of incoming student mobility at Georgian universities.

Internationalization is linked to quality assurance

A third theme that cuts across the three papers is the potential connection between higher education internationalization and quality in former Soviet and Eastern bloc nations. Quality assurance in higher education typically takes the form of institutional

accreditation, although the implementation of a credit transfer system can also be considered a de facto quality assurance mechanism (Heyneman & Skinner, 2014). In this volume, both Pusztai and colleagues (2016) and Jumakulov and Ashirbekov (2016) identify the implementation of the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) in Hungary and Kazakhstan, respectively, as an important promoter of higher education internationalization. These studies suggest that, by making postsecondary credentials from different nations more readily comparable, ECTS is a higher education reform that has likely contributed to international student mobility.

Another strategy that may promote both internationalization and quality is accreditation. Jumakulov and Ashirbekov (2016) report that the Kazakhstani government now requires universities to be accredited by independent agencies, and that eight of the ten independent accrediting agencies currently approved by the Kazakhstani government to carry out university accreditation are international. Perhaps because of the predominance of international agencies, university representatives in Kazakhstan perceive that accreditation is the most important internationalization activity (Jumakulov & Ashirbekov, this volume).

The accreditation process is also related to internationalization in Georgia, although perhaps not in the same way as in Kazakhstan. Campbell and Gorgodze (2016) document that, to meet national accreditation standards, Georgian universities have to commit to the internationalization of research and teaching and the cultivation of skills that makes university graduates employable in a globalized world. Although there are neither specific guidelines to assess commitment to internationalization nor penalties for non-compliance, Campbell and Gorgodze argue that the explicit incorporation of internationalization in national accreditation standards signals that the government of Georgia values internationalization and considers it important to the provision of quality education.

Other research has concluded that higher education internationalization is a form of quality assurance in former Soviet and Eastern bloc nations (Bordean & Borza, 2013; Heyneman & Skinner, 2014), as well as in “peripheral” nations of Central and South America and Sub-Saharan Africa (Blanco-Ramirez, 2015; Maringe, Foskett, & Woodfield, 2013). The focus on higher education quality in former Soviet and Eastern bloc nations may be motivated by the perceived low quality of university education at most former Soviet and Eastern bloc universities, as measured by such international rankings as the Academic Ranking of World Universities, also known as the Shanghai Ranking (Chankseliani, 2015). Concerns about education quality may also be driven by pervasive and persistent corruption as well as the explosion of private for-profit higher education providers that occurred in many former Soviet and Eastern bloc nations during the years following the dissolution of the Soviet Union (Heyneman, Anderson, & Nuraliyeva, 2008; Heyneman & Skinner, 2014).

Regional, European, and global forces influence internationalization

“Western” models have influenced education policy developments in the former Soviet and Eastern bloc nations since the beginning of the economic and political transition (Silova, 2010). Consistent with conclusions from other research (Heyneman & Skinner, 2014), the papers in this special issue illustrate that higher education internationalization in former Soviet and Eastern bloc nations has been influenced by the policy discourse of European integration, including the Bologna Process and the Lisbon project of forming a European Higher Education Area, although to varying degrees.

Pusztai and colleagues (2016) note that Hungary’s participation in the Bologna Process may have catalyzed international student mobility at Hungarian universities. They also emphasize the role of European university associations and the professional and personal networks of Hungarian faculty in Western Europe in driving internationalization at Hungarian universities. Jumakulov and Ashirbekov (2016) suggest that internationalization in Kazakhstan has been shaped by European influences (e.g., the Bologna Process), Anglo-Saxon influences (e.g., partnerships between Kazakhstani institutions and universities in the U.S. and U.K.), and regional influences (e.g., the participation of some Kazakhstani universities in regional mobility and partnership initiatives, such as the Network of the Commonwealth of Independent States Universities). Campbell and Gorgodze (2016) identify the influence of the Bologna Process on higher education internationalization at Georgian universities, as well as non-European influences including international scholarships provided by the U.S. government and private foundations such as the Open Society Institute. The combined influence of domestic and foreign national governments, supranational organizations, international professional associations, and private foundations on higher education institutions in former Soviet and Eastern bloc nations is consistent with the conceptualization of higher education internationalization as a process driven by “glonacal” (global, national, and local) forces (Marginson & Rhoades, 2002).

Conclusion

Comparative research on higher education internationalization often considers nations as groups, comparing and contrasting patterns across such geopolitical entities as Europe, North America, Asia and the Pacific, Latin-America and the Caribbean, and Africa, with the latter sometimes grouped as Sub-Saharan Africa and Middle East and North Africa (e.g., Egron-Polak & Hudson, 2014; Farrugia & Bhandari, 2013; Maringe, Foskett, & Woodfield, 2013). We constructed this special issue to capitalize on the benefits of comparative research to advance understanding of the internationalization of higher education in nations of the former Soviet Union and Eastern bloc. The papers in this volume illustrate both the uniqueness of internationalization of higher education in each featured nation, as well as themes that are common to all three nations. Our attempt to identify themes is not intended to understate the importance of national

context, but rather to offer insights that may have transferability to these three and perhaps other former Soviet and Eastern bloc nations.

The papers in this volume productively advance research-based knowledge of higher education internationalization in former Soviet and Eastern bloc nations and provide a foundation for continued fruitful research. We urge other researchers to further explore the transferability of findings presented in this volume to other nations, especially other nations in the former Soviet Union and Eastern bloc. More research is also required to understand the effectiveness of particular strategies for promoting various aspects of internationalization, as well as for measuring the benefits and costs of internationalization. We also urge researchers and other stakeholders to advance the collection and analysis of data that will produce in-depth, comprehensive understandings of the many dimensions of the most visible aspects of higher education internationalization (student and faculty mobility), and to identify reliable indicators to measure the many activities of internationalization (such as percentage of international students and faculty at domestic higher education institutions, commonly used language(s) of instruction in higher education, faculty participation in international research collaborations, institutional memoranda of understanding with higher education institutions in other nations, etc.) We also need more and better data to more completely understand the many potential and perceived benefits and costs of internationalization for students, faculty, institutions, and societies.

In this global, technologically-driven world, internationalization of higher education will be an enduring characteristic of higher education in the nations of the former Soviet Union and Eastern bloc, as well as in other nations across the globe, into the future. The papers in this special issue improve understanding of higher education internationalization in the selected nations and provide a strong foundation to guide future research, policy, and practice.

Acknowledgement

Earlier versions of the three studies included in the special issue were presented at the Council for International Higher Education (CIHE) pre-conference of the annual meeting of the Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE) in Denver, Colorado (2015). The guest editors of this volume are grateful for helpful comments from external reviewers on earlier versions of this introduction and the three papers included in this special issue.

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