Emerging Scholars Research Summary

Asia/Europe Inter-university Cooperation in Higher Education:
The case of Tuning Central Asian Higher Education Area (TuCAHEA)

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ABSTRACT

The ongoing dissertation investigates the EU-funded Tuning Central Asia initiative, which aimed to support curriculum convergence in higher education in five Central Asian countries. The Tuning Central Asian Higher Education Area (TuCAHEA) initiative is selected as a successful case of an inter-regional project that helped to prepare the ground for further higher education regionalization in Central Asia in the period between 2012 and 2016. The study adopts the constructivist paradigm from International Relations and Deductive Qualitative Analysis as research designs and data analysis methods. This is a simultaneous qualitative case study, in which data is gathered by means of semi-structured

interviews and qualitative content analysis of scholarly publications by European and Central Asian members of the Tuning community. The concept of epistemic community is applied to understand the role of academic experts in higher education regionalization.

Keywords: higher education inter-regionalism, capacity building, Central Asia, Tuning, TuCAHEA, epistemic community

INTER-REGIONALISM AND HIGHER EDUCATION REGIONALIZATION

The period after the Cold War has been characterized by increased regionalization in different world regions (Söderbaum & van Langenhove, 2005). This process of regionalization has expressed itself in the creation of "issue-specific or general" regional spaces (Söderbaum, 2011, p.19) According to Hettne and Söderbaum, "The regionalization process can be intentional or nonintentional and may proceed unevenly along the various dimensions of the 'new regionalism' (i.e., economics, politics, culture, security, etc.)" (2000, p. 462). Regional cooperation can be explained by the contribution of regional organizations in the resolution of issues of regional security, migration, or economic development (van Langenhove & Gatev, 2019). Thus, regional organizations assumed the role of public good providers, which used to be the domain of the state and in the process of regionalization, standard-setting became important. As noted by van Langenhove and Gatev (2019), "The harmonization of standards advanced through regional cooperation has a beneficial effect on economic activity and therefore represents a type of public good" (p. 284). Harmonization of standards is also important for inter-regional cooperation in higher education and can contribute to the regionalization of higher education (Knight, 2014).

The European Union (EU) has been an active supporter of the process of regionalization in other world regions. The EU has made the support of regional cooperation in other world regions one of its priorities, by engaging in "Capacity building inter-regionalism" (Doidge, 2007, p. 242). According to Doidge, "capacity building inter-regionalism" is characterized by the way in which a weaker regional integration arrangement is gradually strengthened through involvement with a more advanced regional counterpart" (Doidge 2007, p. 242).

Capacity building inter-regionalism increases the process of regionalization in one or more sectors (Doidge, 2007; Hettne & Söderbaum, 2000). Thus, EU-funded projects in different world regions have aided in the process of harmonization of standards in various sectors of regional politics. One of the EU-funded initiatives in higher education has been particularly relevant to the process of higher education regionalization in various world regions, including Latin America, Africa, and Central Asia (TuCAHEA, n.d.). According to Knight (2014), "The Tuning Project is an interesting and successful initiative which has addressed the reform of institutional level structures through curriculum convergence, but which has important implications for the regionalization of higher education at sub-regional and regional levels" (p. 109). The present ongoing doctoral study aims to investigate the role of Tuning in the higher education regionalization of Central Asia.

TuCAHEA PROJECT

In the field of education, the European Union has put significant efforts into the process of the EU-Central Asian inter-regionalism (Jones, 2010). Specifically, the EU has supported several inter-university projects that involved the EU on the one side and the five Central Asian countries on the other side (e. g. Central Asian Education Platform (CAEP) or Central Asian Education and Research Network (CAREN)) (Jones, 2010).

Despite the pessimistic analysis of the EU-Central Asian inter-regionalism by Jones in 2010, a project titled "Towards a Central Asian Higher Education Area: Tuning Structures and Building Quality Culture" was funded by the European Commission (Isaacs, 2014). The short abbreviation of the project's name – TuCAHEA- was based on combination of the words "Tuning" and "Central Asian Higher Education Area" (Isaacs, 2014). The project set an ambitious aim in 2012: "TuCAHEA's broad aim is to contribute to building a Central Asian Higher Education Area [CAHEA], aligned with the European Higher Education Area [EHEA], able to take into account and valorise the specific needs and potentials of the Region and the partner countries, thus responding to the needs of the higher education community and society at large" (TuCAHEA, n.d.). Already at the start of the project, Knight (2014) positively assessed the potential of Tuning to support higher education regionalization in Central Asia. Indeed, by the end of the project in 2016, TuCAHEA made an important political achievement: "TuCAHEA arranged aninformation and consultation meeting in preparation of the Riga

conference, and a communiqué was signed by five education ministries in Rome in 2014 under the auspices of TuCAHEA" (Rao et al., 2016). In addition, TuCAHEA conducted a pilot mobility scheme between Central Asian universities (Isaacs, 2014 ; Isaacs, Najmitdinov, Tasbolat, 2016).

According to the TuCAHEA website, the project involved eight universities from the European Union, as well as thirty-four universities and five education ministries from the following Central Asian countries Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan (TuCAHEA, n. d.). The project covered eight subject groups (business, economy, education, engineering, environment, history, language, and law) (TuCAHEA, n. d.). Based on the European Tuning methodology, European and Central Asian experts developed common generic and subject-specific competencies, subject area guidelines, and reference points (Rao et al., 2016).

Given the challenges for regional cooperation in Central Asia (Jones, 2010), the TuCAHEA project was selected as a successful case of Asia/Europe higher education inter-regionalism. Furthermore, the early project evaluations of the TuCAHEA could not capture its long-term effects (Rao et al., 2016). Finally, in the summer of 2021, a conference of Central Asian education ministers took place in Kazakhstan entitled "Central Asian Higher Education Area: regional cooperation, national reforms" (BPAMC, n.d.). Such a conference signifies the interest of Central Asian republics towards regional inter-university cooperation in higher education. In connection with this, it is important to study the long-term effect of the TuCAHEA project as a case notable for its success in the history of Asia/Europe higher education inter-regionalism.

While the Tuning methodology was studied by many researchers from the perspective of the competency-based approach, the present study analyses TuCAHEA as a case of the EU-Central Asia inter-regionalism in higher education. Also, this study stands at the intersection of international relations and higher education research.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Research Problem

Most regionalism researchers used to focus on formal regional organizations such as the EU and the ASEAN. However, new regionalization processes have emerged that do not fit the description of formal regionalism. In higher education, the inter-governmental Bologna Process and the European

Higher Education Area include countries that are not members of the European Union. Furthermore, the formal approach may not adequately explain the process of capacity building inter-regionalism (Hettne & Söderbaum, 2002; van Langenhove & Gatev, 2019; Murray & Warleigh-Lack, 2013). In addition, the focus on formal organizations may ignore contextual factors that may hinder regional and inter-regional projects (Jones, 2010). Finally, the focus on formal regionalism may ignore the unintended social effects of inter-regional initiatives (Lucia & Mattheis, 2021).

The present dissertation suggests studying the effect of the EU-Central Asian inter-regionalism by applying the concept of "epistemic community." According to Haas, "An epistemic community is a network of professionals with recognized expertise and competence in a particular domain and an authoritative claim to policy-relevant knowledge within that domain or issue-area" (1992, p. 3). According to Haas (1992), members of the epistemic community, despite coming from diverse backgrounds, shall share a set of common beliefs and practices, which helps them to promote a certain policy in their area in a coherent way.

This dissertation draws on literature on epistemic communities to reveal the role of European ideas in the Central Asian higher education context. Applying the concept of epistemic community helps to understand the process of norm diffusion within the EU-Central Asia capacity building inter-regionalism. Along with the "track-two diplomacy," the concept of epistemic community is one of two major ways to research scholarly involvement in sectoral regionalization (Acharya, 2011). The literature has shown the role of ideas in driving the involvement of epistemic communities in policymaking processes. In 1994 Risse-Kappen, suggested that domestic structures can shape international traveling policies. Similarly, Acharya proposed the "localization" framework, which considered local policy dynamics and suggested that the support of local epistemic communities is important for the successful norm reception" (2004, p. 248).

In connection with this, Schmidt (2005, 2008) criticized the top-down view of the policy process, suggesting that policy actors take ideas from discursive communities, including epistemic communities, and engage in discursive interaction, in which certain ideas get selected over others. Similarly, it was suggested that epistemic communities using the ICTs and the ICT-driven global inter-connectedness diffuse the discourse of New Public Management (NPM) (Bislev et al., 2002). In 2018 de Almagro, showed how epistemic communities re-

produce discourse on gender security. Inspired by Schmidt (2005, 2008), scholars such as Wahlström and Sundberg (2017) as well as Sivesind and Wahlström (2017) undertook analytical theorization on the role of ideas in curriculum policy. Despite the existing research on the importance of epistemic communities in the process of policy travel and diffusion, empirical examination of causal ideas driving the activities of epistemic communities and their influence on the processes of higher education regionalization is absent from literature.

Research Questions

The present study aims to investigate the following research questions:

1. What is the effect of Asia/Europe higher education inter-regionalism on the regional modes of higher education cooperation in Central Asia?

2. How do members of the Asian and European academic community perceive Central Asia and Europe as global actors of inter-regional cooperation in higher education?

3. What are the prevalent challenges for the development of Asia-Europe cooperation in higher education in Central Asia?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

As a researcher, my position has been influenced by two factors: (1) my previous professional experience and (2) my doctoral study program. I had previously taken part in several projects, where the international experience was being transferred in the local context. Through these projects, I understood the importance of expertise in the adaptation of international ideas and policies. Therefore, I became interested in studying how inter-university cooperation is shaped by the parties involved.

In the Ph.D. program, doctoral students were required to defend a detailed research plan which had to demonstrate knowledge and understanding of relevant literature and theories. This requirement influenced my choice to use a theory-guided approach in the current study. While initially, I studied the research methods based on the textbook by Creswell and Poth (2018), I found some differences between constructivism as defined in International Relations and constructivism as defined by Denzin and Lincoln (2011), the latter is followed by Creswell and Poth. I adopt pragmatism and "thin" constructivism in this current study (Holzscheiter, 2013, p. 145), as both paradigms are understood in International Relations research (Spindler, 2013).

Theoretical Framework

Constructivism by Guba, Lincoln and Denzin

Creswell and Poth (2018) follow Denzin and Lincoln (2011) in their understanding of social constructivism and interpretivism as the same paradigm (2018). According to Lee (2011), constructivism by Egon Guba, Yvonna Lincoln, and Norman Denzin, is a special, distinct case of a research paradigm that should be called "constructionism" (p. 4). Avenier and Thomas (2015) cite Guba and Lincoln, who describe their "constructivist paradigm" as interpretive (p. 7). To differentiate it from pragmatic constructivism, Avenier and Thomas (2015) include it in quotation marks.

According to Gilgun (2015), "With the publication of Glaser and Strauss's (1967), The Discovery of Grounded Theory, induction became associated with qualitative research and, for many researchers, prior conceptual frameworks, or deductive qualitative research, became suspect" (p. 2). Some researchers criticize this perception of qualitative research as simplistic (Berkovich, 2017; Packer, 2018). Analyzing the history behind the grounded theory, Gilgun found that Glaser and Strauss (1967) admitted that "researchers are not tabula rasa but bring their own ideas into research questions" (2015, p. 10). Gilgun also found a note by Glaser (1978), which suggested that knowledge of theory can help in the conduct of grounded theory research. Furthermore, Strauss (1987) admitted that funding agencies require researchers to include conceptual frameworks in their grant proposals (Gilgun, 2015). The scholar concluded that the position of Glaser and Strauss towards a priori theory is not as negative, as it is believed. According to Su (2018), the Straussian approach to qualitative research can combine deductive and inductive thinking (as opposed to the Glaserian approach).

Wendtian Constructivism in International Relations

In International Relations research, various constructivist theories exist that differ by ontology and epistemology (Spindler, 2013). The current research employs "thin" constructivism (Holzscheiter, 2013, p.145), which was developed by Alexander Wendt (1987). In contrast to "constructivism" by Guba, Lincoln, and Denzin, Spindler (2013) states that "Wendtian constructivism is scientific realist and constructivist in ontology, and positivist in epistemology" (p. 221).

Wendt (1987) considered three types of structures that exist in the social world: material resources, interests, and ideas (Spindler, 2013). He was looking for ways to investigate the effects of ideas. As a solution to the problem, Spindler (2013) suggested that ideas can have a constitutive effect that is different from a

linear type of effect. By means of constitutive explanation, Wendt (1987) allowed for the deductive approach to the study of ideas as causal structures. Spindler (2013) called this approach an "explanation by the concept" (p. 215).

A clear example of constitutive explanation is given by Parsons (2010):

> We need constitutive scholarship, for example, to see how the norm of sovereignty constitutes the state. This is not a separable, temporally sequential, causal explanatory relationship. The very minute that people accepted norms of sovereignty they looked around and saw states. Explanatory approaches can analyze dynamics within that socially constructed reality (p. 28).

International Relations scholars have supported the idea of constitutive explanation posited by Wendt (1987). In 2008, Wight noted that researchers in the social sciences deal with open systems, while researchers in the natural sciences deal with closed systems (Wight, 2008). Therefore, non-linear cause-effect relationships can be observed in the social world, unlike in the natural world where researchers often seek to establish linear cause-effect relationships. Existing research shows that the goals of inter-regional projects can be challenged by local circumstances (Jones, 2010; Lucia & Mattheis, 2021), which creates non-linear relations between the goals of the inter-regionalism and its effect. In connection with this, the present research adopts a constitutive explanation of the impact of the EU-driven higher education inter-regionalism on Central Asian countries.

Research Method

The dissertation employs a simultaneous qualitative case study method (Morse, 2010), in which data is gathered utilizing semi-structured interviews and qualitative content analysis. Thus, the case study consists of two simultaneous stages: the interview stage and the analysis of articles by European and Central Asian members of the Tuning community.

Participants

In the project, there is no single specific site, but several locations, which are mainly the building campuses of universities and their experts, who participated in the study. First, all the participants of the projects were identified in the final report of the TuCAHEA project, which resulted in a purposive sampling approach. Participants were targeted based on their involvement in the project, so purposive sampling is applied against people, who are selected based on their "professional role, power, access to networks, expertise or experience"

(Cohen, 2018, p. 115). The purpose of the sampling was "to acquire in-depth information from those who are in a position to give it" (Cohen, 2018, p. 115). Additionally, snowball sampling and networking were used to get access to a wider pool of participants for interviews (Cohen, 2018). Ethical permission was obtained from the Ethical Committee of the university before the start of data collection. Participants read and signed the consent form before interviews. In terms of access to the interview participants, the TuCAHEA members have shown high openness and transparency to the researcher.

However, the spread of COVID-19 has influenced the process of data collection. So far, I have completed 14 interviews from European and Central Asian members of the TuCAHEA project. I also conducted two additional interviews with European experts, who were often involved in the EU-Central Asia inter-university projects aimed at facilitating higher education regionalization. I am now in the process of gathering additional interviews from TuCAHEA members and relevant Central Asian and European experts in inter-university cooperation. I have taken steps to protect the anonymity of the interviewees. Their names are replaced with code names at all stages in the dissertation and I am the only one who has access to their interviews.

Data collection took place during a series of field trips to Kazakhstan and to certain universities in Europe. Interviews in Kazakhstan were all conducted in person. Interviews in Europe and other countries of Central Asia were conducted either in person or by phone or over the Internet. Interviews lasted on average between 30 to 90 minutes. The interview guide contained about 20 questions on Tuning participants' beliefs and practices of the project. Initially, the interview guide was inspired by research on epistemic communities and policy networks (Dalglish, 2015; Saçli, 2011; F. Saçli, personal communication, October 4, 2018), but after a few pilot interviews and a first round of interviews, I modified/ and clarified the interview questions.

In parallel, I am analyzing publications of European and Central Asian Tuning participants on the topics of competency-based approach. Qualitative content analysis of scholarly articles is applied to reveal the causal beliefs of Tuning participants about the competency-based approach as a tool of regional curriculum convergence. At the present stage of research, 29 publications by Central Asian Tuning experts have been identified in the Russian Science Citation

Index. Furthermore, research articles of European Tuning experts will also be analyzed.

Data Analysis

The adoption of Wendtian constructivism from International Relations and the theory-guided approach has led me to follow deductive thinking in the process of data analysis. In 2015, Gilgun suggested that Deductive Qualitative Analysis (DQA) is a theory-driven but flexible approach that allows qualitative researchers to test theories. This scholar has stated that:

> Researchers may simply use theory to focus and guide their research, or they may develop hypotheses and test them. If doing theory development, researchers test the theory on cases.When the theory does not fit findings, the theory is changed. If using theory as focus and guide, researchers typically find new dimensions of the phenomena of interest that the theory did not predict (Gilgun, 2015, p. 13).

The scholar has further suggested that DQA is suitable for Ph.D. students, who are often required by the dissertation committees to show their knowledge of existing theories and literature in the research plans. The scholar also points out that funders often reject research proposals that do not have detailed descriptions of the research framework and methods. These situations often drive early-career researchers to use deductive thinking in their research. For Gilgun (2015), the use of QDA is important because without a preliminary study of literature, early-career researchers could miss important aspects of the studied phenomena thus spending more time on finding the research focus.

EXPECTED CONTRIBUTION

The dissertation is expected to contribute to the understanding of higher education regionalization and inter-university cooperation in the Central Asian context. Thus, the present paper contributes to the JCIHE discussion on regional cooperation and higher education regionalization in world regions and sub-regions, such as Sub-Saharan Africa (Fossey, 2014), ASEAN (Chao Jr, 2018), Northeast Asia (Hammond, 2018), and the Northern Triangle of Central America (Griffin & Gall, 2019).

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