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**Eötvös Loránd University
Faculty of Education and Psychology**

DOCTORAL DISSERTATION 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 aim of the present study is to explore the case of Tuning initiative in Central Asia as a case of the EU-CA higher education inter-regionalism. The study analyzes the TuCAHEA project as the case of the EU-Central Asia higher education inter-regionalism. Based on the concept of localization, the study analyzes the factors for post-Soviet and Central Asian countries' joining or showing interest in the Bologna Process. The analysis reveals the development of higher education quality assurance as the short-term outcome of the Bologna process in the Central Asian context. Another important revelation of the analysis is that the long-term Impact of the Bologna process in Central Asia depends on local actors.

Wendtian constructivism is the theory driving the research of the present dissertation. Wendtian Constructivism uses ideas as the primary change mechanism in contemporary international relations. The dissertation employs the simultaneous qualitative case study approach as the primary method of the present dissertation. The semi-structured interviews and qualitative content analysis of articles as the primary data collection methods for the case study. The dissertation applies a deductive approach to the analysis of data.

Overall, TuCAHEA project created a ground for cooperation between Central Asian universities, and on this ground, it created a unique, multi-actor, multi-level dynamics of cooperation, using European experience. Furthermore, rather than contradicting one another, the responses of Central Asian and European specialists are more complementary. Particularly, European academics have noted the keen interest Central Asian nations have shown in the Bologna process. Experts from Central Asia emphasize the value of high standards in education for their nations as well as the appeal of European models and norms. While Central Asian academics point out distinctive features of the region that would affect the creation of a shared higher education space, European scholars emphasize the significance of the Central Asian region. The only difference was that European researchers offered a more pessimistic appraisal of the desire for collaboration among Central Asian nations. Academics from Central Asia tend to be more optimistic and practical, and they emphasize the necessity of political will and financial backing to develop universal higher education.

Finally, the answers of both groups point out that political barriers are the biggest challenge to building higher education space in Central Asia. However, insufficient technology for communication and difficulty of travel were noted as well by Central Asian interviewees. In the next section, the findings will be discussed in relation to the research questions, research problem, and the scholarly literature.

The analysis of publications of European and Central Asian Tuning experts reveals that both principled and causal beliefs of European and Central Asian members of the TuCAHEA project converge with each other, both between groups and within groups. It can be concluded that all the experts represent a common epistemic community, which strives to promote competence-based learning as a solution to modern and future challenges in education. The analysis of the publications reveals the soft power of the project, which allowed to ensure the continuity of Tuning ideas in Central Asia in comparison with other peer projects.

List of publications

List of publications connected to the topic of the dissertation

Anafinova, S. (2021). Localization of the Bologna Process in the European Context: Theoretical Model. In *Organizational and Methodological Aspects of Improving the Quality of Educational Activities and Training Students under the Programs of Higher and Secondary Professional Education*. (pp. 6–12). Penza; Penza State Agrarian University.

Anafinova, S. (2022). Asia/Europe inter-university cooperation in higher education: The case of Tuning Central Asian Higher Education Area (TuCAHEA). *Journal of Comparative & International Higher Education*, 13(5S). <https://doi.org/10.32674/jcihe.v13i5s.4248>

Anafinova, S. (2022). Critical discourse analysis of the academic discussion on internationalization of Higher Education. *Proceedings of the 2nd International Conference of Strategic Issues on Economics, Business and, Education (ICoSIEBE 2021)*. <https://doi.org/10.2991/aebmr.k.220104.002>

Anafinova, S. (2023). Competency-based approach as the international norm in higher education: Tuning initiative in Central Asia. In A. Wiseman (Ed.), *Annual Review of Comparative and International Education (Ser. International Perspectives on Education and Society)*. essay, Emerald Group Publishing Ltd. *Note*: The paper was accepted based on the conditions of the Exclusive Licence Chapter Agreement with Emerald Publishing Limited.

Other publications

Anafinova, S. (2020). The role of rankings in Higher Education Policy: Coercive and normative isomorphism in Kazakhstani higher education. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 78, 102246. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2020.102246>

Anafinova, S. (2021). 25 years of Transformations of Higher Education Systems in Post-Soviet countries: Reform and Continuity edited by Jeroen Huisman, Anna Smolentseva, and Isak Froumin. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018. 510 pp. \$31.00 (cloth). ISBN 978-3-319-52980-6. *Comparative Education Review*, 65(3), 575–578. <https://doi.org/10.1086/715016>

Contents

Abstract	2
List of publications	4
INTRODUCTION	6
Background of the Study	6
The TuCAHEA Project.....	6
Research Problem	7
<i>The Agent-Structure Problem</i>	8
The Impact of the Bologna Tools outside the Bologna context.....	9
<i>The Convergence-Divergence Debate in Higher Education</i>	10
Research Questions.....	10
Significance of the study.....	11
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK	11
The Constructivist Approach to International Cooperation	11
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY	14
Research Design: Simultaneous Qualitative Case Study	14
Ethical Issues	16
EU-CENTRAL ASIA HIGHER EDUCATION INTER-REGIONALISM: PERSPECTIVE FROM THE TUNING COMMUNITY	17
Perspectives of Central Asian Experts on the Impact of the Tuning project in the Region.....	18
Perceptions of Central Asia and Europe as Global Actors of Inter-Regional Cooperation in Higher Education by the TuCAHEA Community Members	19
The Prevalent Challenges for the Development of Asia-Europe Cooperation in Higher Education in Central Asia	21
Brief Summary of the Interview Findings	21
TUNING INITIATIVE AS A HIGHER EDUCATION EPISTEMIC COMMUNITY	22
DISCUSSION	24
REFERENCES	25

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of the present Chapter is to describe the phenomenon of increasing regionalization and higher education inter-regionalism as the background of the research. Furthermore, the Chapter will present the TuCAHEA project as the case of the EU-Central Asia higher education inter-regionalism. Next, the Chapter will present the dissertation's tripartite Research Problem and Research Questions. Following that, the significance of the study will be discussed. The Chapter will conclude with a discussion of the researcher's positionality and the outline of the dissertation.

Background of the Study

The present dissertation explores inter-regional cooperation in higher education. To describe the growing involvement of universities in transregional initiatives and programs, comparative education scholars have developed a concept of "higher education inter-regionalism." (Chou & Ravinet, 2015, p. 15). Inter-regionalism is usually understood as "relations between regional groupings." (Hänggi, p. 3) However, regional groupings can engage in relations with single countries in hybrid inter-regionalism (Hänggi, p. 3).

The aim of the present study is to explore the case of the Tuning initiative in Central Asia as a case of the EU-CA higher education inter-regionalism. The next section will present the Tuning initiative in Central Asia in more detail.

The TuCAHEA Project

The EU puts significant efforts into EU-Central Asian inter-regionalism in education (Jones, 2010). Specifically, the EU has invested in the development of several inter-regional 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 named Tuning Central Asian Higher Education Area (TuCAHEA) 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" (TuCAHEA¹, n.d.), The project uses competence-based learning as a tool of harmonization of education programs and qualifications between different universities in countries. This shall facilitate inter-university mobility and the creation of a regional qualifications framework. Before starting in Central Asia, The Tuning initiative had projects in Europe, Latin, North America, and Africa. More information on the Tuning history will be given in Chapter 4, "The development of Tuning as an epistemic community." 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 2015, TUCAHEA had made a significant political achievement: "TuCAHEA arranged an information 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).

The TuCAHEA project involved 34 universities from five Central Asian countries and five education ministries (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 CA higher education regionalism (Jones, 2010), the case of TuCAHEA was selected as a unique case study for the present research. Furthermore, the early project evaluations of the TuCAHEA could not have captured 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 titled "Central Asian Higher Education Area: regional cooperation, national reforms" (BPAMC, n.d.). The conduct of such a conference signifies the interests of CA countries in regional inter-university cooperation in higher education and the significance of studying the TuCAHEA project as a case of EU-Central Asia inter-regionalism.

Research Problem

The research problem is tripartite in this study. First, the present dissertation is driven by the Agent-Structure Problem. This problem exists in many social science disciplines (Wendt,

¹ <http://www.tucahea.org/>

1987). In brief, the problem addresses the issue of whether the external environment shapes social actors or gets shaped by them. These theoretical problems provide a foundation for additional issues: analyzing the effect of the EU-CA inter-regionalism on Central Asian universities and the convergence-divergence dilemma in higher education studies.

The Agent-Structure Problem

Through joining regional and inter-regional initiatives and programs, universities became involved in the dimension of international cooperation. Thus, they became actors in international relations. In connection with this, the present dissertation presents the Agent-Structure Problem, as it was introduced by International Relations scholar Alexander Wendt (1987).

According to Wendt (1987), international theories treat the relationship between agents and structure differently. Specifically, an international theory can treat either of them as an independent or dependent variable. In this case, change can be explained as the effect of agents or structure. According to Wendt (1987), neorealists and neoliberal institutionalists treat the structure as the effect of agents' actions and interactions. Wendt (1987) called this approach individualist. World system theorists treat agents' actions and interactions as defined by the structures. Wendt (1987) called this approach a structuralist.

The different treatment of agents or structures as either independent or dependent variables resulted in the different explanations of change in international relations in different theories of international relations. Specifically, neorealist and liberal institutionalist schools of International Relations adopted an individualist approach to international relations. Although Waltz acknowledged that the international structure could indirectly affect actors, neorealists did not develop their focus on the latter. Instead, they theorized about the role of powerful states, which could influence the structure of the international system. Neoliberal institutionalists provided a similar explanation, although they expanded the typology of power and differentiated the structure of distributed power in the international system by issue-specific areas.

The world-systems theory school applied a structuralist view, suggesting that agents' power is the result of the historically established configuration. World-systems theorists treat the structure as the cause of inter-state relations, "The "historical social system" as the basic unit of the social world" (Spindler, 2013, p. 191). Furthermore, "Agents (persons, identity groups, states, and class agents) act according to the single logic of the system, they are determined by the structure. Agency is explained in terms of the "whole" (methodological holism)" (Spindler, 2013,

p. 191) However, historical structures might experience crises, and during the periods of crises, agents only have a choice and can determine the structure's fate. As noted by Spindler (2013), “Agency only in the transition phase from one historical system to another: historical choices. Here, human actions are crucial for the transformation of structures” (p. 191). For example, ecological problems can cause a crisis in the modern world system (Spindler, 2013).

In connection with this, individualists look at the increasing role of regionalism and inter-regionalism as the result of the action of powerful states. Structuralists look at these phenomena as the result of structural processes, including the development of the world economy and the technological revolution.

Having compared both approaches, Wendt (1987) decided that agents and structures are mutually interdependent and called this approach a holist. Furthermore, not only does Wendt (1987) suggest that agents and structures are interdependent, but he developed a theory of the specific way in which they affect each other. Drawing attention to the fact that earlier schools paid more attention to states' military and economic power, Wendt developed a theory that ideas constitute identities and behavior of agents and structures. In connection with this, Wendt (1987) developed a theory that ideas serve as a mechanism through which agents and structures affect each other. Wendt (1987) called this approach idealist, while the focus on military and economic power Wendt (1987) called a materialist approach. To sum up, Wendt called his approach a holist for taking into account both agents and structures as part of an interdependent relationship and the role of ideas in it. The Theoretical Framework chapter will elaborate a more detailed analysis of the different understanding of agents, structures, and their relationships.

Since universities have become subject to international influences, the extent to which they get shaped by these influences or whether universities can shape this influence is the core issue in understanding higher education inter-regionalism.

Furthermore, the Agent-Structure Problem is the basis for two additional problems that can be met in higher education research. The first problem is assessing the Impact of the Bologna tools in the non-Bologna context. The second problem is the convergence-divergence debate in higher education research.

The Impact of the Bologna Tools outside the Bologna context

Furthermore, the Agent-Structure Problem is connected with another problem. EU-driven higher education inter-regionalism promotes Bologna policy instruments and tools in another

regional context. While in Bologna member countries, the effect of these tools is assessed in terms of compliance of these countries and reported in regular Bologna Progress Reports, assessing compliance cannot be achieved in countries that are not members of the Bologna process. Therefore, it is hard to measure the effectiveness of EU-driven higher education inter-regionalism. It is an essential puzzle to what extent the European Union can influence actors in promoting the Bologna model, its policy instruments and tools outside the Bologna process, and the role of local actors in this process.

Thus, the analytical agent-structure problem also leads to the impact problem. It isn't easy, though necessary, to assess the Impact of the Bologna process in Central Asia as the EU foreign policy tool.

The Convergence-Divergence Debate in Higher Education

Another puzzle that echoes the Agent-Structure Problem is higher education's convergence debate. The pragmatic approach influenced government policies in recent decades to apply neoliberal principles. These principles suggest minimizing the state's role in the management of goods and services; increasing the role of the market as a tool to distribute resources; and “a view of the individual as an economically self-interested subject” (Tight, 2018, p. 2). These approaches have led to international quality assurance standards and benchmarking tools, such as global university rankings. These standards created homogenizing trends in higher education policies and universities (Marginson & van der Wende, 2009). Observing these homogenizing trends, some researchers proposed a theory of convergence that predicted a similar development of social structures, political processes, and public policies (Bennett, 1991). However, other scholars advanced the argument that national context shapes the homogenizing influences of international standards. The two contradicting views among social scientists are addressed in the convergence-divergence debate. (Bennett, 1991)

Research Questions

The present study aims to investigate the following research questions based on the tripartite Research Problem.

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

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

Research Question 3. What are the prevalent challenges to developing cooperation in higher education in Central Asia?

It is suggested that analyzing the effect of EU-Central Asia higher education inter-regionalism can shed light on the extent to which higher education inter-regionalism shapes its actors or gets shaped by them. Furthermore, analyzing the effect can help understand the Impact of the Bologna tools in the non-Bologna context and identify convergence or divergence trends.

Significance of the study

With the European Union investing significant amounts of material resources in the number of programs in Central Asia, understanding the effects of the European Union programs is vital for Central Asian countries. Thus, this dissertation can benefit Central Asian experts and policymakers who deal with the issues of cooperation with the European Union to examine the effect of these development programs financed by the European Union. Similarly, the knowledge about the effects of the EU programs in Central Asia can also benefit the European Union experts and policymakers. Understanding direct and indirect effects can facilitate the evaluation of the effectiveness of the EU policy in Central Asia and the cooperation between the EU and Central Asian countries.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The Constructivist Approach to International Cooperation

Overall, the constructivist did not deny the neorealist concepts of the international system and international actors, but they suggested new definitions for these concepts. Furthermore, they continued applying many useful concepts of neoliberal institutionalists. Finally, they elaborated in more detail on how ideas work as a mechanism of agent-structure relationship. (idealist approach) Following Wendt's (1999) definition of social structure: "Social structures have three elements: shared knowledge, material resources, and practices." (p. 139), and his theorizing on sovereignty as a key value constituting the structure of the modern international system, later constructivists developed a more complex understanding of the structure of the international system in comparison with the early understanding by neorealists and neoliberal institutionalists. Constructivists apply the traditional understanding of economic and military power to describe

“Material Resources.” Different types of international norms represent the shared knowledge in international relations, and practices are represented by international regimes and programs based on these norms.

While material conditions can be understood in terms of military and economic power, as neorealists perceived, Wendt means deep institutional structures and norms like sovereignty by shared knowledge. Following Wendt’s theorization, a constructivist scholar, Reus-Smit, elaborated on shared knowledge and practices of the international structure. According to Reus-Smit, the structure of the international system consisted of three levels: the deep, constitutional values of the international system, which included sovereignty. These deep values structured the foundational rules guiding cooperation in the modern international system (multilateralism). International law shapes cooperation rules, which structure institutional practices in issue-specific areas. So modern international cooperation in all spheres takes place within these settings.

The last element of Wendt’s (1999) definition includes “Practices.” Reus-Smit (1999) attributes international cooperation within regimes to practices. “Fundamental institutions operate at a deeper level of international society than regimes. In fact, in the modern society of states, they comprise the basic rules of practice that structure regime cooperation” (p. 13). So, various international cooperation regimes in issue-specific areas, regional or international, constitute an element of the practices of international structure.

Both constitutional structures and regimes constitute the identity and behavior of actors. These deep constitutional structures shape the identity of modern states as international actors who act based on the principle of sovereignty and whose behavior is guided by international law. In return, states also can shape the principles of international law. For example, modern states can negotiate the principle of sovereignty to join an integration union, or they can develop new international rules and make new international agreements. They can also strengthen or weaken international rules by following them or breaking them. Suppose actors behave in accordance with these constitutional and regime norms. In that case, they reinforce these structures: “Sovereignty norms are now so taken for granted, so natural, that it is easy to overlook the extent to which they are both presupposed by and an ongoing artifact of practice. When states tax “their” “citizens” and not others, when they “protect” their markets against foreign “imports,” when they kill thousands of Iraqis in one kind of war and then refuse to “intervene” to kill even one person in another kind, a “civil” war, and when they fight a global war against a regime sought to destroy the institution

of sovereignty and then give Germany back to the Germans, they are acting against the background of, and thereby reproducing, shared norms about what it means to be a sovereign state. If states stopped acting on those norms, their identity as "sovereigns" (if not necessarily as "states") would disappear. The sovereign state is an ongoing accomplishment of practice, not a once-and-for-all creation of norms that somehow exist apart from practice. Thus, saying that "the institution of sovereignty transforms identities" is shorthand for saying that "regular practices produce mutually constituting sovereign identities (agents) and their associated institutional norms (structures)." Practice is the core of constructivist resolutions of the agent-structure problem." (Wendt, 1992, p. 413)

International actors may follow international rules and norms under the pressure of the force of powerful states or their political interests. These two explanations were developed in detail by the neorealist and neoliberal institutionalists. In this case, international rules and norms structure the behavior of international actors. However, they can also change their behavior because of a change in core beliefs. For example, a change in the view on slavery changed the beliefs of those groups who started to support the anti-slavery movement. When actors start to believe in specific domestic and international rules, these rules and norms can constitute the social identity of these actors. In the modern period of international relations, the development of technologies and scientific progress has resulted in the change of many beliefs of modern social actors, including international relations. For example, a belief in the necessity of finding climate change led many states to join the Kyoto Protocol.

Goldstein et al. (1993) give the following definitions of causal and principled beliefs:

"Causal beliefs are beliefs about cause-effect relationships which derive authority from the shared consensus of recognized elites, whether they be village elders or scientists at elite institutions. Such causal beliefs provide guides for individuals on how to achieve their objectives. Scientific knowledge may reveal how to eliminate smallpox, for instance, or how to slow down the greenhouse effect in the earth's atmosphere" (Goldstein et al., 1993, p. 10).

Principled beliefs are "normative ideas that specify criteria for distinguishing right from wrong and just from unjust. The views that 'slavery is wrong,' that 'abortion is murder,' and that human beings have the 'right of free speech' are principled beliefs" (Goldstein et al., 1993, p. 9).

Based on their beliefs, actors often create international norms that construct their identities or guide their behavior. In connection with this, constructivists identify two types of norms: "The

most common distinction is between regulative norms, which order and constrain behavior, and constitutive norms, which create new actors, interests, or categories of action.” (Finnemore and Sikkink, p. 891) Additionally, prescriptive norms are another type. When actors create and join international regimes and follow regulative and prescriptive norms, the actors reproduce these regimes and the international principles based on which these regimes exist. In return, these regimes guide these actors' behavior and sometimes identities.

An example of a meeting between two people can explain the dualism and duality of this process. Let's imagine that two adult people agreed to play tennis together. They came to this agreement as independent adult persons. However, after they agreed to play tennis and made according to notes on their calendar, this agreement started to guide the behavior of these people. They have to deny requests for other events that happen simultaneously as these people agreed to play tennis. Of course, they can cancel the tennis game, but not without consequences for their reputation. Let us also imagine that these people decide to play tennis regularly with each other or even join some club of semi-professional tennis players. When these people start following this activity regularly, it is not just a game of tennis anymore. Tennis has become an essential part of these people's social identity. Similarly, international actors create international norms and agreements and get influenced by these norms.

To sum up, the main propositions of the constructivist theory are the following:

- International actors are social actors whose identities and behavior are constituted and regulated by rules and norms.
- The structure of the international system is a social structure, the elements of which include material resources and international norms and regimes.
- International actors construct international norms and regimes.
- If actors observe international norms in their behavior due to some global power or their interests, they get regulated by the international structure.
- If actors respect international norms based on their beliefs, these norms constitute the social identities of actors.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design: Simultaneous Qualitative Case Study

The dissertation applies a simultaneous qualitative case study approach (Morse, 2010). Given the large number of EU projects in Central Asia, this dissertation applies a case study

approach, focusing on one specific EU-funded project in Central Asia, the so-called Tuning Central Asia project. As mentioned by Checkel (2005): “For one, many contributors employ the case-study technique because it is especially well-suited to establishing scope conditions and examining causal mechanisms” (p. 816).

The present study's data were gathered using semi-structured interviews and qualitative content analysis. Thus, the analysis in the present case study took place within two simultaneous stages: the interview stage and the qualitative content analysis of individual publications by the members of the TuCAHEA inter-university consortium.

To understand the influence of European ideas, this dissertation applies interviews with Central Asian and European scholars. Checkel (1999) states, “Essentially, you need to read things and talk with people. The latter requires structured interviews with group participants; the interviews should all employ a similar protocol, asking questions that tap both individual preferences and motivations and group dynamics. The former, ideally, requires access to informal minutes of meetings or, second best, the diaries or memoirs of participants. To check these first two data streams, one can search for local media/TV interviews with group participants. This method of triangulation is fairly standard in qualitative research; it reduces reliance on any data source (interviewees, after all, may often dissimulate) and increases confidence in the overall validity of your inferences.” The TuCAHEA project does not have a specific site, but it took place in several locations, mainly in the campus buildings of universities that were part of the TuCAHEA consortium. The researcher identified the participants' names in the TUCAHEA project's final report. As the researcher chose the participants based on their participation in the project, purposive sampling was used to recruit participants. Cohen et al. (2018) describe purposive sampling as the selection of participants due to their "professional role, power, access to networks, expertise or experience" (p. 115). Purposive sampling is used “to acquire in-depth information from those who are in a position to give it” (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 115). Many participants kindly helped the researcher contact their colleagues. In connection with this, snowball sampling and networking helped the researcher request participants for interviews (Cohen et al., 2018).

The researcher developed a pilot interview guide based on relevant research on epistemic communities and policy networks (Dalglish, 2015; Saçli, 2011; F. Saçli, personal communication, October 4, 2018). After several pilot interviews and the first round of interviews with TuCAHEA

members, the researcher slightly changed the interview questions. The researcher also asked additional questions to the project coordinator, country, and university coordinators of the TuCAHEA project, because these members were involved in the project's financial or administrative management. These questions were based on Saçlı (2011) and personal communication with Fatma Saçlı on October 4, 2018. The early interviews showed that the participants provided relevant answers to the research question. After the first round of interviews, the researcher slightly corrected and expanded some interview questions.

Participants read the consent form before the interview. Regarding access to the interview participants, the TuCAHEA members showed a high level of openness and transparency. However, the Impact of Covid-19 interrupted the process of data collection. Specifically, all the Central Asian countries closed their borders during the last two years of the data collection for the present dissertation. Furthermore, many participants wished to be interviewed personally by the researcher instead of online. Overall, the researcher gathered 15 interviews from the European and Central Asian members of the TuCAHEA project. Additionally, the researcher conducted three interviews with international experts who participated in government-level meetings in Central Asia dedicated to the EU-Central Asia inter-university cooperation. The full list of participants is presented in Table 4.

The researcher made several field trips to Kazakhstan and Europe. Kazakhstani participants were all interviewed face-to-face. Interviews with experts from Europe and other Central Asian countries were conducted face-to-face or by phone. Each interview lasted from 30 to 90 minutes on average.

In a parallel stage, the researcher read and analyzed the articles of Central Asian Tuning participants on the topics of competence-based approach and Tuning methodology. The researcher used qualitative content analysis to identify the beliefs of Tuning participants on the competence-based approach. In this stage, the population sample comprises twenty-nine articles in English and Russian languages. The researcher used the Russian Science Citation Index to identify articles on the Tuning project and the competence-based approach in the Central Asian context.

Ethical Issues

During the present doctoral research, the researcher followed the main principles of ethical research. “The five main ethical principles you should abide by, in most cases, include: (a) minimizing the risk of harm; (b) obtaining informed consent; (c) protecting anonymity and

confidentiality; (d) avoiding deceptive practices; and (e) providing the right to withdraw.” (Lund Research Ltd, 2012) Overall, the researcher submitted an application describing the research purpose and methods. Furthermore, the researcher developed an informed consent form, which was attached to the application to the Ethical Committee of ELTE. This research consent form contains information about the doctoral research and its goals, the name of the doctoral supervisor and contact details, and the Ethical Committee of ELTE university. Ethical permission was obtained from the Ethical Committee of ELTE university before the start of data collection.

To ensure that the research is conducted according to these standards, the researcher obtained informed consent prior to semi-structured interviews. In most cases, the participants signed the consent form on paper before the interview. In several cases, the participants read the informed consent in the form of an electronic survey, in which they could read the information about the research and then choose “YES” or “NO” in response to an interview request.

Because the list of TuCAHEA members is publicly available, the researcher hid the names of countries of universities of the interview participants because knowing the country of the university increased the risk of identifying the interviewees’ identities. Overall, the interviewees were assigned codenames, which were based on the region of their university. The abbreviation “CA” in a codename means the interviewee’s affiliation is with a university in Central Asia, and “EU” means that the interviewee’s affiliation is with a university in the European Union. Additional participants who participated in the government-level collaborative meetings in frames of EU-CA higher education inter-regionalism were identified. Their code names started with the abbreviation “INT.” Additionally, the names of universities were removed from interview quotations and participants' quotations to protect their identities.

EU-CENTRAL ASIA HIGHER EDUCATION INTER-REGIONALISM: PERSPECTIVE FROM THE TUNING COMMUNITY

In this Chapter, the results of the data analysis are represented on the basis of the interviews with Central Asian and European groups of experts who took part in the Tuning initiative in Central Asia. The Chapter is organized around the three following main themes:

- Perspectives of the European Tuning Experts on the Effect of the Tuning Project in Central Asia
- Perceptions of Central Asia and Europe as Global Actors of Inter-Regional Cooperation in Higher Education by the TuCAHEA Community Members

- The Prevalent Challenges for the Development of Asia-Europe Cooperation in Higher Education in Central Asia

Perspectives of Central Asian Experts on the Impact of the Tuning project in the Region

All the interviewees positively assessed the results of the European projects in the CA context in general and the results in the case of the TuCAHEA project. In contrast, most scholars admitted that the project left a footprint in their national higher education context, although its impact has varied. In Kazakhstan, competence-based learning is being implemented, while in Tajikistan, it is being discussed. Nevertheless, in the case of the latter country, persuading ministries on the positive side of inter-university cooperation in Central Asia is an important political achievement of the project. In the opinion of CAEXP5, the project created a vision of the possibility of a common regional higher education area.

Overall, the answers of EU and CA experts to the first research question reveal high congruence between the two groups of participants. The EU and CA experts expressed the same ideas on the effect of the EU-CA higher education inter-regionalism, and even those ideas that were different between the two groups complemented rather than contradicted each other.

The interviews with Central Asian and European experts allowed to reveal four main results of the work within the TuCAHEA project. These included:

- Learning about the education systems and programs of each of the Central Asian countries.
- Finding common regional denominators.
- Agreeing on the common competencies for the involved Central Asian higher education institutions.
- Creating the list of common competencies.

Furthermore, the interviews with European and Central Asian experts allowed to find out that the TuCAHEA project involved multiple actors: national ministries of education, academic experts, students, international offices of universities, and national Erasmus offices in Central Asian countries, representatives of Tempus and European commission. All these stakeholders belonged to different levels of a top-down education system in Central Asian countries. However, all of them contributed to the project on equal grounds. Members of the consortium often had to participate in long, professional discussions. The interviewees revealed that the discussions were organized around three main principles:

- Open discussion culture

- Consensus approach
- Equality
- Collaboration

Therefore, the involvement of many actors from different levels and the culture of open discussion have allowed for the project to create its unique multi-actor, multi-level dynamic. Thus, the TuCAHEA project not only strengthened links between Central Asian universities but also brought together multiple stakeholders and created cooperation on equal grounds. Thus, the project established a connection between Central Asian countries, between various stakeholders (employers, students, parents, universities, ministries), and between various levels (individual, university, country).

Both groups have found that the EU activities in Central Asia, as well as the TuCAHEA project, have strengthened the academic links between the EU and CA universities, as well as among CA universities. As a result of the project, many universities kept in contact with each other and even concluded inter-university memorandums of cooperation. Both groups have expressed a positive perception of project results. There is a slight difference in the focus of European and Central Asian experts on the Impact of the project. European experts paid attention to the structural Impact of the project: organization of the meeting of Central Asian education ministers, pilot mobility scheme, and definition of CAHEA. The Central Asian experts stressed the learning experience as one of the key outcomes. Furthermore, both groups claim that the ideas of the TuCAHEA project were continued in other inter-university cooperation projects. For Central Asian scholars, competence-based learning became a key agenda, who try to promote this approach within their universities. Furthermore, this approach is applied to other international projects. However, these differences do not contradict each other.

In conclusion, it can be said that the TuCAHEA project created a ground for cooperation between Central Asian universities, and on this ground, it created unique, multi-actor, multi-level dynamics of cooperation using European experience.

Perceptions of Central Asia and Europe as Global Actors of Inter-Regional Cooperation in Higher Education by the TuCAHEA Community Members

While European scholars perceive the Central Asian region as having a strong interest in the Bologna process, Central Asian scholars specifically perceive EHEA as a model for aspiration and European education as a standard of quality for Central Asian universities.

European scholars notice that Central Asia's interest in cooperation with the European Union and in the Bologna process coexists with the reluctance of Central Asian countries to cooperate with each other. By contrast, Central Asian scholars positively assess the interest of their neighbors in regional cooperation. The only country which received a pessimistic assessment from Central Asian experts was Turkmenistan.

Finally, the interviewees expressed their vision of Central Asia as an important region that needs cohesion and will benefit from cooperation in higher education. Complementary to that answer, Central Asian experts express an understanding that the Central Asian region has a unique cultural context, which needs to be taken into account. For example, some participants mentioned issues of national identity and gender as distinct in Central Asia, in comparison, for example, to Europe. Furthermore, the interviewees identify three key factors for building a common higher education space: political will, financing academic mobility, and support of competence-based learning.

Overall, the answers of Central Asian and European experts rather complement or contradict each other. Specifically, European scholars notice the high interest of Central Asian countries in the Bologna process. Central Asian experts stress the importance of education quality for their countries and their attraction to European models and standards. European scholars note the importance of the Central Asian region, while Central Asian experts note unique aspects of the region, which will influence the building of a common higher education space. The only difference was that European scholars provided a more pessimistic analysis of Central Asian countries' interest in cooperation with each other. Central Asian scholars are more optimistic and pragmatic. They stress the importance of political will and financial support for building a common higher education space in Central Asia.

The Prevalent Challenges for the Development of Asia-Europe Cooperation in Higher Education in Central Asia

Both Central Asian and European scholars identified political barriers as a major challenge in building a common higher education space. According to the European experts, at the regional level, all countries were interested in cooperation with the EU but had a low interest in mutual cooperation within CA. At the country level, this position had also expressed an unequal and insufficient quality of ministerial involvement in the project. Similarly, Central Asian experts identified political barriers: the existence of national borders, lack of regional integration, and fear of changes by policymakers.

Furthermore, a lack of motivated individuals was also mentioned as a problem by one of the European interviewees. Similarly, one of the Central Asian experts raised the issue of teacher training. However, Central Asian experts paid more attention to practical and technical issues in comparison to European scholars. According to the Central Asian experts, more face-to-face communication was needed. Although they used technology for communication, more regular face-to-face meetings could have improved their work on the project. Furthermore, one of the interviewees raised the issues of commonly chosen lingua franca and lack of agreed regional credit framework. Furthermore, Central Asian experts identified different local values and Soviet heritage as barriers to the implementation of the regional model of higher education cooperation. These factors were not mentioned by the European experts.

Overall, the answers of both groups point out that political barriers are the biggest challenge to building higher education space in Central Asia, although insufficient technology for communication and difficulty of travel were noted as well by Central Asian interviewees.

Brief Summary of the Interview Findings

In conclusion, it can be said that the TuCAHEA project created a ground for cooperation between Central Asian universities, and on this ground, it created unique, multi-actor, multi-level dynamics of cooperation using European experience.

Furthermore, rather than contradicting one another, the responses of Central Asian and European specialists are more complementary. Particularly, European academics have noted the keen interest Central Asian nations have shown in the Bologna process. Experts from Central Asia emphasize the value of high standards in education for their nations as well as the appeal of European models and norms. While Central Asian academics point out distinctive features of the region that would affect the creation of a shared higher education space, European scholars emphasize the significance of the Central Asian region. The only difference was that researchers from Europe offered a more pessimistic appraisal of the desire for collaboration among Central Asian nations. Academics from Central Asia tend to be more optimistic and practical. They emphasize the necessity of political will and financial backing for the development of universal higher education.

Finally, the answers of both groups point out that political barriers are the biggest challenge to building higher education space in Central Asia, although insufficient technology for communication and difficulty of travel were noted as well by Central Asian interviewees. In the next section, the findings will be discussed in relation to the research questions, research problem, and the scholarly literature.

TUNING INITIATIVE AS A HIGHER EDUCATION EPISTEMIC COMMUNITY

The purpose of the present Chapter is to present the development of the local epistemic community in Central Asia under the influence of the international Tuning community. The present dissertation suggests studying the effects of the EU-Central Asian inter-regionalism by applying the concept of "epistemic community." According to Haas (1992), "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" (p. 3). According to Haas (1992), members of the epistemic community, despite coming from different backgrounds, shall share a set of common beliefs and practices, which helps them to successfully promote a certain policy in their area in a coherent way.

The analysis revealed the principled and causal beliefs of European and Central Asian members of the TuCAHEA community. Overall, the beliefs of the analyzed authors echo each other between and within both groups. However, there are some differences in the views of the authors.

As regards principled beliefs, the European experts were found to give more attention to the importance of addressing societal needs. By contrast, Central Asian scholars focused more on the need for higher education reform in their countries. It seems that European experts are more oriented toward the agenda of the future. By contrast, Central Asian experts see competence-based learning as a tool for modernization of higher education, which responds to challenges faced by their countries.

Furthermore, European scholars provide a more balanced view of higher education priorities. By contrast, Central Asian experts tend to focus more on a certain aspect of the education agenda: the value of employability, the Bologna process, or the need for reform. It can be suggested that Central Asian scholars choose to adapt the application of competence-based learning to the needs of their countries.

As regards causal beliefs, the views of both groups echo each other. However, the two groups put stress on slightly different advantages of competence-based learning. European scholars prefer to connect the use of competencies with societal needs, transparency, and accountability of academic programs. By contrast, Central Asian experts stress more the connection between competence-based learning and education quality. It seems that both groups of experts perceive competence-based learning as a tool for the achievement of goals relevant to their regional or national needs.

Finally, Central Asian experts are less critical of competence-based learning than European experts. By contrast, European experts take a more balanced approach.

Despite the differences, both principled and causal beliefs of European and Central Asian members of the TuCAHEA project converge with each other, both between groups and within groups. It can be concluded that all the experts represent a common epistemic community, which strives to promote competence-based learning as a solution to modern and future challenges in education. It was mentioned above that the TuCAHEA project was more successful than some other similar EU-funded projects in Central Asia. The analysis of the publications reveals the soft power of the project, which allowed to ensure the continuity of Tuning ideas in Central Asia in comparison with other peer projects. These findings suggest the importance of individual persons for the success of transnational projects in higher education.

DISCUSSION

Overall, it can be said that the TuCAHEA project created a ground for cooperation between Central Asian universities, and on this ground, it created unique, multi-actor, multi-level dynamics of cooperation using European experience. As regards perceptions of the EU and Central Asia, rather than contradicting one another, the responses of Central Asian and European specialists are more complementary. Particularly, European academics noted the keen interest Central Asian nations have shown in the Bologna process. Experts from Central Asia emphasize the value of high standards in education for their nations as well as the appeal of European models and norms. While Central Asian academics point out distinctive features of the region that would affect the creation of a shared higher education space, European scholars emphasize the significance of the Central Asian region. The only difference was that researchers from Europe offered a more gloomy appraisal of the desire for collaboration among Central Asian nations. Academics from Central Asia tend to be more upbeat and practical. They emphasize the necessity of political will and financial backing for the development of universal higher education.

Overall, the findings reveal that the structure of the EU-Central Asia higher education inter-regionalism was able to unite Central Asian participants and create a new international actor, a Central Asian epistemic community, which is in favor of the competence-based approach. The interviews identified insignificant differences, but the principled and causal beliefs of European and Central Asian members of the TuCAHEA project converge with each other. Thus, the Tuning community involved Central Asian scholars and made them a regional hub of an internationally huge epistemic community. Both European and Central Asian scholars expressed commitment in their articles to promote competence-based learning as a solution to modern and future challenges in education.

However, the findings also revealed that the Central Asian participants were active supporters of the project. The success of Tuning shows the important role of local actors in the successful adaptation of the Tuning methodology in the Central Asian context. The review of literature based on the localization framework by Acharya revealed that while the short-term effect of structure can be internationally driven, the sustaining of this effect depends on local actors. The results of the empirical study confirm this proposition.

At the beginning of the research journey, the tripartite research problem was presented based on the state-of-the-art analysis of the latest literature. The three research questions were

asked about the EU's influence on Central Asian and inter-university cooperation between Central Asian countries. In seeking to assess the influence of the European Union in Central Asia, the researcher applied the concepts from the International Relations discipline. Driven to look further than the calculation of financial expenditure of the European Union in support of capacity-building regionalism in Central Asia, the researcher adopted Wendtian Constructivism as the main research paradigm. This approach allowed us to reveal the effect of the Tuning initiative in Central Asia, which would not be visible if attention was paid only to mere numbers. The interviews revealed that the Tuning project brought the multi-level multi-actor approach to Central Asia, which received a positive assessment from Central Asian participants. Furthermore, the analysis of publications of Tuning scholars revealed the deep Impact of European ideas on the beliefs of Central Asian scholars. Thus, the European Union supported the development of the local Central Asian epistemic community, connected with the global Tuning community. The constructivist approach turned out to be useful in showing the influence of the EU-funded Tuning initiatives on the content and practices of inter-university cooperation in Central Asia.

However, the present research has some limitations. Due to the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic, the borders of countries were closed during the last year of data collection, and the researcher had to cancel personal visits to Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, conducting interviews by phone. Unfortunately, representatives of most non-Kazakhstani universities found it inconvenient to give an interview using technologies and refused to be interviewed online. Therefore, the representative involvement of Central Asian countries is not equal in the interview sample. In connection with these limitations, future research is recommended that could involve a larger sample of Central Asian scholars.

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