

DOCTORAL (PHD) DISSERTATION

Saule Anafinova

**Asia/Europe Inter-University Cooperation in Higher
Education:
The Case of Tuning Central Asian Higher Education Area
(TuCAHEA)**

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**EÖTVÖS LORÁND UNIVERSITY
FACULTY OF EDUCATION AND PSYCHOLOGY**

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**Asia/Europe Inter-University Cooperation in
Higher Education: The Case of Tuning Central
Asian Higher Education Area (TuCAHEA)**

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I dedicate my dissertation work to my family and friends. I am grateful to my parents, Amangeldy and Bagilya, for their support of me throughout this journey. A special feeling of gratitude is to my partner, Balázs and his family, for being my besties in Budapest.

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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.

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LIST OF IMPORTANT ABBREVIATIONS

ASEM	Asia-Europe Meeting
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BP	Bologna Process
CA	Central Asia
CAHEA	Central Asian Higher Education Area
CBA	Competence-based learning
EHEA	European Higher Education Area
EU	European Union
OBE	Outcome-Based Education
TuCAHEA	Tuning Central Asian Higher Education Area

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. 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 the 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, 2017, p. 15). Inter-regionalism is usually understood as “relations between regional groupings” (Hänggi, 2000, p. 3). However, regional groupings can engage in relations with single countries in hybrid inter-regionalism (Hänggi, 2000).

The period after Cold War has been characterized by the increased regionalization in different world regions (Söderbaum & Van Langenhove, 2005). This dissertation uses the word “region” to refer to supranational regions, including several countries, rather than subnational or suburban regions. As noted by do Amaral (2021),

A region may refer to an area of sub-national extent, a definition commonly used in government and planning, or it can also describe several contiguous countries, often also called “world region,” e.g., the Caribbean and South-East Asia. Although regions may be viewed as phenomena at the micro- or macro- levels, most conceptual thinking around regionalism centers upon world regions, emphasizing spatial- geographical relations and mutual interdependence among nation-states. (p. 265)

This regionalization process¹ has expressed itself in the emergence of “issue-specific or general” regional spaces (Söderbaum, 2011). According to Hettne and Söderbaum (2000), “The regionalisation 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.)” (p.

¹ “Regionalisation” and “regionalization” are American and British spellings of the same word. Most authors cited in this dissertation use American spelling, which led the researcher follow the American spelling (see References). However, two authors use British spelling (Woldegiorgis (2018) and Hettne and Söderbaum (2000), and the author kept their quotations in the original form.

462). Regional cooperation can be explained by the contribution of regional organizations in the resolution of issues of regional security, migration, or economic development (Langenhove & Gatev, 2019). Thus, regional organizations assumed the role of public goods providers, which used to be the state's prerogative. In the process of regionalization, the standard-setting became important (Langenhove & Gatev, 2019). As noted by 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).

The European Union (hereinafter – EU) has actively supported the process of regionalisation in other world regions. Overall, the EU has made supporting regional cooperation in other world regions one of its priorities, engaging itself in the capacity-building inter-regionalism (Doidge, 2007). According to Doidge (2007), “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” (p. 242). Capacity-building inter-regionalism increases the process of regionalization in one or more sectors (Doidge, 2007; Hettne & Söderbaum, 2000). One of the main priorities of the EU capacity-building inter-regionalism is the promotion of regional harmonization of norms and standards in other world regions (Doidge, 2007).

The process of regionalization achieved an advanced level in European higher education. In 1999, the intergovernmental Bologna process was started aimed at converging higher education systems in Europe and creating the European Area of Higher Education. The Bologna process was started as a voluntary intergovernmental initiative. As Wagenaar (2019) noted,

In the Bologna Process, originally the focus was on the system level, but gradually it also encompassed the change of paradigm regarding the teaching and learning process that was thought necessary. By broadening the agenda to the student-centered approach, the realm of structure and content was entered, which was addressed by Tuning and related projects. (p. 31)

The European Commission became an active supporter of the Bologna process in Europe and beyond. In higher education, the European Union has been using the Bologna process as a foreign policy tool (Moscovitz & Zahavi, 2019). Moscovitz & Zahavi (2019) noted the following:

Higher education can be understood as central to the EU’s wider foreign policy strategies, underscored by its aim to assert a leading role in global affairs and to strengthen its

international attractiveness and appeal. A simple search of the term ‘higher education’ in the EU’s diplomatic service- the European External Action Service (EEAS) - website conjures myriad examples of higher education initiatives within the Union’s diplomatic mission. Around the world, the EU’s foreign offices promote the EHEA through events, education fairs and cooperation efforts with universities or ministries of education. (p. 5)

Using the Bologna process as an example for promoting regional cooperation in other world regions is the main feature of the EU-driven capacity-building inter-regionalism in higher education.

Overall, harmonizing standards in any sector, from environmental regulation to higher education policy, is a complex task that cannot be achieved only due to mere political will. In connection with this, the role of experts who possess issue-specific knowledge became prominent as new actors of international cooperation. With the development of the common educational agenda in the European Union, the use of competences and learning outcomes has become a central element of educational politics (Antunes, 2012). In the European politics, competences became the political instruments, which were used to translate policy into practice (Antunes, 2012).

Early educational models based on the use of competences were developed in the 1950s in the United States (Antunes, 2012). Later, the use of competences became the basis for the international Outcomes-Based Education movement, that strived to ensure efficiency of modern education. In the beginning of the Bologna process curricular and pedagogical reform was not reflected in the early official documents of the Bologna process (Antunes, 2012).

In connection with this, competences were introduced into university regulation in the legal framework of the Bologna process. The competence-based approach made their way into a legal sphere of university regulation in the European Higher Education Area, when the Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area and the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning were developed on the basis of learning outcomes. In connection with this, the competence-based approach can be considered a regulative norm in higher education.

An initiative emerged in frames of the European Tuning project to ensure compatibility of university programs based on these frameworks. The Tuning methodology links competences and learning outcomes with overarching descriptions in the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning and the Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area (Lokhoff et al., 2010). Thus, Tuning initiative became important in driving harmonization at the

university level. The Tuning methodology is a type of a competence-based approach (Wagenaar, 2019). The Tuning methodology acquired prominence for its activities, and a lot of attention in the scholarly literature. Although the Tuning definition of learning outcomes and competences faced some critique, the approach became recognized and received worldwide attention (Wagenaar, 2019). Overtime, the Tuning developed into an educational community, which supported the competence-based approach as a norm in the Bologna process countries and beyond.

The Tuning initiative is one of the most important programs in the frames of the EU-driven higher education inter-regionalism. The European Union supported the Tuning initiative to facilitate regional curriculum convergence in Latin America, Africa, and Central Asia, using the European experience in the frames of the Bologna process (Isaacs et al., 2016). Scholars associate the Tuning project in various parts of the world with the influence of the Bologna process beyond its member countries (Figueroa, 2008; Petkutė, 2016; Zmas, 2014). In connection with this, the Tuning project “has been one of the most influential initiatives promoting the LO approach in Europe and worldwide” (Halász, 2017, p. 82).

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 next section will present the Tuning initiative in Central Asia in more detail.

The TuCAHEA Project²

The EU puts significant efforts into the EU-Central Asian inter-regionalism in education (Jones, 2010a). 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, 2010a).

Despite the pessimistic analysis of the EU-Central Asian inter-regionalism by Jones (2010a), 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

² The present section is based on 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>

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. (TuCAHEA³, n.d.)

The project uses competence-based learning as a tool of harmonization of education programs and qualifications between different universities across 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 the Chapter 4 of the present dissertation. When the Tuning project started, Knight (2014) gave a positive assessment to the Tuning initiative in Central Asia, suggesting that it will facilitate higher education regionalization in the region. This assessment by Knight (2014) turned out to be correct – by the end of the TuCAHEA project in 2015, TuCAHEA served as a platform for high level meetings in Riga and Rome, which involved Central Asian education ministries. According to Rao et al. (2016), “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” (p. 18).

The TuCAHEA project involved 34 universities and education ministries from five Central Asian countries (TuCAHEA Official Website, n. d.). The project covered eight subject groups (business, economy, education, engineering, environment, history, language, and law) (TuCAHEA Official Website, 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 for involved Central Asian universities (Rao et al., 2016).

Overall, Jones (2010b) criticized a number of the EU-funded education initiatives in Central Asia for an insufficient progress made. By contrast, the TuCAHEA project’s contribution to the strengthening inter-university collaboration in Central Asia was mentioned (Knight, 2014; Rao et al., 2016). Therefore, 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

³ <http://www.tucahea.org/>

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 higher education inter-regionalism.

The Tuning methodology uses the concepts of learning outcomes and competences to assess the progress made by students in the course of instruction (Wagenaar, 2014). Furthermore, in the Tuning method, competences and learning outcomes are connected with the European Credit Transfer System (Wagenaar, 2014), a crucial element of the Bologna process. Wagenaar (2014) provides the following definition of competences:

Competences should be understood as a dynamic representation of demonstrated knowledge, understanding/insight/comprehension, (subject-specific and generic) intellectual, practical and interpersonal skills and (ethical) values. They cover the whole spectrum of capabilities from pure theoretical and methodological knowledge to vocational knowledge/insight and from research abilities to practical abilities. (p. 294)

Wagenaar (2014) also provides the following definition of a learning outcome:

A learning outcome is understood as a statement of what a learner is expected to know, understand and be able to demonstrate after completion of a process of learning. Learning outcomes indicate the level of competence that is desired and should be achieved. They are in other words the specifications of the results and outcomes of a learning process. The learning process again is based on an identified set of competences. (p. 294)

While aiming to facilitate the achievement of the Bologna goals, Tuning applies a rather complex set of tools, which makes its implementation difficult (Pálvölgyi, 2017). In connection with this, the local institutional context becomes essential for the success of the Tuning ideas (Pálvölgyi, 2017).

Furthermore, there is a strong critique of competence-based learning from scholars who suggest that the approach is popular not only due to its effectiveness but due to the conditionality of the financial aid of rich countries, which impose the approach on developing countries (see Allais, 2010, 2014). Indeed, it is hard to ignore that funding is essential for universities. Rónay and Niemczyk (2020) find the connection between funding and academic freedom, “The universities are in a vicious cycle of fundraising and producing research outputs in order to secure a desired ranking. Meanwhile, researchers’ autonomy is increasingly restricted due to the interference of

funding agencies. Although multiple funding streams may enhance autonomy, it is essential to be vigilant not to solely service the agenda of a specific funder” (p. 245). Indeed, the financial support from international institutions can influence the agenda of universities. A prominent critic of competences and competence-based qualification frameworks is Stephanie Allais (2010, 2014). Allais (2010, 2014) connected the widespread adoption of competence-based approach with the funding of international organizations.

However, Douglas Blackmur, the Executive Director of the Independent Quality Assurance Agency of Southern Africa from 2010 to 2013, published an article in which Blackmur (2015) disagreed with Allais and suggested alternative explanations of the success of competences are possible. Indeed, financing does not always guarantee the acceptance of a new policy or novel approach. As mentioned earlier, the EU has supported several inter-university consortia in Central Asia, aiming to facilitate the convergence of regional policies and regional cooperation in higher education, including the Central Asian Education Platform (CAEP) or Central Asian Education and Research Network (CAREN) (Jones, 2010a). According to the Evaluation of EU Regional-level Support to Central Asia (2007-2014) report, published by the European Commission (Rao et al., 2016), the TuCAHEA project was more successful in the region than some other EU-funded large-scale projects in Central Asia. Some other EU-funded projects were criticized by Jones (2010b) for failing to establish continuity of people, ideas, and activities.

While many researchers studied the Tuning methodology from the perspective of competence-based learning, the present study explores TuCAHEA as a case of EU-Central Asia inter-regionalism in higher education. In connection with this, this study places itself at the intersection of international relations and higher education research.

Following Pálvölgyi (2017), it is suggested that the local environment is an essential factor that the researchers should not ignore. Furthermore, the TuCAHEA project is chosen by the author due to its quite unique achievement made in the challenging Central Asian context.

Research Problem

The research problem is tripartite in this study (Figure 1). First, the present dissertation is driven by the Agent-Structure Problem. This problem exists in many social science disciplines (Wendt, 1987). In brief, the problem addresses the issue of whether the external environment shapes its actors or gets shaped by them. This theoretical problem provides 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. Figure 1 presents the visualization of the research problem of the present dissertation.

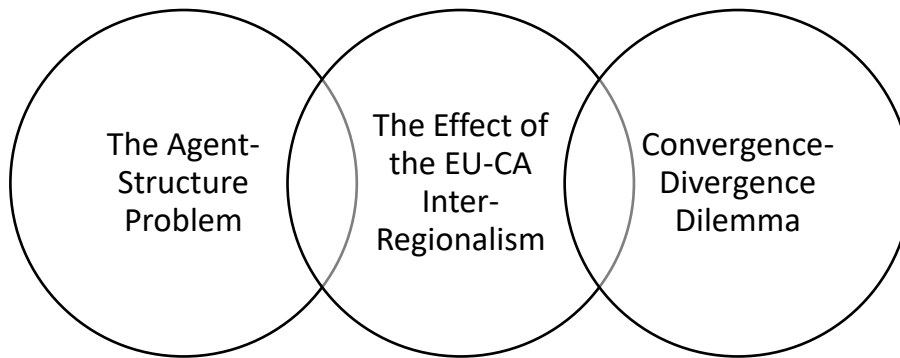


Figure 1. The Tripartite Research Problem of the Study.

In Figure 1, the Agent-Structure Problem is a main theoretical puzzle of the present study (Wendt, 1987). The subsequent problems are more higher education specific, and they are related to the Agent-Structure Problem. Specifically, understanding the broader effect of social phenomena depends on the approach to the Agent-Structure Problem (this will be discussed in the Theoretical Framework chapter). Finally, the convergence and divergence debate in higher education is based on understanding convergence or divergence as the main effect of social structures in higher education. The following sections will explore each element of the Research Problem in detail.

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).

Higher education regionalism and inter-regionalism are structures that made universities a subject of new regulations and innovative approaches that can significantly affect universities and their activities. Specifically, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (hereinafter - ASEAN) and university networks like the ASEAN University Network were able to create a regional research community in Southeast Asia and East Asia (Gill, 2018). Research by Vukasovic & Elken (2017) shows how the EU-driven capacity-building inter-regionalism affected the behavior of

universities, with achieving recognition of qualifications and quality assurance in several smaller regions, such as the Balkans, Baltic and Benelux, and Nordic countries.

Overall, while regional social structures can affect actors and interact with them, the depth of this effect depends on the actors themselves. Reviewing the activities of regional organizations in Africa, the Arab countries, and South-East Asia, Bekele et al. (2021) see that the regional organizations create elaborate structures without providing good quality content for education policy reforms at the national level. Thus, such regional organizations do not produce any “contextualized knowledge” (Bekele et al., 2021, p. 16), which results in the low effectiveness of their activities. Actors can also have causal, enabling, or constraining effects on international regimes. Jules (2015) suggested that harmonization in the Caribbean space is the result of efforts of rational actors who consciously supported harmonizing regional trilingualism policies.

Similarly, countries in Latin America expressed an enthusiastic stand toward harmonizing higher education, and they implemented several successful regional inter-university cooperation programs (Batista, 2021). By contrast, low political will and financial capabilities largely constrained the effect of the EU-Africa higher education inter-regionalism (Adamu, 2021). On the African counterpart, the positive perception of the Bologna process did not lead to African countries’ financial support for harmonizing higher education (Adamu, 2021). As a result, the harmonization programs are largely dependent on European funding. In connection with this, Adamu (2021) pointed out that 12 African countries only ratified the Arusha Convention to harmonize African higher education in October 2020.

Similarly, the analysis by Khalid et al. (2019) identified low, medium, and high groups of member countries of the ASEAN, in terms of their efforts toward further internationalization and harmonization of higher education. These studies suggest that the effect of higher education inter-regionalism depends on the efforts of local actors. In Asia, Asian Universities Alliance emerged under the umbrella of the Chinese “One Belt, One Road” initiative⁴. Pointing out that the AUA is dedicated to promoting inter-university collaboration in scientific matters, Cabanda et al. (2019) rejected the influence of the European Union and the Bologna process on this process. According to Cabanda et al. (2019), while the Asian Universities Alliance is similar to the European Research Area, its creation was driven by the needs of the Asian economy and the support of China.

⁴ <https://www.beltroad-initiative.com/belt-and-road/>

Similarly, stressing points of convergence between Russian and Chinese visions of the Central Asian region, Leskina & Sabzalieva (2021) claim that Russia and China can drive the development of the Eurasian Higher Education space in Central Asia, pointing out the low level of agency of Central Asian states in promoting alternatives to Russian or Chinese visions. However, the specific mechanisms of regional processes remain unexplored. While acknowledging the European Union's and international organizations' role in supporting higher education harmonization in Latin America, Batista (2021) acknowledged their influence is underexplored by scholars.

Whether it is actors who shape international structures or international structures which shape the actors is referred to as the “the agent-structure problem” in social science. While this problem exists in different disciplines, Alexander Wendt (1987) introduced this problem in connection with international relations.

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 neoliberal 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 the international system by the distribution of power across 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 constructivist. Furthermore, not only Wendt (1987) suggested 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 international actors, as well as they constitute international 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 constructivist for taking into account both agents and structures as part of an interdependent relationship and the role of ideas in it. Following Wendt (1999), other constructivists developed additional theories. Specifically, a Haas (1992) developed a concept of epistemic community in frames of the constructivist theory. Similarly, Acharya (2004) as well as Finnemore and Sikkink (1998) developed their analytic theorizations in frames of Wendt's constructivist program. Furthermore, constructivists borrowed concepts from earlier schools, especially from the liberal neoliberal institutionalists (Sterling-Folker, 2000). 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. The 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 the 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.

Formal regional organizations, including the EU and the ASEAN, have been the focus of many regionalism researchers. However, new types of regionalism have emerged that do not fit the description. The Bologna Process and the European Higher Education Area include countries that are not members of the European Union. Furthermore, this approach does not fit the study of capacity-building inter-regionalism and regionalization (Hettne & Söderbaum, 2000; Langenhove & Gatev, 2019; Murray & Warleigh-Lack, 2013). Focusing on formal organizations ignores contextual factors that may prohibit the regional projects (Jones, 2010a) and their unintended effects (Lucia & Mattheis, 2021). The conclusions of most studies give a primary role to regional organizations, like the ASEAN or the EU. While several authors acknowledged that the lack of political will from the countries in one region could hinder the harmonization of higher education at the regional level, most of them explain the lack of countries' interest in the low material capabilities of the countries to finance the project.

Thus, the analytical agent-structure problem also leads to the impact problem. Although assessing the effect of the Bologna process as the EU foreign policy tool in Central Asia may not be easy, it is necessary.

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, 2019, 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)

Due to the necessity of establishing common standards, member countries of the European Union oriented their public policies toward voluntary convergence to support the development of the European Economic Area and the Common European Market (Bennett, 1991; Woldegiorgis, 2013). At the beginning of the European Economic Community, its members needed to harmonize national customs laws to eliminate tariffs on goods for members of the European Economic Area (Woldegiorgis, 2013). Similarly, the tasks of “quality education, employability of graduates across borders, and standardization of qualifications” were set on the agenda of policymakers to support the processes of free movement of labor and capital (Woldegiorgis, 2013, p. 13). So, voluntary convergence or harmonization of European education policies became the political agenda (Woldegiorgis, 2013). Later, the Bologna Process was developed to facilitate the coherence of European higher education systems and cooperation between European universities. Several policy instruments were developed to support the Bologna process, including the two-cycle degree system and the European Credit Transfer System (Wagenaar, 2019).

From the start, the Bologna Process was intergovernmental, and the European Commission was initially not involved in it. Subsequently, the Bologna Process and its policy instruments received wide recognition in many countries outside the European Union. Since then, many non-EU countries are either members of the Bologna Process or have adopted some of the Bologna instruments. Therefore, the Bologna process is a source of voluntary convergence of education policies in both EU and non-EU countries. By 2009, the Bologna Process facilitated convergence through standard quality assurance and educational qualifications frameworks. The systematic literature review articles and policy documents on the Bologna process between 2004 and 2013 revealed that convergence at the macro level is the most important outcome of the Bologna Process (Wihlborg & Teelken, 2014). Initially, the Bologna process suggested a more flexible approach. However, benchmarking and peer pressure have recently been used as instruments to support the process of convergence within the Bologna Process (Ravinet, 2008). Related studies on the Europeanization of higher education increased, and the concept of the “external dimension” of the Bologna Process emerged to describe the broad influence of the Bologna process beyond its member countries (Zgaga, 2006). The concept of the external dimensions sometimes suggested that the Bologna model was being exported to non-European countries (Ravinet, 2008).

According to Marginson and van der Wende (2009), the following in-depth studies revealed significant national differentiation in implementing the Bologna Process. Thus, while the Netherlands adopted the two-tier Bologna system to replace its old higher education degree system, Germany adopted the two-tier one in co-existence with its old one (Lub, van der Wende & Witte, 2003). Based on similar observations, Zmas (2014) argued that “it is possible that the BP reinforces relevant regionalisms or nationalisms in other parts of the world rather than leading to a convergence of national higher education policies” (p. 720). In a similar vein, Chou and Ravinet (2017) argued against the so-called “export thesis” of the Bologna model in higher education research, suggesting addressing the local context's role in shaping the influence of the Bologna model.

In higher education literature, the convergence-divergence debate has not been resolved yet. While the abovementioned research tends to make an accent on either convergence (Wihlborg & Teelken, 2014; Ravinet, 2008) or divergence (Chou & Ravinet, 2017; Lub, van der Wende & Witte, 2003; Marginson & van der Wende, 2009; Soltys, 2014; Zmas, 2014), the researcher agrees with Zmas (2014) and Chou and Ravinet (2017). Therefore, a researcher suggests applying a new

concept that captures the interplay between the Bologna standards and domestic factors. This concept can help analyze the Bologna influence outside the European Union. The researcher considers the localization concept by the International Relations scholar Amitav Acharya (2004) to be a useful analytical tool to analyze local factors' role in shaping the Bologna Process's influence in non-EU countries. Chou and Ravinet (2017) considered this concept to be appropriate for the study of the Bologna influence, claiming that “Acharya's concept of 'norm localization' captures much more accurately the processes we observed” (p. 156). However, the researcher found only one empirical higher education study using this concept: Que Anh Dang (2015) included the concept of localization in a broader theoretical framework to research regionalism in the ASEAN higher education. Using this concept allowed Dang (2015) to conclude that ASEAN countries do not follow the Bologna Process as a template but use it as an inspiration for active construction of their own.

Like many other countries, post-Soviet states have faced many challenges in the higher education sector, which led them to follow the neoliberal logic in their higher education policies. The neoliberal logic drove the orientation of the post-Soviet higher education systems toward the market needs and international standards, including the global university rankings (Smolentseva et al., 2018). In Kazakhstan, international university rankings became the source of pressure for Kazakhstani universities towards coercive and normative isomorphism, due to the activities of government and the Quacquarelli Symonds agency (Anafinova, 2020). The Bologna process was very much connected with the global neoliberal agenda. “In this sense, the socio-political matrix of neo-liberal governance is linked to political action aimed at transforming the political systems and introducing alternative institutional arrangements” (Antunes, 2012, p. 448). Furthermore, the majority of post-Soviet countries have joined the Bologna Process. Consequently, the European Union has actively supported the Bologna model in the post-Soviet countries. Thus, international standards and the Bologna standards are new sources of pressure to converge post-Soviet higher education policies and practices. The review of the European Higher Education Area country reports by Soltys (2014) showed that convergence to the Bologna model has not occurred in many post-Soviet countries. However, the European Union supported the Tuning initiative in Russia and Central Asia. The Tuning project aims to support the Bologna process in different parts of the world beyond their member countries (Figueroa, 2008; Petkutė, 2016; Zmas, 2014). In Central

Asia, the European Union launched Tuning to facilitate regional curriculum convergence based on the Bologna standards (Isaacs et al., 2016).

Exploring the Agent-Structure Problem with the impact problem and the convergence-divergence debate in higher education can be useful for understanding the European influence on Central Asian higher education structures and policies.

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 answering these research questions can shed light on the extent to which higher education inter-regionalism shapes its actors or gets shaped by them. Furthermore, it can help understand the effect of the Bologna process 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 the five Central Asian countries.

Furthermore, the significance of studying the EU-Central Asia higher education inter-regionalism is connected to the broader regionalism trends in Central Asia. Specifically, Central

Asia is characterized by competing regional ideas promoted by Russia, China, and the European Union. According to Leskina & Sabzalieva (2021), Russia and China hold initiatives in the frames of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). These initiatives also influence the development of competing for regional and transregional projects in higher education. As noted by Leskina & Sabzalieva (2021),

When two regional powers build their integration projects around the same geographical area that is characterized by significant historic, cultural and economic differences, a possible outcome is that their approaches to the construction of a region (in this case, a Eurasian higher education region in Central Asia) could be competitive and possibly even conflictual. (p. 2)

The EU applies a regional approach to cooperation with Central Asian states on several issues of common interest (Bossuyt, 2019). Central Asia's regional cooperation is less institutionalized than in other world regions (Krapohl & Vasileva-Dienes, 2020). In the field of security, “[..]in Central Asia, “different regional organisations are competing over ideas, beliefs, norms, and practices related to international and internal security policies” (Lewis, 2012, p. 1219). According to Lewis (2012), two security organizations are competing with each other: the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). The influence of the EU countries characterizes the OSCE and the SCO by China's dominant role in it. This is complicated because “Russia traditionally views the region as being within its sphere of influence, and China has considerably extended its economic presence in the region” (Rakhimov, 2018, p. 11). In a similar vein, Çakir (2020) noted that “Global powers, such as the USA, China, Russia, the EU; and regional powers such as Turkey, India, Iran, and Pakistan have been involved in the region, adding to the complexity of the equation” (p. 75). Specifically, Turkey leads an initiative in frames of the Organization of Turkic States, which includes Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkey and Uzbekistan as its members. Furthermore, two countries are observer states in the Organization of Turkic States, namely Hungary and Turkmenistan.

In this context, transregional initiatives often happen. However, while Central Asia states participate in such initiatives, further regionalization of Central Asian countries remains challenging. According to Lewis (2018),

Central Asian societies became increasingly estranged from each other while their political leaderships united only for brief political summits under the hegemonic tutelage of Russia or China. Although external powers frequently initiated new regional initiatives, they were often ineffective or reinforced the very fractures they were intended to overcome. (p. 3)

While the EU's strategic policy is to develop Central Asian regionalism (Fawn, 2021), research shows that Western countries, including European Union members, have competing visions of Central Asian regionalism (Lewis, 2018). In the context of these different visions, competing aid donors promote different normative frameworks for Central Asian cooperation. In connection with this, choosing which norms to adopt can influence the region's development (Lewis, 2012).

Similarly, Cooley expresses an opinion on the critical ability of Central Asian states to shape the influence of international organizations (Cooley, 2012). While the development of regional cooperation in higher education may not lead to the development of the regional identity of Central Asia directly, it can support its development through the convergence of values (Wendt, 1994). In connection with this, the effectiveness of regional programs funded by different donors may influence the success of particular visions of Central Asian regionalism.

Researcher's Positionality

Saule Anafinova is a Ph.D. candidate from Kazakhstan with a particular interest in international and higher education. Before the author's doctoral studies at ELTE Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, Hungary, the author received a Master of Science in Educational Leadership from the Graduate School of Education, Nazarbayev University, Nur-Sultan, Kazakhstan, and a Bachelor's degree in Regional Studies from L. N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University, Nursultan, Kazakhstan. The researcher's background in regional studies and later in educational leadership influenced the researcher's interest in the geopolitics of higher education, including Asia-Europe higher education inter-regionalism and global university rankings. Furthermore, the researcher had worked on several international cooperation projects, which influenced the researcher's motive to understand the role of international and local experts in the inter-university cooperation programs.

The research design was significantly influenced by the worldwide spread of the Covid-19 virus. Initially, the research was designed to include two projects in the study. The first project

was the ASEM Education and Research Hub for Lifelong Learning (ASEM LLL Hub)⁵, which was supposed to represent another case of the Europe/Asia higher education inter-regionalism (Robertson, 2008). However, since the spread of Covid-19, the researcher could not travel to attend some public events of the ASEM Hub. Furthermore, the change of country chairmanship within the Hub also influenced the problems with identifying relevant events and people. The researcher's emails were left without response by the members of the ASEM Education Hub. While the same research questions were developed for both projects in South-East Asia and Central Asia, eventually researcher refocused the study on Central Asia.

The Outline of the Dissertation

The structure of the present dissertation follows the traditional approach to qualitative dissertations, based on which the dissertation contains the following chapters (Durdella, 2017):

Chapter 1. Introduction

Chapter 2. Literature Review

Chapter 3. Methodology

Chapters 4-5. Results or Findings

Chapter 6. Discussion of Findings

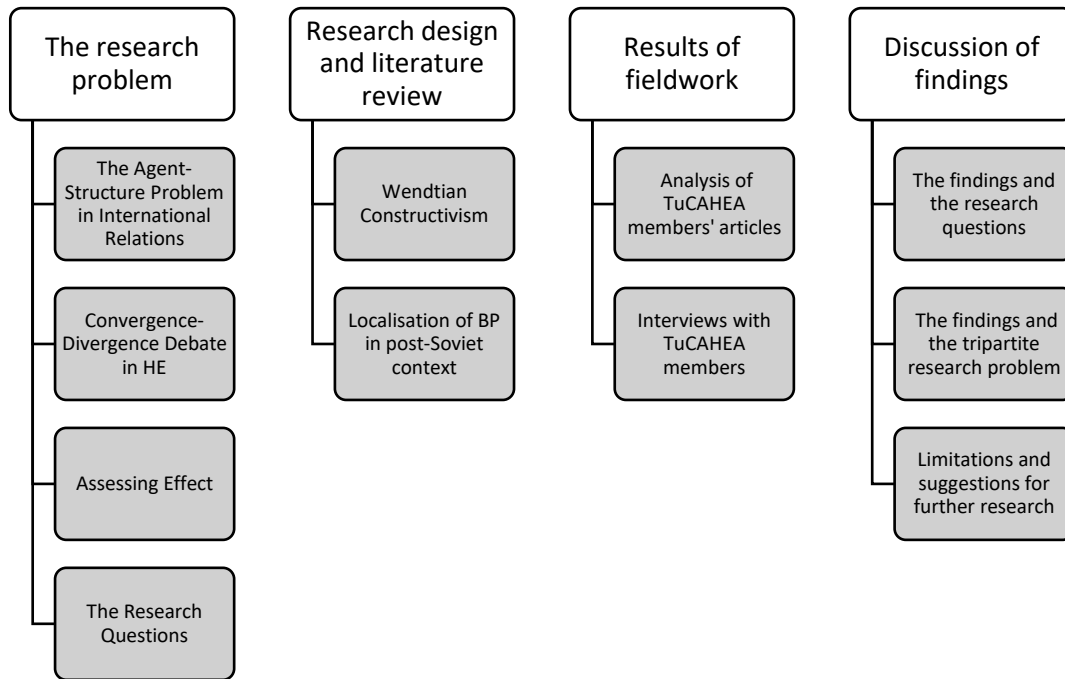
Chapter 7. Conclusion

Due to the interest of the present dissertation in the role of the European Union in promoting competence-based learning, the present dissertation stands at the intersection of two disciplines: higher education and international relations. The present dissertation will review the influence of the Bologna process in the post-Soviet context with particular attention to Central Asian countries. The Literature Review Chapter on the Bologna process in the post-Soviet and Central Asian context will use Amitav Acharya's (2004) theory on localization, who is a constructivist like Alexander Wendt. Furthermore, the research method chapter will present Wendtian constructivism and the associated research design of the dissertation. Consequently, the findings will be presented in two separate chapters. The first chapter of findings will present the results of face-to-face semi-structured interviews with European and Central Asian experts of the TuCAHEA community. The second findings chapter will present the results of the qualitative content analysis of publications in English and Russian languages by the members of the TuCAHEA project from European and Central Asian universities. Finally, the discussion chapter

⁵ <https://asemlllhub.org/>

will summarize and reflect on the conducted research. The dissertation is concluded with references and appendixes. Figure 2 below summarizes the main stages of the work process in the present dissertation.

Figure 2. *Main stages of work process in the dissertation research.*



THE LOCALIZATION OF THE BOLOGNA PROCESS IN THE POST-SOVIET CONTEXT

The current chapter is a literature review aimed at a reconceptualization of the Bologna process research in the post-Soviet and Central Asian context. Based on the concept of localization, the chapter aims to analyze the factors for many post-Soviet 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.

Introduction

Chapter 1 introduces a convergence-divergence debate in higher education as part of the broader research problem. In this debate, a new concept is needed, which could capture both global influence and norm-takers' role in adopting the Bologna process, especially in the regions outside the EU. In connection with this, the current chapter suggests using Amitav Acharya's concept of localization to study the influence of the Bologna process on education policies in non-EU countries. Earlier Chou & Ravinet (2017) positively assessed the concept of studying the higher education regionalization under the influence of the Bologna process, noting that "Acharya's concept of 'norm localization' captures far more accurately the processes we have observed" (p. 156). However, the researcher could only find one study which applied the concept of localization in higher education in a consequential way: Que Anh Dang (2015) applied localization as part of a broader theoretical framework to study ASEAN higher education regionalism, concluding that ASEAN actively constructed its own regional higher education space, while the role of the Bologna process was used for inspiration, but not as a template.

The Concept of Localization

In the present section, the concept of localization by Acharya (2004) is explained as the analytical lens of the literature review. Acharya (2004) has criticized the scientific view that "'good' global norms prevail over the 'bad' local beliefs and practices" (p. 239). Acharya (2004) noted that "local beliefs are themselves part of a legitimate normative order, which conditions the acceptance of foreign norms" (p. 239). Acharya (2004) followed the constructivist perspective, arguing that domestic agents reshape international norms to make them "fit with the agents'

cognitive priors and identities” (p. 239). Referring to this process as “congruence building,” Acharya stressed it as a “key to acceptance” (p. 239). To illustrate the process of congruence building, Acharya used a case study from the ASEAN security policy as an example. Using the European experience of “common security,” Australia then Foreign Minister Gareth Evans proposed this idea for the ASEAN organization in 1980s (Acharya, 2004, p. 240). However, the idea of common security strongly contradicted some established ASEAN norms, including non-interference in the domestic issues of ASEAN members and a non-formal style of cooperation (pp. 256, 265). Adopting the common security policy meant abandoning these important ASEAN principles.

Consequently, members of ASEAN countries rejected Evans’s idea. Later, Evans proposed the idea of “cooperative security,” which agreed with the principles of non-interference and non-formality (Acharya, 2004, p. 257). This example illustrates how the common security norm was reshaped by the ASEAN members into cooperative security to fit with important domestic norms. In connection with this, Acharya identified to processes in the diffusion of international norms: norm borrowing and norm localization. He also named the factors of borrowing and localization of international norms: the existence of influential insider proponents and prior similar norms, as well as the possible short-term and long-term outcomes of localization (Table 1).

Table 1. *Factors and Outcomes behind Policy Borrowing and Localization.*

Stage	Factors/outcomes
Why borrow	Economic crisis, war, or depression Change of global powers Change of domestic powers International, regional demonstration effect
Why localize	Borrowed norm enhances the legitimacy and authority of existing institutions and practices Strong local norms prevent wholesale borrowing (norm hierarchy) Credible local actors Strong local identity Similarity with a prior norm

Short-term outcome: institutional change	Task expansion Development of a new policy instrument
Long-term outcome (may or may not occur)	Fundamental change or norm displacement

Source: Adapted from Acharya (2004)

Acharya’s work (2004) helps illustrate domestic factors that might affect the process of borrowing and localization of international norms. Therefore, this perspective can be applied to analyze the Bologna Process's influence in non-EU countries.

Literature Review Method

As defined by the Bloomsburg University of Pennsylvania (2020),

A literature review is a comprehensive summary of previous research on a topic. The literature review surveys scholarly articles, books, and other sources relevant to a particular area of research (n. d.)

Literature reviews are helpful readings for scholars to find relevant literature (Torraco, 2016). Furthermore, they contain a helpful summary of a topic, characterized by the growing number of publications (Torraco, 2016). Literature reviews can be systematic or provide critical analysis of existing research (Torraco, 2016).

The maturity and establishment of topics like the Bologna process can make it challenging for early career researchers to bring novel perspectives. In connection with this, the present paper aims to use the localization perspective by Acharya (2004) to reconceptualize the approach to studying the Bologna process. This is a specific type of literature review named the reconceptualization literature review (Torraco, 2016). According to Torraco (2016),

Reconceptualization offers a new way of thinking about the topic addressed in the literature. Reconceptualization is undertaken when the current conception of the topic is found to be outdated or otherwise problematic, and a critique and reconceptualization of the topic is needed. (p. 64)

In connection with this, reconceptualizing the approach to studying the Bologna process from the perspective of localization helps to reveal the role of local factors in shaping the influence of the Bologna process. Based on this objective, the researcher evaluated the relevance of the literature. Specifically, the studies describing the introduction of the Bologna Process in the post-Soviet countries and its gaining interest in Central Asia were considered in this literature.

Before conducting the present literature review, the researcher assessed the existing literature reviews on the Bologna Process. The researcher found seven systematic and two analytical literature reviews related to the Bologna process (Table 2). Additionally, the researcher used the meta-review of internationalization studies by Kehm and Teichler (2007). Overall, the identified reviews of literature did not include the articles on the Bologna process in the post-Soviet context (Table 2). So the researcher could establish no existing literature review with the same purpose (reconceptualization) on the Bologna process in the post-Soviet context.

The researcher manually performed an initial search for literature in the ERIC database, entering the “Bologna process” and “post-Soviet” keywords in the word search. This search revealed that 44 articles had been published since 2003. However, from reading the articles' titles and abstracts, the researcher could identify only three relevant articles (Soltys, 2014; Silova & Niyozov, 2020; Tampayeva, 2015). In the next stage, the researcher identified literature through careful reading of the identified articles. Soltys (2014), Silova and Niyozov (2020), and Tampayeva (2015) included citations from other relevant publications. Additionally, these authors cited their previous works. Finally, a collection of in-depth national case studies titled *25 Years of Transformations of Higher Education Systems in post-Soviet Countries: Reform and Continuity* was published by Smolentseva, Huisman and Froumin (2018). The compendium carefully analyzed the reform period of post-Soviet higher education systems. As the compendium by Smolentseva et al. (2018), provided a milestone information on the university reform in the post-Soviet context (Anafinova, 2021), the researcher used the papers from that edition (Clement & Kataeva, 2018; Shadymanova & Amsler, 2018; Smolentseva et al., 2018). Additionally, the researcher identified useful reports using search engines flexibly (BFUG, 2004; Zgaga, 2006, 2019).

Table 2. *Identified Literature Reviews on the Bologna process.*

Authors (in alphabetical order)	Type of review	Topic of review
Collins & Hewer, 2014	Systematic	The Bologna process and nursing higher education
Diogo et al., 2019	Systematic	The implementation of the Bologna process

Heinz & Maasen, 2019	Systematic	Bologna process and the social sciences
Kroher et al., 2021	Systematic	Bologna process and student enrollment
Mngo, 2019	Analytical	The Bologna process and the external dimension
Palese et al., 2014	Systematic	The Bologna process and nursing education
Pereira et al., 2016	Systematic	Assessment studies in the Bologna process
Vucaj, 2015	Analytical	Bologna process and vocational education and training (VET)
Wihlborg & Teelken, 2014	Systematic	Critical studies on the Bologna process

The researcher built the present literature review around the main elements that Acharya (2004) established in his analysis. Analytical tables are used to visualize this structure and the review's main findings. The literature review provides a fresh perspective, highlighting domestic factors' role in shaping the Bologna process.

Bologna Process in the European context⁶

While to the outside observer, it might not seem important, but while European Commission is a complete and active member of the Bologna process, the activities of the European Commission in education are separate from the Bologna process. Furthermore, the Bologna process includes member countries from outside the European Union. As Davies (2017) noted,

⁶The present section is based on the 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.

European higher education policy follows two tracks. The first, in historical terms, is the vision elaborated over many years by the European Commission. [...] The second track is the Bologna Process, an inter-governmental action program dating from the Sorbonne Declaration of 1998 and the Bologna Declaration of 1999. (p. 1)

While European Commission is more supranational by nature (Hooghe, 2001), the Bologna process is more intergovernmental (Davies, 2017).

The emergence of the supranational and intergovernmental policy tracks can be explained by the unwillingness of the EU member countries to give up their power in higher education. Before the Bologna process, European Commission ran a series of successful regional programs. However, its activities faced low acceptance from the governments of the EU member countries (Wagenaar, 2019). According to Wagenaar (2019), a limited 1976 Action program established by the European Commission “discomforted several national governments (e.g., Denmark, France, and the UK) who feared that the Commission might slowly extend its competence in the field of education at the costs of national authorities” (p. 35). Furthermore, the Memorandum on Higher Education in the European Community was published (Commission of the European Communities, 1991). Finally, member countries reluctantly approved another successful program by the European Commission named ERASMUS. According to Wagenaar (2019),

It took a lot of lobbying from both Commission officials, in particular Jones, but also University Rectors, and a full year of intensive political negotiations [...] to get the ERASMUS Programme approved” (p. 36). Furthermore, the approval limited the role of the European Commission “as a facilitator of transnational cooperation. The Commission was kept at a short rope, because the legal basis for creating the framework programmes, like COMETT and ERASMUS, was created in such a way, that the member states kept a final say regarding the budget to be made available. (p. 36)

To sum up, there was a rejection of the EU Commission activity, while the initiative for the intergovernmental Bologna approach was successful.

The Sorbonne declaration preceded the Bologna declaration and was signed by the ministers of four countries, including the UK, France, Italy and Germany (Wagenaar, 2019, p. 19). These countries have been dealing with internal higher education issues, including insufficient funding for universities and low completion rates of higher education programs (p. 18). In this context, the international mobility of students and graduates was desired to solve these internal

problems. In connection with this, some countries considered the Sorbonne declaration as legal support necessary to justify domestic higher education reforms (p. 22). In the short document titled Sorbonne Joint Declaration on Harmonization of the Architecture of the European Higher Education System, the four ministers have outlined their vision for increasing the competitiveness of European higher education internationally (Wagenaar, 2019). Analyzing the Sorbonne declaration, Wagenaar (2019) noted: “One might agree it is more a wish list than a vision, by using the wording ‘could’ and ‘should’ all over the document. Nevertheless, it can be read as a ‘roadmap,’ a plan or guide for future actions” (p. 25).

However, the concept of harmonization was initially rejected and became the object of heated discussion. Wagenaar (2019) shared the memory from Sigurd Höllinger, the senior official of the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture of Austria, who chaired the working group which was responsible for preparation of the Bologna Declaration: “It was the term ‘harmonization’ that provoked the greatest outrage. Critics saw harmonization as imposing adaptation of important elements of higher education, and as a threat to national independence in educational policy” (p. 25).

The Bologna architects needed to stress the difference between harmonization of educational standards and unification of educational structures and content (Wagenaar, 2019). Eventually, the members of the Bologna process preferred to use the term “convergence” to describe the Bologna focus on “similarity in change” (Wagenaar, 2019, p. 56). However, Wagenaar (2019) suggested that applying the meaning of the concept “convergence” was based on actors' understanding rather than on the theoretical definition of convergence. Wagenaar (2019) noted,

In theoretical terms, it opted for the concept of policy convergence, while in reality looking for harmonization of systems, guidelines, and standards by initiating one architecture based on cycles, one agreed credit system (ECTS) and common rules for quality assurance and recognition of studies. (p. 55)

Overall, despite the initial negativity of other member countries towards the Sorbonne declaration, the countries responded to the call of the Sorbonne declaration by signing the Bologna declaration one year later. There were many discussions, but the Bologna process was accepted and expanded, causing mass-scale transformations of higher education systems in Europe and

beyond. While the progress according to the indicators varies from country to country, the Bologna Process as a political project is a great success.

An important group of countries which joined the Bologna process includes the ex-socialist bloc of European countries. Acharya (2004) names the following factors that can lead to borrowing the Bologna process: economic crisis, war, or depression, change of global powers, change of domestic powers, and regional demonstration effect. In post-socialist countries, the *change of global powers* was reflected in the ideological crisis. As noted by Želvys (2018), “Ideological crisis – the collapse of the socialist idea of education, partially replaced by the ideology of neoliberalism” (p. 45). This was exacerbated by the economic crisis (Želvys, 2018): “Economic crisis – transition from planned to market economy which led to deterioration of educational infrastructure” (p. 45). *The change of domestic powers* was in the context of welfare and cultural crises. As noted by Želvys (2018), “Cultural crisis – socialist culture was replaced by different modifications of promoting national and/or regional cultures” (p. 45). Finally, European integration was another critical factor for the influence of the Bologna process. As Chankseliani and Silova (2018) pointed out, “European integration has been a powerful driver for education reforms in many post-socialist countries, specifically those countries that have aspired to join the EU” (p. 15).

These factors drove post-socialist European countries in the direction of higher education reform. As noted by Halász (2007), “This case shows again that transition has been going on not only from communism to democracy and from soviet block to EU membership but also from systems conceived in simple terms to more complex ones” (p. 69). In connection with this, Chankseliani and Silova (2018) note the task expansion for universities: “While pursuing the economic purposes of education, the post-socialist states have continued to use education as a tool for setting political agendas that revolve around the ideas of nation (re)building and unification, as well as expanding regional influence” (p. 15). In a similar vein, Kováts (2018) noted,

Over the last 30 to 40 years, European higher education has been in a state of permanent reform. The expansion of higher education, the appearance of new missions and tasks, the government-imposed funding reforms and the pressures from internationalization, globalization and technological development have all led to increasing complexity in higher education. All of these changes have also resulted in a continuous reform of the management of higher education institutions (HEIs) which cover their governance and their organizational structure - as well as the roles and responsibilities of actors. (p. 74)

As a short-term outcome, institutional change followed. Berde & Vanyolos (2008) recall the process of institutional change in Hungary, one of the ex-socialist countries in Europe, “A second wave of institutional reforms swept the system after the country’s entry into the EU (in 2004), with the final goal of integrating the Hungarian higher education into the European higher education system (the so-called Bologna process)” (p. 307). The institutional change significantly shaped the activities of universities:

Organizational responses seem to be clear: both the academic and administrative structure became more differentiated. Many new faculties and administrative units were established leading to more standardized processes and more bureaucratic way of operation. While the creation of new faculties resulted in the decentralization of the academic structure, the administration became more centralized because most administrative units were placed in the center so that they can monitor and provide services to all faculties. (Kováts, 2018, p. 85)

The most important of the Bologna reforms was the introduction of the use of competences and learning outcomes in the ex-socialist countries. The European Commission financed the Tuning initiative to support the building of university programs based on the competences and learning outcomes. The official aim of the Tuning root project, TUNING Educational Structures in Europe, was “to link the political objectives of the Bologna Process and at a later stage the Lisbon Strategy to the higher educational sector” (the University of Deusto, n. d.). As the long-term outcome, the application of learning outcomes has made significant progress in European universities (Halász, 2017).

The framework by Acharya (2004) suggests that local factors influence the foreign norm's borrowing process. For example, strong local norms can interfere with the borrowing process, while credible local actors and similarities with a prior norm can support the adoption process. Despite the global factors mentioned above, local factors played a significant role in post-socialist countries. As Kováts (2018) noted,

One notable attribute of post-socialist countries is that all the reforms which took place gradually in Western European countries from the 1980s onwards started simultaneously after the change of the regime. This resulted in a permanent reform process and an unstable environment. The growing dynamics (or instability) of the environment is reflected in Hungarian higher education. (p. 79)

Consequently, local actors exacerbated this environment: “In Central Europe the professional and social groups developed various reasoning for higher education reform, that can be divided into different Bologna-interpretations or frames” (Szolár, 2011, p. 7). Citing earlier research (Liebert, 2003; László, 2009), Jakab (2009) states, “While most Hungarians do not doubt the necessity and the benefits of internationalisation, the Hungarian mode of the Europeanization of HE systems can best be described as that of compliance” (p. 60). Jakab (2009) also stated, “In the process of the implementation of the Bologna system, European norms have become part of the domestic legal order, but attitudes and fundamental beliefs have not (or only slowly) changed. Thus, adjustment remained formal and delivery limited” (p. 60).

The evidence from the literature suggests that institutional change can be observed as a short-term outcome with the development of new policy instruments as a consequence of task expansion. However, evidence from the literature suggests that local factors must be favorable for a fundamental change to occur.

Factors for Joining the Bologna Process in the Post-Soviet context

The Soviet Union practiced a uniform system of higher education, in which Moscow exercised central control. After its disintegration, countries in both European and Asian parts of the ex-Soviet Union experienced similar problems. Some factors triggered post-Soviet countries' interest in the Bologna process. Specifically, post-Soviet countries experienced an economic crisis, followed by the drastic underfunding of post-Soviet universities. This underfunding made it challenging for post-Soviet universities to sustain the quality of education services. The lack of funding was one of the main barriers to sustaining education quality. Post-Soviet universities could not operate in the context of increasing marketization of higher education. It must be noted that post-Soviet universities were subject to the pressures of international organizations that actively supported the neoliberal approach toward higher education management. Due to underfunding and marketizing higher education, many post-Soviet countries became interested in the European Bologna process, including Central Asian countries. The following section will focus on shared experiences faced by universities in the post-Soviet context. The section after that will focus on the Bologna process in the Central Asian context.

Economic Crisis in the post-Soviet period

There was a lot of turbulence at the beginning of the post-Soviet era. First, the social context was characterized by unemployment, low wages, poverty, and armed conflicts in certain

regions (Silova & Steiner-Khamsi, 2008). Many economic connections between ex-members of the Soviet Union were broken, and centralized funding from Moscow ceased (Silova, 2009). In this context, governments could not provide sufficient funding and proper management of higher education systems (Smolentseva et al., 2018). However, the post-Soviet countries searched for a new model that could operate in the new challenging environment, ensure education quality and provide management tools.

During the Soviet period, certain achievements were made in Soviet higher education policy: higher education was free for all citizens who passed university entrance exams (Kuraev, 2016). However, these achievements could not be sustained in the new competitive environment. Some governments were attracted by the neoliberal approach toward higher education policy, although it could have worsened the crisis in post-Soviet higher education (Johnson, 2008). Overall, many post-Soviet countries experienced decentralization and the emergence of the free market, which attacked the principles of Soviet higher education, on which universities were accustomed to operating (Froumin & Leshukov, 2016).

Another factor that reduced universities' ability to compete in the new environment was the weak development of Soviet social science. In the Soviet Union, citizens dictated their beliefs based on communist ideology. University students studied Marxism and Leninism, dialectical materialism, and the history of the Communist Party with limited ability to develop critical thinking and argumentation skills in their courses (Heyneman, 2010). The views of young people on history, literature, law, and society were structured through a single communist ideology. Based on the communist ideology, Soviet universities strictly defined what was proper to believe. Therefore, social sciences did not develop actively as in Western universities.

Consequently, Soviet higher education was strongly vocational orientation. In the last decades of the Soviet Union's existence, the professional training of youth at school and college levels were the main priority (Kuraev, 2016). Another poor quality of post-Soviet higher education was the weak development of academic freedom. Overall, individual rights and academic freedom were ignored in the Soviet era, during which more emphasis was given to communal values (Kuraev, 2016). As Kuraev (2016) noted,

Soviet higher education opposed the western university model on a fundamental level: The pragmatism of practical training contradicted the ideology of academic liberal knowledge

and institutional self-governance. Decision-making in higher education was transformed from a personal matter to a communal one in the USSR. (p. 184)

Kuraev (2016) compared the role of Soviet higher education with a conveyor belt that provided a professional workforce under the state order. Soviet institutions could not define their budgets (Heyneman, 2010). All these factors reduced the adaptability of universities in the post-Soviet period.

As a result, universities struggled with ensuring education quality (Silova, 2009). The curriculum did not fit the requirements of modern times, university and school infrastructure were old, education funding was meager, qualified teachers left their jobs, and corruption issues were widespread in post-Soviet universities (Silova and Steiner-Khamsi, 2008). Specifically, post-Soviet universities closed high-quality but narrowly focused professional programs. Instead, universities created cheap educational programs that were popular in the market (Froumin & Leshukov, 2016). Despite these efforts, university enrollment was low; and the new education programs had poor curricula (Froumin & Leshukov, 2016). As Johnson (1996) noted, the level of professionalization in education was low in the 1990s. In this context, universities struggled to ensure students' employability (Heyneman and Skinner, 2014).

To sum up, due to the economic crisis, post-Soviet universities struggled to ensure students' education quality and employability, and they were not competitive (Froumin & Leshukov, 2016). Froumin & Leshukov (2016) observed, "At one time, they had been leaders in specific areas of training determined by the state; now they had lost their sense of identity and purpose" (p. 183). This economic crisis occurred in the context of global and domestic power change.

Change of Global and Domestic Powers

The change of power configurations had two significant aspects: at the national level, independent national education systems needed to be developed, and at the international level, international organizations emerged as new players in the region, which was previously inaccessible to international influence.

Building independent educational systems was a new task for post-Soviet countries, which created an opportunity to adopt international policies (Silova et al., 2006). Furthermore, the international aid from organizations, including World Bank, Asian Development Bank, US Agency for International Development (USAID), Open Society Foundation, Aga Khan Foundation, and others (Silova, 2005), supported the adoption of international policies and foreign practices in post-

Soviet universities. The European Union became an international donor in the post-Soviet area. The efforts of the EU were supported in the frames of other organizations, including the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), which acted in the role of a broker in extending the influence of the Bologna process outside Europe (Zgaga, 2006)

In Central Asia, several factors created a fertile ground for competence-based learning. While the EU promoted the Tuning methodology in the region, by the time the EU-funded project started in Central Asia in 2012, countries in this region were already familiar with the concepts of competencies and learning outcomes as a part of outcome-based education (hereinafter - OBE) (Steiner-Khamsi et al., 2006). Competence-based education is related to outcome-based education; sometimes, these terms are used interchangeably (Cuckler, 2016). However, outcomes are related to applying skills in a concrete setting, while competences represent a general set of skills (Cuckler, 2016). Competence-based learning is influential at school and higher education levels (e. g. Chisholm, 2007). By the time it arrived in Central Asia, OBE was already an internationally widespread reform whose footprint could be found in many national education systems (Steiner-Khamsi et al., 2006). In addition, Central Asian countries have been accustomed to benchmarking and planning since the Soviet times, which made using competences and learning outcomes attractive for Central Asian policymakers (Steiner-Khamsi et al., 2006). Finally, Central Asian countries dealt with domestic education issues, making policymakers interested in outcome-based education. According to Steiner-Khamsi et al. (2006), in Kyrgyzstan, policymakers perceived outcome-based education as a way to reduce corruption in the education sector. Kazakhstan used the same approach to pursue its wish to develop an economy similar to Western countries (Steiner-Khamsi et al., 2006). Therefore, Steiner-Khamsi et al. (2006) pay attention to domestic political factors and development aid from more affluent countries for adopting outcomes-based education in Central Asia. Specifically, Steiner-Khamsi et al. (2006) stated that “borrowing does not occur because reforms from elsewhere are better, but because the very act of borrowing has a salutary effect on domestic policy conflict” (p. 671).

Regional Demonstration Effect

Many post-Soviet countries applied for the Bologna membership during the same period: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine (BFUG, 2004). Currently, all the European sub-group of post-Soviet countries holds membership in the Bologna process (Smolentseva et al., 2018). Like these countries, Kazakhstan became a member of the Bologna process in 2010.

Although other Central Asian countries did not become full members of the Bologna process, they expressed high interest in the process, following the example of other post-Soviet countries. In 2007, Kyrgyzstan applied for membership in the Bologna process. However, the application was rejected as Kyrgyzstan was not a signatory of the European Cultural Convention, which is a requirement for the Bologna membership (Shadymanova & Amsler, 2018).

All Central Asian countries have expressed great interest in the Bologna reform model. Consequently, the Bologna two-tier degree system was introduced in all Central Asian countries, although it often coexists with the Soviet 5-year specialist degree and the Soviet doctorate system (Smolentseva et al., 2018). According to Clement and Kataeva (2018), Turkmenistan established the International University of Humanities and Development (IUHD) in 2014 (). In this university, the teaching process was experimentally based on the Bologna model. As of spring 2016, the IUHD university employed local faculty with foreign degrees and two international faculty members. Furthermore, some leading Turkmen universities hosted guest lecturers cooperating with the Erasmus program. According to Clement and Kataeva (2018), “The philosophy behind IUHD’s founding was to create a Turkmen HEI that would meet international standards and compete with the internationally recognized Nazarbayev University in Kazakhstan” (p. 397). Similarly, Kazakhstani policymakers justified some new education reforms with the nature of reforms conducted in neighboring Russia, Ukraine, and the Baltic region countries (Silova, 2005). Thus, the popularity of the Bologna Process spread greatly affected the post-Soviet countries, including Central Asia.

Overall, the Bologna process responded to key domestic challenges of post-Soviet education systems: the quality of university services worsened due to the economic crisis. Post-Soviet higher education needed reform to fulfill the goal of constructing national education systems. Thus, the analysis reveals the presence of all the factors listed by Acharya, which precondition the borrowing of an international norm (Table 3). The economic crisis caused the reduced quality of university education, and the collapse of the Soviet Union caused the change in global and domestic powers. The literature also shows that the Bologna process had a regional demonstration effect in the post-Soviet area, as many countries applied for membership during the same period. The results of the analysis are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. *Bologna Process in the Post-Soviet Context.*

Theoretical framework by Acharya (2004)	Domestic factors
Economic crisis, war, or depression	Underfunding of universities and issues of education quality
Change of global powers	The collapse of the USSR
Change of domestic powers	The necessity to build independent higher education systems
International, regional demonstration effect	Already established “Bologna club”

However, international policies were shaped by post-Soviet countries' local historical, political and institutional contexts. Specifically, in the case of Central Asia, Iveta Silova (2005) made the following observation:

Local education stakeholders may ‘appropriate the language of the new allies,’ while not necessarily agreeing with it or being willing to implement it. In other words, local education stakeholders may effectively internalize international discourses, while using them for their own needs such as legitimizing contested educational reforms domestically, objectifying value-based decisions, or ‘signaling’ certain reform movements internationally. (p. 52)

In a similar vein, Steiner-Khamsi et al. (2006) noted that that “borrowing does not occur because reforms from elsewhere are better, but because the very act of borrowing has a salutary effect on domestic policy conflict” (p. 671). The following section will examine factors of localization of the Bologna model in Central Asia. Specifically, it will reveal that domestic factors were present, enabling and constraining the Bologna influence.

Factors of Localization of the Bologna process

The present section will present the factors that influence the localization of the Bologna process in the Central Asian context. Overall, Central Asian educational policymakers played an essential role in supporting the Bologna process in the Central Asian context. However, the Soviet model of education retained supporters in local academic circles. These factors influenced the

localization of the Bologna process in the Central Asian context. As a result, the quality assurance practices and the competence-based approach were internalized in the post-Soviet practices at Central Asian universities.

The Prestige of the Bologna Club

Overall, the Bologna process was prestigious among ex-members of the socialist bloc and ex-member countries of the Soviet Union. For example, Armenia and Georgia proclaimed their commitment to the “Europe of Knowledge” (BFUG, 2004, pp. 1, 5). Azerbaijan stressed the importance of international cooperation; Moldova stressed the necessity of reforming its higher education system and the need for change (BFUG, 2004). Only Ukraine focused on measures already taken in the field of higher education and did not present its motivation clearly (BFUG, 2004). During that period, the Minister of Education of Kazakhstan, Zhaksybek Kulekeyev, stated in the Kazakhstani application for the Bologna membership that “integration into global educational space is considered to be of primary objective” for the national education system (BFUG, 2004, p. 13).

To sum up, the applicants associated the Bologna process with a positive change in their education policies. Specifically, Eastern Europe associated the Bologna membership with increasing ties with Europe, and Kazakhstan associated the Bologna process with being a part of an international community. Indeed, both the OECD/World Bank (2007) review of Kazakhstani higher education and the United Nations National Human Development Report (UNDP, 2004) praised Kazakhstani's move to become a member of the Bologna process. It seems that the process indeed increased the international reputation of post-Soviet countries.

However, domestic developments in the post-Soviet countries shaped the influence of the Bologna process. Overall, Kazakhstan and other leading ex-Soviet countries (Russia, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia, and Ukraine) revealed the trend toward the development of the “state capitalism” model (Johnson, 2008). This model was based on the power of oligarchic groups and military people in the countries (Johnson, 2008). So, after achieving specific stability, post-Soviet countries did not develop democratic regimes (Johnson, 2008). This contrasted with the neo-liberal democratic reforms, which drove educational policies and instruments of international organizations and the European Union. Overtime, some critique emerged internationally of considering neoliberal education policies as the educational inequalities between rich and poor countries, promoting the vision of education as a private good. Consequently, after the mid-2000s,

the trend of adopting international policies decreased in post-Soviet countries, including higher education.

The Role of Local Actors

The importance of comparable degrees was attractive to Central Asian governments. The Bologna process was advertised to post-Soviet policymakers and university leadership: “It was at the 12th OSCE (Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe) Economic Forum where Per Nyborg, head of the Bologna Secretariat under Norway’s coordination (2003-2005), was invited to present the Bologna opportunities to a broad range of countries, broader than the circle of signatories” (Zgaga, 2006, p. 37). In that conference, Per Nyborg started his speech with the claim that “the principles and objectives of the Bologna Process may be used for reforms in any country, and they may be a very good basis for international cooperation in higher educations also outside the European Region” (Zgaga, 2006, p. 37). UNESCO played a similar role: the Minister of Education of Kazakhstan attended a Ministerial Round Table on the Quality of Education conducted by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in October 2003 in Paris (Zgaga, 2006). During this round table, the Bologna process was presented to the participants with emphasis on its “principle of comparative and transparent certificates across borders, which can equally apply to other levels of education” (Zgaga, 2006, p. 204). These examples show that influential international organizations interacted with local actors to promote the Bologna process in Central Asia.

Outcome-based education is a prominent policy that uses competencies and learning outcomes. International organizations introduced outcome-based education (hereinafter - OBE) in post-Soviet and Central Asian countries (Steiner-Khamsi et al., 2006). The OBE is an internationally established reform that left a trace in many national education systems (Steiner-Khamsi et al., 2006). In the Central Asian context, the use of competences and learning outcomes was similar to Soviet practices of benchmarking and planning, so Central Asian policymakers were interested in OBE as an instrument for managing domestic higher education challenges (Steiner-Khamsi et al., 2006). According to Steiner-Khamsi et al. (2006), in Kyrgyzstan, policymakers applied outcome-based education as a measure against corruption in the education sector. Kazakhstani policymakers were interested in the OBE as a tool to orient universities toward national economic needs (Steiner-Khamsi et al., 2006).

Agendas of Quality Assurance and International Cooperation in Higher Education

Agendas of quality assurance and higher education internationalization received the most prominence in Central Asia. The EU Council and EU agencies supported these agendas in the Central Asian context. For example, as part of inter-regional cooperation with the European Higher Education Area, the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE) organized a Eurasian conference named “Central Asian Symposium on Quality Assurance seen from three perspectives – Governments, Higher Education Institutions and their students, Enterprises,” in Almaty (Kazakhstan) in October 2007. In the May of the following year, EURASHE conducted a seminar on “Quality Assurance on an institutional level” in Bishkek (Kyrgyzstan) (Austrian Federal Ministry of Science and Research, 2009, p. 16). Within inter-regional cooperation, the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) signed agreements with regional accreditation networks and accreditation bodies in several Central Asian countries (Austrian Federal Ministry of Science and Research, 2009). These two agendas prepared the fertile ground for the Bologna influence in Central Asia.

Furthermore, the European Union launched a Tuning Central Asia project to facilitate the convergence of curricula among Central Asian universities (Isaacs, 2014; Knight, 2014). The Bologna experience served the Tuning program in Central Asia, and the European idea was to create the “mini-Bologna” Central Asian education space (Jones, 2010b, p. 9). The Bologna standards became essential instruments to facilitate Central Asian inter-university cooperation (Jones, 2010b). The competence-based approach is an instrument of convergence of educational degrees and programs in Central Asian universities. Eventually, it is expected to facilitate regional inter-university mobility in Central Asia (Isaacs, 2014; Knight, 2014).

The Tuning methodology is based on applying learning outcomes and competences in evaluating student progress in university courses (Wagenaar, 2014). The Tuning methodology is described as a competence-based approach (CBA) type. Furthermore, Tuning competences and learning outcomes support the European Credit Transfer System (Wagenaar, 2014). Through this process, Tuning aims to aid the achievement of the Bologna goals. However, some scholars note that Tuning has developed as a rather complex set of instruments that creates difficulties in implementation (Pálvölgyi, 2017). So the success of Tuning largely depends on the local institutional context (Pálvölgyi, 2017).

Overall, the prestige of the Bologna club and the promotion of outcome-based education in the post-Soviet context by international organizations supported the introduction of the Bologna process and instruments in Central Asia. The agendas of quality assurance and international cooperation were critical paths through which Bologna ideas traveled to Central Asian countries. However, some factors constrained the Bologna reform in the Central Asian context. Specifically, strong Soviet traditions in education caused resistance to Bologna ideas (Silova, 2009).

Strong Soviet Traditions in Higher Education

According to Belkanov, adopting neoliberal practices during turbulence caused criticism by some members of academia who perceived Soviet education as a good old standard of reference (cited in Silova & Steiner-Khamsi, 2008). Some post-Soviet scholars still hold this perception. Different perceptions caused power struggles in post-Soviet higher education systems during the reform adopting the Bologna standards (Silova, 2009). Joining the Bologna process was less complicated than aligning university practices with Bologna's goals and principles (Silova, 2009). The study of the Kazakhstani higher education context by Tampayeva (2016) identified that members of the Kazakhstani academic community expressed perceptions of “nostalgia and loss” in response to the Bologna reform (p. 2). However, nostalgia for Soviet education was simultaneously expressed with the discourse of progress (Tampayeva, 2016). Thus, the Soviet approaches to education were still robust in the post-Soviet period. Furthermore, the strong nostalgia of Kazakhstani academics, similar to the feelings expressed in academic circles of Russian and other post-Soviet countries, suggested that the Soviet identity remained strong in the post-Soviet academia. However, the ideas of outcome-based education and competence-based approach fitted well with the Soviet-inherited planning practices and were not rejected in the post-Soviet context.

The Short-term and Long-term Outcomes

Kazakhstan joined the Bologna process in 2010 (Bologna Process, 2010). Consequently, Kazakhstani quality assurance agencies were established that were connected with European associations of quality assurance agencies. The earliest Kazakhstani agencies include the Independent Agency for Accreditation and Rating (IAAR) and the Independent Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (IQAA). Both agencies hold membership in the European associations of quality assurance agencies: the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA, 2022) and the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher

Education (EQAR, 2021). To receive membership in ENQA and EQAR, quality assurance agencies must follow the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) (ENQA, 2022; EQAR, 2021). The EHEA Standards and Guidelines ensure that the activities of universities are in harmony with Bologna standards in member countries of the Bologna process. The IQAA and the IAAR are responsible for providing institutional and program accreditation for Kazakhstani universities. Under their guidance, Kazakhstani higher education institutions receive their accreditation and use the credit allocation and transfer system based on the ESG standards and the competence-based approach. Therefore, in connection with the Bologna process, quality assurance agencies have emerged in the process of the task expansion caused by the country's membership in the Bologna process. Consequently, the direct short-term outcome of the localization of the Bologna process in Kazakhstan is the emergence of quality assurance agencies.

To sum up, the crisis after the collapse of the Soviet Union caused a shift that led Central Asian countries, along with other post-Soviet countries, to get interested in the Bologna process. However, the post-Soviet model of higher education remained in practice. Hence, the main channel of influence of the Bologna process was the internalizing of European quality assurance and higher education norms and policy instruments in the practices of Central Asian universities. The main factors of localization of the Bologna process, as well as its short- and long-term outcomes are summarized in Table 4.

Table 4. *Bologna Process in Central Asian context.*

Element from the theoretical framework by Acharya	Why localize the Bologna process in Central Asia
Borrowed norm enhances the legitimacy and authority of existing institutions and practices	The prestige of the Bologna membership
Strong local norms prevent wholesale borrowing	Soviet approaches
Credible local actors	Ministries of education
Strong local identity	Nostalgia over Soviet education

Similarity with a prior norm	Focus on quality assurance
Short-term outcome	
Task expansion	Quality assurance agencies (IQAA, IAAR)
Development of a new policy instrument	Adoption of the Bologna standards (ESG) and the competence-based approach
Possible long-term outcome	
Fundamental change or norm displacement	Displacement of the knowledge-based approach

Source: Theoretical framework based on Acharya (2004)

In internalizing the Bologna-driven standards, Ibatov and Pak (2020) note the insufficient motivation of universities to reform their practices and the underdeveloped labor market. However, if actors overcome these barriers, the Bologna-inspired competence-based approach might gradually replace the knowledge-based education in Central Asian higher education systems. This can be a possible long-term outcome of the localization of the Bologna process in Central Asian universities.

Chapter Summary

The present chapter's aim was to reconceptualize the Bologna process from the perspective of localization by Acharya (2004). The analysis of the literature was based on the elements of Acharya's (2004) theorizing. The use of elements identified by Acharya (2004) helped to describe the global and domestic factors that influenced the attraction of the Bologna process in post-Soviet countries, including Central Asia. The use of Acharya's theory has helped to show aspects that reduced the influence of the Bologna process in the post-Soviet context. For example, the role of international prestige would be an insufficient driver for change in domestic practices deeply rooted in Soviet higher education traditions. However, the Bologna process influenced changing the norms of higher education quality assurance in Central Asia.

Consequently, Central Asian countries joined the quality assurance initiatives that ensure applying the Bologna-driven ESG standards in the university setting. In response to the convergence-divergence discussion, the concept of localization by Acharya (2004) provides a better account of the interplay of the Bologna process's structural influence and the actors' role in

shaping it. Specifically, the emergence of quality assurance agencies and the application of the competency-based approaches is the short-term outcome of the localization of the Bologna process. In the long term, the competence-based approach might take the place of the knowledge-based approach in Central Asian higher education.

It can be concluded that local actors can enable or constrain international models and standards. In the Central Asian context, the Bologna elements currently coexist with Soviet-inherited practices in higher education.

Overall, the selection of articles for the analytical review was not based on the traditional, systematic approach, which is a significant limitation of the literature review. In connection with this, further empirical studies can shed more light on the localization of the Bologna standards in Central Asian universities. Furthermore, a localization framework is recommended to study higher education processes in other post-socialist and post-Soviet countries.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The purpose of the present chapter is to present Wendtian constructivism as the theory driving the research of the present dissertation. Through analyzing the evolution of the theoretical thought in International Relations, the current chapter reveals that the constructivist approach is the most appropriate theory for analyzing modern international cooperation. Wendtian Constructivism uses ideas as the primary change mechanism in contemporary international relations. The chapter uses the constructivist approach to identify the EU-Central Asia higher education inter-regionalism as a social structure and its main actors. The chapter also explores the constructivist understanding of effects and effectiveness. Finally, the chapter suggests the concepts of epistemic community and causal and principled beliefs to illustrate the process of international norm travelling in the EU-Central Asia higher education inter-regionalism. These concepts were promoted by the constructivist scholars who followed Wendt (1999).

Introduction

The neorealist school developed International Relations as a theory, pioneered by Kenneth Waltz (2010), who laid the foundations of the international theory as a discipline in his book “Theory of International Politics.” Specifically, Waltz stated the purpose of International Relations as a scientific discipline and its central concepts, including the international system and actors.

The neorealist school was crucial in settling the main concepts of study and the purpose of International Relations as a discipline. Particularly, Kenneth Waltz (2010) explained the role of the theory of International Relations as a discipline:

A theory arranges phenomena so that they are seen as mutually dependent; it connects otherwise disparate facts; it shows how changes in some of the phenomena necessarily entail changes in others. To form a theory requires envisioning a pattern where none is visible to the naked eye. (pp. 9-10)

Based on this understanding, the purpose of international theory is to explain the change. As noted by Waltz (2010),

Across systems, a theory explains change. A theory of international politics can succeed only if political structures are defined in ways that identify their causal effects and show how those effects vary as structures change. (p. 70)

Thus, Waltz (2010) established a primary goal of International Relations as a discipline: to explain the change.

Waltz (2010) introduced the concept of “an international actor” and an international system as key explanatory analytical concepts of an International Relations theory. First, Waltz (2010) explained the concepts of a system and interacting units within it: “A system is composed of a structure and of interacting units. The structure is the system-wide component that makes it possible to think of the system as a whole” (p. 79). Further, Waltz (2010) suggested the understanding of an international system:

International-political systems, like economic markets, are formed by the coaction of self-regarding units. International structures are defined in terms of the primary political units of an era, be they city states, empires, or nations. Structures emerge from the coexistence of states. (p. 91)

While Waltz (2010) acknowledged the presence of non-state actors in international relations, he proclaimed the critical importance of states because the interaction between states, in the opinion of Waltz (2010), created the structure of the international system: “Just as economists define markets in terms of firms, so I define international-political structures in terms of state” (p. 94). Waltz (2010) further stated: “States are the units whose interactions form the structure of international-political systems” (p. 95). Waltz (2010) explained his approach based on the sovereignty of a state, which makes it an independent entity that is not subject to any superior entity:

To say that a state is sovereign means that it decides for itself how it will cope with its internal and external problems, including whether or not to seek assistance from others and in doing so to limit its freedom by making commitments to them. States develop their own strategies, chart their own courses, make their own decisions about how to meet whatever needs they experience and whatever desires they develop. (p. 96)

However, Waltz (2010) also paid attention to the fact that states were different by levels of economic and military power. In the opinion of Waltz (2010), power was the defining feature of inter-state relations:

Power is estimated by comparing the capabilities of a number of units. Although capabilities are attributes of units, the distribution of capabilities across units is not. The distribution of capabilities is not a unit attribute, but rather a system-wide concept. (p. 98)

In connection with this, Waltz (2010) proposed that the international system is defined by the hierarchy at the national level and the anarchy at the international level. Finally, he determined the key feature of the structure of the international system: “Structures are defined, third, by the distribution of capabilities across units. Changes in this distribution are changes of system whether the system be an anarchic or a hierarchic one” (p. 101).

While later International Relations scholars highly valued Waltz’s contribution to establishing the foundations of the discipline of International Relations, they argued for modifying Waltz’s understanding of international actors and the structure of the international system.

The Problem of International Cooperation

However, the neorealist theory could not explain one crucial development of the XX century international politics – the proliferation of international cooperation. Indeed, from the neorealist perspective, international cooperation is limited. According to Waltz (2010), “The weak, moreover, fearing the loss of their identity, limit their cooperation with the stronger. They want to see not the aggrandizing but the balancing of power” (p. 201).

In connection with this, a critique of neorealist thinking emerged in the study of international relations. Reus-Smit (1997) noted that, for neorealists, the only possibility for cooperation to last is to be established by a powerful hegemonic state:

Institutional cooperation is considered most likely under conditions of hegemony, when a dominant state can create and enforce the rules of the international system, and dominant states tend to create and maintain institutions that further their interests and maximize their power. (p. 558)

In a similar vein, Keohane (1984) noted that the neorealist conception of the international system views cooperation as driven by the power of a hegemonic country and ceases once the hegemonic country’s power declines. According to Keohane (1984), the neorealist thinking suggested “that order in world politics is typically created by a single dominant power” (p. 31).

Consequently, International Relations scholars revised Waltz’s theory, so it could better represent the complexity of modern international relations. Keohane (2018) noted,

Although neoliberal institutionalists share the neorealists' objective of explaining state behavior insofar as possible through an understanding of the nature of the international system, we find the neorealist conception of structure too narrow and confining.

Neorealism can account only for changes that result from shifts in relative state capabilities. (p. 8)

Consequently, Keohane (2018) noted how realism was better at predicting war than international cooperation:

Realism, furthermore, is better at telling us why we are in such trouble than how to get out of it. It argues that order can be created from anarchy by the exercise of superordinate power: periods of peace follow establishment of dominance in Gilpin's 'hegemonic wars.' Realism sometimes seems to imply, pessimistically, that order can only be created by hegemony. (p. 65)

Similarly, Wendt notes that some elements of Waltz's theorizing precluded the possibility of international cooperation, predicting conflict as the most likely outcome of inter-state relations. Wendt (1999) described the neorealist understanding in the following way: "the 'war of all against all' in which actors operate on the principle of *sauve qui peut* and kill or be killed" (p. 265). Wendt (1999) noted, "This does not mean that states will constantly be at war, since material considerations may suppress the manifestation of this tendency for a time" (p. 265).

Neoliberal institutionalists admitted that international cooperation is difficult to achieve. Keohane (1984) wrote that "Rejecting the illusion that cooperation is never valuable in the world political economy, we have to cope with the fact that it is very difficult to organize" (p. 50). In connection with this, "Liberals like Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye asked *why we see so much cooperation*, even under the anarchic conditions of the international system" (Mingst et al., 2019, p. 83). Specifically, Keohane (1984) noted,

Why should an egoistic actor behave, on a given issue, in a way that is inconsistent with its self-interest on that issue? If we observe compliance with the rules of international regimes, is this not inconsistent with the assumption of egoism? (p. 99)

While praising the neorealist contribution to the building of the international theory, neoliberal institutionalists criticized the neorealist approach for not explaining international cooperation properly. In connection with this, Keohane (2020) noted,

As we will see below, pure Structural Realism provides an insufficient basis for explaining state interests and behavior, even when the rationality assumption is accepted; and the fungibility assumption is highly questionable. Yet the Structural Realist research program

is an impressive intellectual achievement: an elegant, parsimonious, deductively rigorous instrument for scientific discovery. (p. 42)

Speaking about the neorealist approach, Keohane (2018) noted,

Although this theory provides a valuable starting point for analysis, it overlooks the fact that world politics at any given time is to some extent institutionalized. Formal international organizations and codified rules and norms (“international regimes”) exist in particular issue areas; but at a more general level as well, much behavior is recognized by participants as reflecting established rules, norms, and conventions. To understand state behavior, we must not only take account of the relative physical power capabilities of states and recognize the absence of hierarchical authority, but we must also comprehend world political institutions – regardless of whether they are formally organized and explicitly codified. (p. vii)

Specifically, Keohane (1984) pointed out that institutionalized collaboration is difficult to explain using the neorealist approach:

Were this portrayal of world politics correct, any cooperation that occurs would be derivative from overall patterns of conflict. Alliance cooperation would be easy to explain as a result of the operation of a balance of power, but system-wide patterns of cooperation that benefit many countries without being tied to an alliance system directed against an adversary would not. If international politics were a state of war, institutionalized patterns of cooperation on the basis of shared purposes should not exist except as part of a larger struggle for power. The extensive patterns of international agreement that we observe on issues as diverse as trade, financial relations, health, telecommunications, and environmental protection would be absent. (p. 7)

Consequently, neoliberal institutionalists focused their efforts on explaining international cooperation. Keohane (1984) described international cooperation as following,

To summarize more formally, intergovernmental cooperation takes place when the policies actually followed by one government are regarded by its partners as facilitating realization of their own objectives, as the result of a process of policy coordination. (pp. 51-52)

Neoliberal institutionalists tried to explain cooperation by expanding the typology of power and corresponding state interests. They suggested that there are different kinds of power. While neorealists only considered maximizing power as the major interest of states, neoliberal institutionalists suggested that the interests of states and their power can be different in different

issue-areas. In connection with this, Keohane and Nye (2012) wrote: “[..] we have consistently seen world politics as differentiated both by issue areas and by region” (p. 21). They also indicated that the power distribution varies depending on the area of political issues under consideration:

Issue-areas are best defined as sets of issues that are in fact dealt with in common negotiations and by the same, or closely coordinated, bureaucracies, as opposed to issues that are dealt with separately and in uncoordinated fashion. Since issue-areas depend on actors' perceptions and behavior rather than on inherent qualities of the subject-matters, their boundaries change gradually over time. Fifty years ago, for instance, there was no oceans issue-area, since particular questions now grouped under that heading were dealt with separately; but there was an international monetary issue-area even then. (Keohane and Nye, 2012, p. 61)

Thus, international cooperation received regional dimensions and extended into many societal spheres, including higher education. They further suggested that states construct international issue-specific regimes to ensure their interests in different issue-areas. In connection with this, Keohane (2018) described the vital role of regimes in structuring international cooperation: “Regimes are institutions with explicit rules, agreed upon by governments, that pertain to particular sets of issues in international relations” (p. 4). Keohane (2018) described the purpose of regimes:

Within this multilayered system, a major function of international regimes is to facilitate the making of specific agreements on matters of substantive significance within the issue-area covered by the regime. (p. 66)

Neoliberal suggested that international regimes structure cooperation in issue-specific areas:

As our examples of money and oil suggest, we regard the scope of international regimes as corresponding, in general, to the boundaries of issue-areas, since governments establish regimes to deal with problems that they regard as so closely linked that they should be dealt with together. (Keohane and Nye, 2012, p. 61)

Neoliberal institutionalists made two crucial observations about the structure of the international system. First, they pointed out the existence of economic interdependence between modern states:

The key characteristic of complex interdependence is the well-founded expectation of the inefficacy of the use or threat of force among states – an expectation that helps create

support for conventions or regimes delegitimizing threats of force. Western Europe, North America, and Japan form a zone of complex interdependence: power is an important element in relationships among these states (as well as between states and nonstate actors), but this power does not derive from the use or threat of force toward one another. (Keohane, 2018, p. 9)

Furthermore, with the development of science and technology, awareness arose about the links between international issues: “More importantly, effects of interdependence among issues were now recognized: changing marine technology could result in over-fishing, unacceptable pollution, greater ship disasters; and the mining of deep-sea minerals could depress the price of the same minerals mined on land” (Haas, 1980, p. 366).

Although it took some time, this awareness led to changes in the international behavior of states: they started to create international agreements which regulated the conduct of states in non-military or non-economic areas, such as ocean policy (Haas, 1980). The interdependencies between states and issues reduced the importance of military power and increased the value of information. According to Keohane and Nye (2012), information became an essential source of power: “Given a certain distribution of power (Waltz's “international structure”), variations in information may be important in influencing state behavior” (p. 64).

Furthermore, it was theorized by Keohane that due to the increasing value of information, many international regimes, which in the beginning might be created in the interests of powerful states, continue their existence even after these states might lose their power. Powerful states create international regimes to serve their interests, but other states can also benefit from them because they provide a platform for sharing valuable information. As Keohane (1984) pointed out,

Appreciating the significance of these information-producing patterns of action that become embedded in international regimes helps us to understand further why the erosion of American hegemony during the 1970s was not accompanied by an immediate collapse of cooperation, as the crude theory of hegemonic stability would have predicted. Since the level of institutionalization of postwar regimes was extremely high by historical standards, with intricate and extensive networks of communication among working-level officials, we should expect the lag between the decline of American hegemony and the disruption of international regimes to be quite long and the ‘inertia’ of the existing regimes relatively great. (p. 101)

In connection with this, Keohane (1984) advanced an argument that international regimes are beneficial to its members due to the dissemination of information, that the regimes facilitate: international regimes are easier to maintain than to construct. The principles, rules, institutions, and procedures of international regimes, and the informal patterns of interaction that develop in conjunction with them, become useful to governments as arrangements permitting communication and therefore reducing transaction costs and facilitating the exchange of information. As they prove themselves in this way, the value of the functions they perform increases. Thus even if power becomes more diffused among members, making problems of collective action more severe, this disadvantage may be outweighed by the agreement-facilitating effects of the information provided by the regime. (p. 102)

Keohane (1984) also noted, "The importance of transaction costs and uncertainty means that regimes are easier to maintain than they are to create. Complementary interests are necessary but not sufficient conditions for their emergence" (p. 100).

In connection with this, modern international regimes do not only serve hegemonic interests but also facilitate sharing information:

Regimes not only are consistent with self-interest but may under some conditions even be necessary to its effective pursuit. They facilitate the smooth operation of decentralized international political systems and therefore perform an important function for states. In a world political economy characterized by growing interdependence, they may become increasingly useful for governments that wish to solve common problems and pursue complementary purposes without subordinating themselves to hierarchical systems of control. (Keohane, 1984, p. 63)

Overall, both accounts explain how states shaped the structure of the international system through conflict and international cooperation. However, neither version provided a specific mechanism of change in international relations. As neoliberal institutionalists acknowledge themselves, complex interdependence does not necessarily lead to cooperation: "In analyzing the politics of interdependence, we emphasized that interdependence would not necessarily lead to cooperation, nor did we assume that its consequences would automatically be benign in other respects" (Keohane and Nye, 2012, p. 264).

The constructivists further pushed the neoliberal institutionalists' argument on the importance of information in modern international relations. They suggested that ideas constitute modern social structures and the identities and interests of social actors. Ernst Haas (1980) noted that international cooperation in issue-areas requires more than conditions of interdependence and interconnectedness between issues. According to Haas (1980), governments must recognize both these factors, which requires cognitive convergence among the involved countries in issue areas. Therefore, for a change in modern international relations, actors need to change their beliefs and the ideas on which modern social structures rely.

Following Haas (1980), Alexander Wendt (1999) theorized about the role of ideas as mechanisms enabling change in the structure of the international system. Wendt started the constructivist school of international relations. Constructivists changed their views on the international system and actors based on their understanding of the role of ideas. Specifically, they perceived states as social actors with social identities and interests; and the structure of the international system, including social institutions, rules, and norms, is based on shared ideas, which compose the socially shared knowledge. The following section will expand on the constructivist argument of change in international relations.

Wendtian Constructivism

Alexander Wendt dedicated his work to search for an explanation of how ideas constitute and influence social actors and structures. To achieve this goal, Wendt used the ideas of sociologists Roy Bhaskar (1979) and Giddens (1979) to develop his understanding of international relations. Based on their ideas, Wendt developed an understanding of states as social actors and the structure of the international system as a social structure, and ideas as a mechanism of the relationship between them. Wendt (1999) developed his theorizing in his book, "Social theory of international politics," which laid the foundations for the constructivist school in international relations.

Wendt observed that sovereignty, which made states principal actors of international relations, was not a natural but a social phenomenon. Analyzing the principle of sovereignty, Wendt (1999) made an observation:

Being sovereign is, on the one hand, nothing more than having exclusive authority over a territory, which a state can have all by itself. A state controlling a lost island or a world government would still both be sovereign, and to that extent, sovereignty is an intrinsic,

self-organizing property of their individuality. In virtue of this feature of sovereignty, states can causally interact with each other, and thus with a structure of sovereign states, because it means they are independently existing. (p. 182)

Thus, Wendt (1999) admitted sovereignty as a property that made the identities of modern states: “In sum, the essential state is an organizational actor embedded in an institutional-legal order that constitutes it with sovereignty and a monopoly on the legitimate use of organized violence over a society in a territory” (p. 213).

Wendt paid attention to the fact that sovereignty is not the only property of states but is also an organizing principle of the international system. According to Wendt (1999),

It seems due more importantly to the fact that states recognized each other as the only kind of actor with standing, a fact which they eventually institutionalized by making empirical sovereignty the criterion for entry into international society. Actors that fail this test are not recognized by the international system as ‘individuals,’ which makes it much more difficult for their interests to be realized. In this light the institution of sovereignty can be seen as a ‘structure of closure,’ exerting structural power that keeps certain kinds of players out of the game of international politics.” (pp. 291-292)

Furthermore, Wendt (1999) made another observation about sovereignty:

When states recognize each other's sovereignty as a right then we can speak of sovereignty not only as a property of individual states, but as an institution shared by many states. The core of this institution is the shared expectation that states will not try to take away each other's life and liberty. In the Westphalian system this belief is formalized in international law, which means that far from being merely an epiphenomenon of material forces, international law is actually a key part of the deep structure of contemporary international politics. Despite the absence of centralized enforcement, almost all states today adhere to this law almost all of the time, and it is increasingly considered binding (and therefore enforceable) even on states that have not agreed to its provisions. (pp. 280-281)

Wendt (1999) also noted, “Luxemburg may be a self-organizing entity that resists denials of its existence, but it is clear that other states' recognition of its sovereignty enables it to survive” (p. 74). Wendt (1999) further states, “One answer is to recognize that, even as a property of state actors, sovereignty is really a property of a structure” (p. 207). Wendt (1999) concluded,

The institution of sovereignty is the basis of the contemporary international system” (p. 285). Specifically, “In the contemporary states system states recognize each other's right to sovereignty, and so the state-centric “project” includes an effort to reproduce not only their own identity, but that of the system of which they are parts: states in the plural. (Wendt, 1999, pp. 10-11)

The analysis of sovereignty by Wendt made Wendt pay attention to the critical role of ideas in social phenomena. Wendt (1999) used the term “social kinds” by Currie (1988, p. 207) to refer to such phenomena (p. 68). According to Wendt (1999), states are social actors that can be analyzed in terms of their properties – social identities, interests, and behavior. Wendt suggested that actors of international relations act based on their social identity, which can be described by the pronoun “we” in comparison with the individual pronoun of “I” that is used to refer to an individual identity: “This social identity matters because it facilitates collective action against outsiders; when the group is threatened, its members will see themselves as a “we” that needs to act collectively, as a team, in its defense” (p. 293). Wendt (1999) considered that social actors can have multiple identities: “An actor can have multiple type identities at once” (p. 225). He further stated, “We all have many, many identities, and this is no less true of states” (Wendt, 1999, p. 230).

According to Wendt (1999), “identities and interests are socially constructed” (p. 248). Furthermore, Wendt claimed that due to the critical role of ideas in composing social structures, social structures have a constitutive effect on the social identities of actors and a causal effect on their behavior, and vice versa. According to Wendt (1999), ideas play a defining role in structuring the identities of international actors. “Without ideas there are no interests, without interests there are no meaningful material conditions, without material conditions there is no reality at all” (Wendt, 1999, p. 139).

Based on this observation and the theory by Waltz and Keohane, Wendt (1999) changed the definition of an international structure: “Social structures have three elements: shared knowledge, material resources, and practices” (p. 139). Therefore, ideas get enacted with material means and sustained through practices. Social structures are based on “socially shared knowledge” (p. 141). Wendt (1999) claimed that “It is actors' beliefs that make up shared knowledge, and their practices which confirm or falsify that knowledge over time” (p. 188).

Finally, Wendt (1999) explained how ideas affect social identities and structures. Wendt (1999) observed that ideas can constitute the identities or social structures: “Ideas or social structures have constitutive effects when they create phenomena - properties, powers, dispositions, meanings, etc. – that are conceptually or logically dependent on those ideas or structures, that exist only ‘in virtue of’ them” (p. 88). For example, the idea of sovereignty constitutes the social identities of modern states. Also, the idea of sovereignty constituted the structure of the modern international system.

Furthermore, ideas can have a causal effect when they influence the behavior of social actors. According to Wendt (1999), “Causal effects presuppose that the explanans (identities and interests) exists independent of the explanandum (culture), and that interaction with the latter changes the former over time in a billiard ball, mechanistic sense” (p. 87).

Due to the critical role of ideas in structuring both social actors and social structures, Wendt (1999) concluded that the agent-structure relationship is based on two principles: dualism and duality, “two sides of the same coin rather than distinct phenomena interacting over time” (p. 180). Wendt (1999) described dualism as “co-determination,” while he described duality as “mutual constitution” (p. 165). This relationship allows taking into account material conditions like power and ideational conditions like identities and interests of states. According to Wendt (1999), “To say that a structure “constrains” actors is to say that it only has behavioral effects. To say that a structure “constructs” actors are to say that it has property effects” (pp. 26-27).

He was looking for ways to investigate the effects of ideas (Wendt, 1999). As a solution to the problem, he suggested that ideas have constitutive effects that are different from linear effects (Wendt, 1999). Spindler (2013) described this approach as an “explanation by the concept” (p. 215). Parsons (2010) provides a good description of constitutive explanation: “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).

The constitutive explanation was supported and developed by Kurki (2008) and Wight (2006). Unlike natural scientists like physicists, who study natural phenomena, social scientists cannot easily establish linear cause-effect relations in their explanation of social phenomena (Wight, 2006, p. 287).

According to Wendt, sustaining the effect of international regimes and norms can be supported by force, interests, and actors' beliefs in the legitimacy of these ideas. Neorealists focused on the role of power in supporting the modern international order. Liberal institutionalists focused on the role of interests. Constructivists admitted both power and interests, but they added legitimacy as the third factor, ensuring the survival of norms.

In the opinion of Wendt (1999), norms have the most considerable effect on actors if they constitute actors' beliefs in comparison with regulating their behavior. In connection with this, constructivists have developed a different understanding of the effectiveness of international regimes and norms:

The question of the effectiveness of international regimes is more complicated from a reflectivist perspective than from a rationalist one. From the rationalist perspective, effectiveness can be reduced to efficiency, the extent to which the regime is efficient at changing the behavior of states and other actors in international relations. The rationalist approach focuses on regulative rules that clearly specify how actors are expected to behave, and those same rules can be used as a metric for effectiveness. States either follow them or they do not; the regime is either effective or not. (Barkin, 2015, p. 49)

Suggesting that norms create basic expectations for states' behavior, Barkin (2015) commented:

Similarly, states often cheat at the margins of their obligations under the WTO system. From a rationalist perspective, this suggests a weak regime with inadequate enforcement. From a reflectivist perspective, however, the fact that the international trade regime provides the behavioral baseline of expectations from which states cheat only at the margins suggests that the regime has been effective in establishing multilateralism, nondiscrimination, and other criteria as legitimate standards of behavior. (p. 49)

The effects that ideas can have were previously recognized by the liberal neo-institutionalists, although they did not expand their theorizing in this direction:

From the constructivist perspective, actors shape the structure of the international system by constructing issue-specific regimes. Wendt (1994) believes that modern states are involved in an uneven process, "It is a process, and even if it continues, we are only in its early stages. It is issue-specific (though it may "spill over" into new issue areas), mostly regional in nature, and a matter of degree" (p. 393). This can ultimately change the structure of the international system by

challenging the anarchic order, in which states exist. According to Wendt (1994), international states might eventually develop a collective identity. In turn, regimes support the diffusion of norms, increasing the convergence of states' identities and behavior, leading them to develop collective identities. In the next section, the constructivist understanding of international cooperation will be applied to reveal the social structure of Asia-Europe higher education inter-regionalism and its actors.

The main message of constructivism is that changes in international relations may not be easy, but they are possible. As noted by Wendt (1999), “These identities may be hard to change, but they are not carved in stone” (p. 21). In a similar vein, Wendt (1999) noted,

It does not assume that social change is easy or even possible in a given, socially constructed context. Actors must still overcome institutionalization, power asymmetries, and collective action problems to generate social change, and, indeed, sometimes this is more difficult in social structures than material ones. (p. 24)

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. This approach is called idealist. 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 (1999) 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 (1999), 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).

These foundational structures, in turn, structured international cooperation in issue-specific areas. As observed by Reus-Smit (1999),

For almost 150 years the fundamental institutions of contractual international law and multilateralism have provided the basic institutional framework for interstate cooperation and have become the favored institutional solutions to the myriad of coordination and collaboration problems facing states in an increasingly complex world. Without these basic institutional practices the plethora of international regimes that structure international relations in diverse issue-areas would simply not exist, and modern international society would function very differently. (p. 3)

Reus-Smit (1999) suggested that constitutional structures influence the role of states and international cooperation:

I argue that international societies are bound together by constitutional structures, which define the social identity of the state and the basic parameters of rightful state action. These structures incorporate three deep constitutive values: a hegemonic belief about the moral purpose of centralized, autonomous political organization; an organizing principle of sovereignty; and a norm of pure procedural justice. Constitutional structures exert a profound influence on the nature of institutional cooperation, with prevailing norms of pure procedural justice shaping institutional design and action. (pp. 26-27)

Reus-Smit (1999) gave the following definition of constitutional structures:

Constitutional structures are coherent ensembles of intersubjective beliefs, principles, and norms that perform two functions in ordering international societies: they define what constitutes a legitimate actor, entitled to all the rights and privileges of statehood; and they define the basic parameters of rightful state action. (p. 30)

Currently, sovereignty and legislative justice are the constitutional structures of the modern international system. Reus-Smit (1999) also defines fundamental institutions in the following way: “Fundamental institutions are the elementary rules of practice that states formulate to solve the coordination and collaboration problems associated with coexistence under anarchy” (p. 14). The

principles of international law and multilateralism are fundamental institutions of international relations today. According to Reus-Smit (1999),

Constitutional structures are the foundational institutions, comprising the constitutive values that define legitimate statehood and rightful state action; fundamental institutions encapsulate the basic rules of practice that structure how states solve cooperation problems; and issue-specific regimes enact basic institutional practices in particular realms of interstate relations. (p. 15)

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. (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. (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, 1998, 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 respective notes on their calendar, this agreement started to guide the behavior of these people. They have to deny requests for other events that happen at the time when 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 becomes 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.

Constructivist analysis of inter-regionalism and its actors

Wendt theorized that interaction between agents and structures could have multiple effects. Regarding the effects of structure on agents, Wendt (1999) suggested that structures can constitute agents' identities and regulate their behavior, for example, constrain this behavior or enable it. Structures also affect the interaction between actors. Regarding the effect of agents on structure, they can create ideas that constitute structures and strengthen or weaken the structure by following

or breaking structural norms. They can also create or modify structural norms as a result of cooperation. In connection with this, Wendt identified two categories of effects in the relationship between agents and structures: constitutive and causal.

Following Wendt, the constructivist school produced a lot of new knowledge and fruitful revelations about international relations, including the area of European politics. Specifically, Checkel (2001) theorized the following: “European institutions can construct, through a process of interaction, the identities and interests of member states and groups within them” (p. 548). Checkel (2001) suggested that at the European level, the EU shaped the behavior of the European Member states through learning and socialization, and at the domestic level, it used soft tactics to introduce European norms and ideas to the member countries of the European Union. According to Checkel (2005),

Moreover, the current interest in Brussels, London and elsewhere in moving the EU away from a strict regulatory role to one emphasizing standard-setting and so-called ‘soft law’ plays to the strength of social actors like NGOs: it is precisely the promotion of such informal practices and norms where they are most influential. (p. 555)

This dissertation extends the argument of Checkel (2001), suggesting that the European Union applies the same techniques when dealing with third countries.

Following the Agent-Structure Problem, the present dissertation seeks to identify the effects of EU aid on Central Asia, including causal and constitutive effects. Checkel (2001) supports the idea that the European Union can have indirect or unintended effects on the EU member-countries, which can be called constitutive effects: “First, there are well-established theoretical reasons for suspecting that Europe, especially Western Europe, is a most likely case for international institutions to have constitutive effects” (p. 59). Furthermore, the dissertation assesses Central Asian higher education's potential convergence toward European models and standards.

EU-Central Asia higher education inter-regionalism and its actors

In the previous section, we showed that deep values, including sovereignty of the state, are the foundation of international structure, on which essential principles of international relations are based, including international law and multilateralism. In combination with material conditions, and international regimes, these structures represent the three elements of the

international structure as defined by Wendt (1999): “Social structures have three elements: shared knowledge, material resources, and practices” (p. 139).

The present section aims to set inter-university cooperation between Central Asia and Europe within the structure of the modern international system and present its actors. Let’s use the following definition of Central Asia:

Central Asia, central region of Asia, extending from the Caspian Sea in the west to the border of western China in the east. It is bounded on the north by Russia and on the south by Iran, Afghanistan, and China. The region consists of the former Soviet republics of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan. (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2018)

The Central Asian region includes five Central Asian countries:

When the Soviet Union collapsed, all five Central Asian Soviet socialist republics obtained their independence in 1991, becoming the sovereign and independent nations of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2018)

This made the five Central Asian countries new state actors in international relations.

While Central Asian countries actively engage in international relations, the European Union is one of their most active international cooperation partners. “European Union (EU), international organization comprising 27 European countries and governing common economic, social, and security policies” (Gabel, 2022). In brief,

The EU was created by the Maastricht Treaty, which entered into force on November 1, 1993. The treaty was designed to enhance European political and economic integration by creating a single currency (the euro), a unified foreign and security policy, and common citizenship rights and by advancing cooperation in the areas of immigration, asylum, and judicial affairs. (Gabel, 2022)

The Maastricht treaty made the European Union a new non-state international actor, which became influential in modern international relations. So both European Union and Central Asian countries are international actors based on modern international law, rooted in deep fundamental values of the international system discussed in the previous section. This is the “Shared Knowledge” element of the modern international structure. Next element of the structure is

“Material Conditions.” European Union is an acknowledged international aid donor for Central Asian countries, funding numerous projects in various fields, including education (see chapter 2).

Finally, “Shared Knowledge” and “Material Conditions” shape the third element of the structure, “Practices.” Constructivists suggest that international regimes represent the element of “Practices” in modern international relations. The present inter-regional cooperation between EU and Central Asian countries is based on the EU strategy document titled: “Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council. The EU and Central Asia: New Opportunities for a Stronger Partnership” (European Commission, 2019). According to this document, the EU cooperation with Central Asian countries is set into a broader framework of norms and rules driven by the United Nations, the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, and other international organizations. Thus, EU-Central Asia cooperation is nested within a larger complex of international agreements and norms.

In education, the vision for cooperation between the EU and the five Central Asian countries is set within the two high level meeting of education ministers that took place in an inter-regional format. The first high-level meeting, titled the First Meeting of Ministers for Education of the Member States of the European Union and of the Central Asian countries took place in Riga, on 25th and 26th of June, 2015 (Education Ministers of the EU and the Central Asian Countries, 2015). As a result of that meeting, Joint Communiqué was published, which the three key directions of cooperation under the umbrella of the EU-Central Asia higher education inter-regionalism: 1) “Development of Qualification Frameworks and Standards”; 2) “Quality Assurance and Accreditation”; 3) “Employment and Labour Market Needs” (Education Ministers of the EU and the Central Asian Countries, 2015). In higher education, the Communiqué proclaimed the Bologna process and Erasmus + programs as the main fields of activities (Education Ministers of the EU and the Central Asian Countries, 2015). The Communiqué set a road map for high-level seminars, roundtables and official meetings in support of the action proclaimed in the Joint Communiqué (Education Ministers of the EU and the Central Asian Countries, 2015).

The second high-level meeting between the education of the two regions took place in Astana on 23rd June 2017. The Second Meeting of Ministers for Education of the Member States of the European Union and of the Central Asian Countries released a document named Astana

Declaration. The Clause 6 of the Astana Declaration proclaimed that all the ministers acknowledge the role of the Bologna process as the guiding initiative for EU-Central Asia cooperation in higher education:

Participating Ministers and delegates acknowledged that the Bologna process in Higher Education, which created the European Higher Education Area, provides guidance and orientation to the further development of cooperation in this field, linked to the priorities mentioned in the Yerevan Communiqué (May 2015): enhancing the quality and relevance of learning and teaching; fostering the employability of graduates throughout their working lives; making education systems more inclusive; and supporting agreed structural reforms in education. (Education Ministers of the EU and the Central Asian Countries, 2017, p. 2)

Clause 21 of Astana Declaration made the following note regarding the Bologna process:

Whilst only Kazakhstan is a formal Member of the European Higher Education Area, participating Ministers and delegates of all Central Asia countries confirmed their interest to be associated with the Bologna Process which has proposed guidance for many national reforms” (Education Ministers of the EU and the Central Asian Countries, 2017, p. 5). A whole section was dedicated to the Erasmus + Programme (Clauses 24-26). The section was titled “Erasmus + as main European Union programme to support capacity building and academic mobility in education in Central Asia countries. (Education Ministers of the EU and the Central Asian Countries, 2017, p. 5)

In frames of the Bologna process, the EU described in the documents its intention to involve Central Asian universities in leading European cooperation programs, including the Horizon, Erasmus+, and other programs. Thus, within the framework of the Bologna process, Central Asian universities become involved in international cooperation as non-state actors in international relations.

So the structure of Asia-Europe higher education inter-regionalism includes financial support from the European Union to Central Asian countries, international norms and agreements, and the Bologna process. EU-Central Asia strategy and the Bologna process shape the international cooperation at the level of actual practice, in which universities get involved as practitioners of inter-university cooperation between the EU and the five Central Asian countries.

To sum up, EU-Central Asia higher education inter-regionalism contains the following actors: the EU and its member countries, five Central Asian countries and European and Central

Asian universities. The structure of the EU-Central Asia higher education inter-regionalism consists of international legal framework, the EU development aid to Central Asia, EU-Central Asia strategies, Joint Communiqué of the EU-CA education ministers 2015, Astana Declaration (2017) and the Bologna process and its relevant programmes, including Erasmus +.

It was theorized that modern actors create international regimes to facilitate cooperation, which affects cooperation and becomes an element of a social structure. In turn, the social structure of modern international relations causes convergence through international regimes. Based on this theorization, one possible effect of the EU-CA HE inter-regionalism can be a convergence of Central Asian higher education systems and universities based on the Bologna principles and standards. However, states can also shape the process by enabling or constraining its influence. Overall, the effectiveness of the Bologna process and the European programs in Central Asia cannot be measured through the traditional way of compliance, as most Central Asian countries are not subject to standard European measurement instruments, which can be applied to Bologna member countries, especially those who are members of the European Union. However, only one CA country is currently a member of the Bologna process. In this context, the question of the measuring the effectiveness of the EU-CA inter-regionalism arises.

In the context of the EU-Central Asia higher education inter-regionalism, the role of issue-specific experts, who can support the practical development of the main directions of the EU-Central Asia higher education inter-regionalism becomes an important question. Constructivists have developed the concept of an epistemic community to describe the travel process of international norms and standards. In the opinion of constructivists, epistemic communities are important international actors who support the diffusion of international norms from region to region or from country to country.

Epistemic Community

As mentioned earlier, regional and inter-regional initiatives in higher education often deal with issues of harmonization of regional degree structures and higher education quality assurance. In connection with this, these initiatives gave rise to the communities of experts who possess issue-specific knowledge. To describe the influence of these experts, constructivists developed the concept of an epistemic community.

Finnemore and Sikkink (1998) present a definition of norm, which scholars and experts commonly use. According to them, the norm is “a standard of appropriate behavior for actors with

a given identity” (p. 891). Norms can be regulative, like laws, but they can also be prescriptive. Tuning-based competence-based learning is one such prescriptive norm recommended to universities interested in aligning their curriculum with the standards of the Bologna process. According to the webpage of the Tuning Academy on the website of the University of Deusto, Spain,

The Tuning methodology has four lines of work which help to organize a discussion in specific subject areas: identifying relevant generic and subject-specific competences and elaborating a meta-profile for the subject area; exploring how a mutually agreed cumulative credit system can facilitate student mobility; exchanging good practices in approaches and techniques in teaching, learning and assessment; and finally exploring how quality assurance frameworks can be used at the program level to enhance student learning. (Tuning Academy⁷, n. d.)

In connection with the international influence of the Tuning initiative and its role in the EU-driven higher education inter-regionalism, the present dissertation suggests studying the effects of the EU-Central Asian inter-regionalism by applying the concept of “epistemic community” (Haas, 1992). 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). Thus, Tuning members possess expertise in competence-based learning, which supports harmonization efforts in the process of the EU-Central Asia higher education inter-regionalism.

The role of epistemic communities in European public policies was highlighted by European integration scholars Börzel and Risse (2012), suggesting that they help to spread norms and act as policy entrepreneurs. According to Harmsen (2015), “The BP clearly has elements of such an epistemic community. The process, in specific areas such as quality assurance or the development of qualifications frameworks, is invested with specific technical competence” (p. 795). Similarly, Tackney (2014) claims that the Bologna process is very much dependent on European-based epistemic communities as it is driven by cooperation among universities at the institutional level. In connection with the statement of Tackney (2014), it is essential to note that the external dimension of the Bologna process also relies a lot on the institutional efforts of European universities and their partner universities abroad.

⁷ <https://www.unideusto.org/tuningeu/tuning-academy.html>

Definition of an Epistemic Community

In connection with the increasing role of international institutions, Haas (1992) suggested using the concept of an “epistemic community” to describe the role of area experts in policymaking. 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. Although an epistemic community may consist of professionals from a variety of disciplines and backgrounds, they have (1) a shared set of normative and principled beliefs, which provide a value-based rationale for the social action of community members; (2) shared causal beliefs, which are derived from their analysis of practices leading or contributing to a central set of problems in their domain and which then serve as the basis for elucidating the multiple linkages between possible policy actions and desired outcomes; (3) shared notions of validity— that is, intersubjective, internally defined criteria for weighing and validating knowledge in the domain of their expertise; and (4) a common policy enterprise—that is, a set of common practices associated with a set of problems to which their professional competence is directed, presumably out of the conviction that human welfare will be enhanced as a consequence. (p. 3)

It shall be noted that the concept of the epistemic community turned out to be so valuable in analyzing and explaining policy processes that it has received an application in a range of different areas, including agriculture, international relations, legal medicine, and educational science (Dunlop, 2012, p. 231). Not only did Haas set the ground for the research domain on epistemic communities, but through his interaction, he inspired some constructivist international relations scholars to research the role of ideas in policymaking (Goldstein et al., 1993) and “transnational advocacy networks” (Keck & Sikkink, 1999). Consequently, epistemic communities are recognized actors in policymaking and diffusion today. However, most scholars chose different public sectors to analyze the role of ideas in nuclear arms control (Adler, 1992), environmental policy (Haas, 2002), humanitarian intervention (Finnemore, 1996), and human rights (Keck & Sikkink, 1999). The field of higher education has not received sufficient attention

from the constructivist camp. Further, the analysis of competence-based learning will be provided as a norm, based on principled and causal beliefs.

Development of an Epistemic Community

While reading the two articles in the same issue, in which the article by Haas (1992) was published, the researcher adapted a framework for the development of an epistemic community based on case studies by Drake and Nicolaidis (1992) on the topic of GATS, and by Adler (1992) on the topic of cooperation in the field of nuclear arms control between the United States and the Soviet Union. The following main phases may be identified in the development of an epistemic community approach:

1) The government faces an issue.

According to Drake and Nicolaidis (1992), governments may end up in situations when a policy's advantages or disadvantages are unclear. However, governments might need to respond to specific challenges, changes, and ongoing developments. In this situation, the expert opinions of members of an epistemic community become powerful in shaping governmental interests.

2) Government invites experts to discuss an issue.

The specific, concrete ways epistemic communities do it is by gathering the negotiators for discussion and drafting the initial policy ideas. According to Drake and Nicolaidis (1992), epistemic communities do not have to appear without a context. Instead, they can emerge in the context of governmental efforts and demand for policy ideas and expert knowledge. However, bargaining often corrects the influence of epistemic communities, follows the activities of epistemic communities, and can correct the course of ideas developed by the joint efforts of epistemic communities.

3) Experts from various professional paths unite over developing a solution to an issue.

The desire to solve the issue unites professionals from various directions, which makes epistemic communities different from professions. Initially, the growth of the epistemic community develops from communication between individual people from government agencies looking into a policy issue with individual experts. Experts could be representatives of different sectors working on a shared policy issue, and the desire to solve the issue can converge representatives of various sectors. In connection with this, epistemic communities are not professionally homogenous, and what unites them is the upholding of causal beliefs, which are scientifically grounded.

4) *Experts converge over shared principled beliefs.*

According to Adler (1992), members of one group of the United States epistemic community on the issue of nuclear arms control held the following causal ideas: nuclear war cannot be won, technology cannot solve the problem but can help create the nuclear balance. In connection with this, members of the epistemic community established the following causal beliefs: prevention of a first strike is an essential strategy, and cooperation with the adversary is necessary. The members of the second group of an epistemic community believed nuclear wars could be won with necessary measures. In connection with this, they had the following causal belief: “credible threats” can be used to prevent other countries from challenging the status quo, and cooperation with the adversary is dangerous. However, these two groups both held a principled belief about the short-term benefits of cooperation and arms control, which led the two groups to converge. Furthermore, according to Adler (1992), the members of two groups often communicated with each other, which fastened the convergence. Two groups converged because (1) they were united by their principled beliefs, and (2) they knew each other well.

5) *Experts formulate a solution to an issue through a cause-and-effect statement.*

It was concluded by Adler (1992) that in situations of uncertainty, theories that establish cause and effect relations help governments to define their interests. Most often, cause-effect relations are defined by experts and academics because their experience validates theories. Furthermore, countries tend to share these cause-effect theories with other countries. According to Adler (1992),

To prescribe an effective course of action, a community of strategists requires a theory that, as Charles Reynolds suggests, “show[s] a causal relationship between conditions, a governing principle, and a result. The [political] actor then has the choice, should he so wish, to procure the result by fulfilling the conditions.” (p. 107)

6) *Bargaining between governmental actors and international diffusion.*

According to Adler (1992), domestic epistemic communities of the United States provided a foundation for negotiations with the Soviet Union in the form of causal ideas. Later, the ideas were modified through bargaining. This finding is important because domestic epistemic communities can extend their influence at the international level, for example, if the government supports them. According to Adler (1992),

That is why we need to pay more attention to the international influence of national epistemic communities in various fields, including arms control. They may be able to affect international political processes and outcomes by binding present and future decision makers to a set of concepts and meanings that amount to a new interpretation of reality and also by becoming actors in the process of political selection of their own ideas. (p. 106)

It is suggested that epistemic communities play a critical role in the process of diffusion of international norms in higher education at the local level. As the competence-based learning is a part of the European university regulative framework, and the Tuning initiative significantly relies upon the expertise of a group of international experts, it is suggested that Tuning initiative is an epistemic community that promotes competence-based learning in frames of the external dimension of the Bologna process.

Development of the Tuning Community

The present section will present the development of the Tuning project into an epistemic community, using the framework outlined in the previous section. Robert Wagenaar (2019) provided the most detailed account of the Tuning community.

1) Policymakers are facing an issue.

In July 2000, at the meeting of ECTS counselors, a number of issues were raised: “course to course comparison” was still in use, and the elective courses were not in practice. In response to these issues, an education expert Julia González offered to implement a novel project based on the use of learning outcomes (Wagenaar, 2019).

2) Scholars are searching for a solution.

Later, Julia González involved another scholar Robert Wagenaar, with whom they collaborated on the development of a project proposal. The idea of the project was to identify the desired learning outcomes in five subject areas, thereby achieving convergence, transparency, and improved mobility for students. At this stage, a cause-effect link was proposed by González and Wagenaar. However, they needed the support of other scholars to promote it (Wagenaar, 2019).

3) Involving other interested experts.

An Open Call for participation was sent out to European universities. This Open call was spread with the aid of European National Agencies. The national-level Conferences of Rectors and the existing at that time European Rectors Conferences helped in the selection of participating universities. All the experts came from various disciplinary backgrounds, so they were

representatives of different professions. It is their interest in a common issue that united them in the project. Thus, all the universities that were interested in the issue raised by Wagenaar and González joined their pilot project (Wagenaar, 2019).

4) *Converging over common beliefs.*

One of the initial points on which the participants agreed was the importance of faculty members and university departments in the implementation process. This led the participants to develop a multi-level approach to their project. Furthermore, the participants agreed on the importance of academic freedom, which in the project context, was connected to the design of academic programs. Finally, all the participants agreed to focus on the importance of employability for the project goals. These three ideas became the point of convergence of principled beliefs of the members of the first Tuning project, which created a foundation for the emergence of an epistemic community (Wagenaar, 2019).

5) *Establishing cause-effect links.*

As a final result of the project work, a methodology was developed, which was driven by these principled beliefs and by the cause-effect link between the X and the Y. As a result of the project, scholars developed the following cause-effect links (Wagenaar, 2019):

- The use of competencies makes academic programs transparent and more accountable to employers and society.
- The use of competencies ensures the student-centered approach.
- The use of competencies ensures employability.
- The use of learning outcomes ensures congruence with the needs of society, providing a ground for citizenship education.
- The use of competencies promotes readable and comparable degrees, contributing to the development of EHEA.

6) *Spreading causal ideas and beliefs.*

Furthermore, the Tuning project expanded its activities, involving the European Thematic Network Programmes (TNPs). In addition, Tuning conducted conferences that involved high-level policymakers from European and national levels of the EU. All members of the project actively promoted the Tuning methodology at both European and national levels. According to Wagenaar (2019),

The contacts at the national level, national ministries and Rectors' Conferences, including Conferences of Deans were left to the individual members of the project. This was different for professional organizations. In those cases, relationships were organized and kept by the coordinators of the subject area groups. (p. 259)

Members of Tuning produced a lot of publications in press and academic journals. Finally, the Tuning community established its own academic journal: The Tuning Journal (Wagenaar, 2019).

7) *Tuning results.*

As a result, the Tuning methodology became known and applied by policymakers and academic circles. As Wagenaar (2019) recalls, "At the end of 2016 it had been referenced more than 2000 times; one and a half year later 500 times more. It was also applied as a source of inspiration for other projects" (p. 266).

To sum up, over time, Tuning experts developed into an epistemic community, while Tuning methodology developed into a common policy enterprise on the basis of shared causal and principled beliefs. Based on this analysis, it can be said that the core group of members interacted with other members and influenced their views. Therefore, it is suggested to analyze the publications of European and Central Asia authors to test this proposition.

Chapter Summary

The present Chapter's aim was to present Wendtian constructivism as the theory driving the research of the present dissertation. The chapter revealed how earlier schools of International Relations experienced issues with explaining prolific international cooperation in modern times. Furthermore, the Chapter showed how understanding of international structure actors, as well as their relationship changed with the development of new International Theories. Wendtian Constructivism uses ideas as the primary change mechanism in contemporary international relations. The Chapter identified EU-Central Asia higher education inter-regionalism and its main actors. Finally, the Chapter revealed the development of Tuning community as an epistemic community in higher education.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY⁸

The purpose of this chapter is to present the simultaneous qualitative case study approach as the primary method of the present dissertation. The chapter presents semi-structured interviews and qualitative content analysis of articles as the primary data collection methods for the case study. The dissertation applies a theory-driven approach to the analysis of data.

Researcher's Philosophical Stance

To answer the Research Questions of the Present dissertation, the researcher adopts Wendtian constructivism as the main approach of this study. In connection with this, the researcher adopts a constructivist and idealist approach to studying the EU-Central Asia higher education regionalism (See Chapter 1).

In the Ph.D. program, the researcher was required to pass a Complex Exam and defend a detailed research plan. To fulfill these requirements, the researcher engaged in reading the literature and placing it in connection with the dissertation. The knowledge of relevant literature informed the researcher's choice of theory-guided research. During the research proposal preparation, the researcher used the textbook by Creswell and Poth (2018) to study methodological approaches. Initially, the researcher used Creswell and Poth's (2018) description of constructivism to describe the approach of the doctoral presentation. However, later the researcher found some differences between constructivism in International Relations and the constructivism by Denzin and Lincoln (2011), whose interpretation is followed by Creswell and Poth (2018). In connection with this, the present dissertation adopts the constructivist approach as one of the theories of the International Relations discipline (Spindler, 2013). However, the understanding of constructivism, as described by Creswell and Poth (2018) and Denzin and Lincoln (2011), is popular in educational research circles. To avoid the potential confusion, the following section will examine the difference between the two interpretations of constructivism in educational research and international relations.

⁸ The present section is based on 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>

Constructivism by Denzin and Lincoln

Social constructivism is “the school of thought that recognizes knowledge as embedded in the social context and sees human thoughts, feelings, language, and behavior as the result of interchanges with the external world” (APA Dictionary of Psychology, 2022). While social constructivism in education and international relations research is based on this understanding, scholars in both disciplines have elaborated different discipline-specific theories. Following Denzin and Lincoln (2011), Creswell and Poth (2018) describe social constructivism as an interpretive paradigm (p. 60). In connection with their understanding of the interpretive paradigm, these authors suggest that researchers should not apply any literature before creating the research plan. They suggest that grounded theory is the primary method of interpretive paradigm, based on which researchers cannot apply conceptual or theoretical framework before any data collection. As noted by Gilgun (2015), “With the publication of Glaser & Strauss’s (1967) *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*, induction became associated with qualitative research and, for many researchers, prior conceptual frameworks, or qualitative deductive research, became suspect” (p. 2).

However, some researchers criticize the perception of qualitative research as simplistic (Avenier and Thomas, 2015, Berkovich, 2017; Packer, 2018). Having studied the history of the grounded theory approach, Gilgun found the acknowledgment by Glaser and Strauss (1967) that “researchers are not tabula rasa but bring their own ideas into research questions” (p. 10). Gilgun also studied a note by Glaser (1978), which suggested that knowledge of theory might be useful in grounded theory research. Based on this analysis, Gilgun suggested that qualitative researchers can use a priori theories in a deductive way. Furthermore, Gilgun discovered a practical recommendation by Strauss (1987) that conceptual frameworks are often required in grant proposals by funding agencies (Gilgun, 2015, p. 11). Gilgun concluded that Glaser and Strauss do not negatively perceive a priori theory as it might seem at first (ibid, p. 12). Similarly, Su (2018) suggested that the Straussian, in contrast with the Glaserian approach, can be deductive.

Constructivism in the International Relations Discipline

Various constructivist theories exist in international relations with different ontologies and epistemology (Spindler, 2013, p. 198). The present dissertation adopts “thin” constructivism (Holscheiter, 2013), developed by Alexander Wendt (1987, 1999). Wendtian constructivism is a scientific realist and constructivist in ontology and positivist in epistemology (Spindler, 2013).

As described in the Theoretical Framework chapter, Wendtian constructivism relies on ideas' role in explaining the change in international relations. Thus, the effects of inter-regionalism often get intertwined with local circumstances (Jones, 2010a). The present dissertation uses the constitutive explanation to understand the effect of inter-regionalism on Central Asian countries.

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 (2001) 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. (p. 55)

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 (Appendix II) 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 (Appendix III). 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 (Appendix IV). These questions were based on Saçli (2011) and personal communication with Fatma Saçli 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 (Appendix I). 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 5.

Table 5. *Experts Involved in the Interview-Based Part of the Dissertation.*

Group of experts	Assigned code
European experts in the TuCAHEA consortium	EUEXP1
	EUEXP2
	EUEXP3

	EUEXP4
	EUEXP5
Central Asian experts in the TuCAHEA consortium	CAEXP1
	CAEXP2
	CAEXP3
	CAEXP4
	CAEXP5
	CAEXP6
	CAEXP7
	CAEXP8
	CAEXP9
	CAEXP10
International experts who were involved in government-level meetings in Central Asia	INTEXP1
	INTEXP2
	INTEXP3

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 through the use of communication technologies (e. g. WhatsApp or Zoom). One of the European experts sent notes in response to the questions. On average, one interview lasted about 30 minutes. However, many face-to-face interviews lasted to 90 minutes.

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 (Appendix I), 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 (Appendix I). The researcher requested and received the ethical permission from the Ethical Committee of ELTE university before the start of data collection (Appendix VI).

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 of the study participants and participants' quotations to protect their identities. Finally, the researcher avoided using personal pronouns when referring to the participants.

Qualitative Content Analysis of Tuning Publications: Research Method and Sampling

Overall, the research is a qualitative case study, focusing on the single case of a TuCAHEA project. The sampling population includes European and Central Asian experts involved in the TuCAHEA project. The researchers found four out of five Central Asian countries involved in the TuCAHEA project: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. Unfortunately, the

researcher did not find any papers about the project or the competence-based learning written by the Turkmen scholars who took part in the TuCAHEA project.

As mentioned above, the concluding report of the TuCAHEA project provided a list of articles written by the participants. However, the search engine did not identify the sources when trying to purposefully search the articles based on the information in the TuCAHEA report. Therefore, the researcher used the keywords “Tuning” and “Central Asia” in the Russian Science Citation Index. Reading the titles of articles, the researcher could initially identify 29 articles. However, upon closer reading, not all the articles were found relevant. For example, some papers only mentioned the project while discussing another topic, such as the internationalization activities of some universities. Papers written by a member of the TuCAHEA project with several authors from outside of the targeted TuCAHEA community were eliminated. However, some members of the TuCAHEA project co-authored articles, despite belonging to different subject groups. These papers remained in the sample. Eventually, the researcher selected 13 articles dedicated to competence-based learning, written by the TuCAHEA project members. The following table presents a list of selected articles, with the names of their author and the subject group in which the author was involved in the TuCAHEA project. While some articles by Central Asian experts presented the results of the TuCAHEA project, other articles included review papers on the topic of competence-based learning.

Many TuCAHEA members from Central Asia published their articles based on their experience in the TuCAHEA project. In connection with this, these articles represent the key causal and principled beliefs of these members, developed through their experience in the project (Table 6).

Table 6. *Sampling of Articles by TuCAHEA Central Asia authors Selected for Analysis.*

No.	Name of authors	Country	Institutional affiliation during the period of the TuCAHEA project	Member of a subject group in TuCAHEA	Content of the article
1.	Abilova, 2013	Kazakhstan	Kazakh Academy of Architecture and Leading of	Engineering	TuCAHEA case study of Engineering subject group

			Civil Engineering		
2.	Azhybaev et al., 2014	Kyrgyzstan	S. Naamatov Naryn State University	Education	Review article on the competence-based learning
3.	Azhybaev et al., 2015	Kyrgyzstan	S. Naamatov Naryn State University	Education Language	Review article on the competence-based learning
4.	Dyusheyeva, n.d.	Kyrgyzstan	Issyk-kul State University named after K. Tynystanov	History	Literature review on the topic of competence-based learning and learning outcomes
5.	Kadyrova, 2016	Tajikistan	Tajik State University of Commerce	Business	TuCAHEA case study of the Business subject group
6.	Mambaeva, 2018	Kyrgyzstan	Kyrgyz-Turkish Manas University	Language	Analysis of competencies of a translator-linguist profession
7.	Nurmatov, 2015	Uzbekistan	Andijan State University	Economics	TuCAHEA case study of Economics subject group
8.	Giyasova, 2015	Uzbekistan	Samarkand State Institute of Foreign Languages	Language	Review article on the competence-based learning
9.	Sanginov and Kadyrova, 2014	Tajikistan	Tajik State University of Commerce	Education Business	Review article on the competence-based learning
10.	Tuleuova et al., 2016	Kazakhstan	Karaganda State University after E.A.Buketov	History	TuCAHEA case study of History subject group
11.	Zakirova et al., 2020	Kazakhstan	International Information	Language	Review article on the topic of competencies

			Technology University		
12.	Lutfullayev 2018	Uzbekistan	Namangan State University	Language	Review article on the topic of quality assurance
13.	Tologonova et al., 2021	Uzbekistan	International University of Kyrgyzstan	Business	Results of the training needs analysis

Furthermore, several articles were written by scholars whose universities participated in the TuCAHEA project. Although these scholars' names were not included in one of the final reports of the TuCAHEA project, they clearly described their involvement in the project in their articles. During the personal communication, the researcher learned that some additional people were involved in the project outside the core group. Finally, a few papers dedicated their analysis to the competence-based learning and TuCAHEA experience. The TuCAHEA project strongly influenced these papers, so they were also included as additional analysis sources (Table 7).

Table 7. *Papers by Central Asian Faculty Indirectly Involved in the TuCAHEA Project.*

No.	Name of authors	Country	Institutional affiliation indicated in the paper	Discipline	Description of article
1.	Azimova, 2017	Tajikistan	The Tajik State University of Law, Business and Politics	Economics	Review paper on the topic of multidisciplinary and competence-based learning
2.	Manapbayeva, 2014	Kazakhstan	International Information Technology University	Computer science	Application of TuCAHEA results to create an example lesson-plan
1.	Muratalieva, 2019a	Kyrgyzstan	K. Karasayev Bishkek	History	TUCAHEA case study of History subject group

			Humanities University		
2.	Muratalieva, 2019b	Kyrgyzstan	K. Karasayev Bishkek Humanities University	History	Review article on the competence-based learning

Similarly, the names of European experts were identified in the final report of the TuCAHEA project. The researcher read the bios of the authors to search for relevant publications. Here, the researcher also faced some difficulties. Several European experts involved in the TuCAHEA published many articles in European languages, like Swedish or Italian. For example, an article on the TuCAHEA project was published in Spanish (Eizaguirre & Feijoo, 2016). Eventually, the researcher identified three English-language articles that corresponded to the study (Table 8). Additionally, the researcher included the dissertation by Wagenaar (2019) in the analysis (Table 8). However, Robert Wagenaar was a part of the project leadership, rather than a European expert, directly involved in the regular activities of the project. European experts interacted more than Wagenaar with their Central Asian peers. However, as Robert Wagenaar is one of the creators behind the Tuning methodology, his beliefs were also analyzed to compare how similar the views of the Central Asian and European members of the project.

Table 8. *Sampling of Articles by the European TuCAHEA Members Selected for Analysis.*

No.	Name of authors	Country	Institutional affiliation during the period of the TuCAHEA project	Member of a subject group in TuCAHEA	Content of the article
1.	Wagenaar, 2019		Groningen University	The leadership of the project	Dissertation on the history of Tuning
2.	Eizaguirre, García-	Spain	University of Deusto	Business	Review of competencies for sustainability in future

	Feijoo, and Laka, 2019				
3.	Nováky, 2017	Sweden	Uppsala University	History	Reflection on the competencies outlined in three Tuning projects
4.	Zgaga, 2013	Slovenia	University of Ljubljana	Education	Review of teacher education in the Bologna context

In analyzing selected publications, the researcher manually performed conventional content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Initially, the researcher read each publication to understand the general meaning of the texts. Next, the researcher identified the extracts of the articles, which expressed the views of the authors that corresponded with the definition of causal or principled beliefs by Goldstein et al. (1993). Then, both causal and principled beliefs were organized by two groups of authors: European and Central Asian members of the TuCAHEA community.

Data Analysis of Interviews with TuCAHEA Members

Gilgun (2015) suggested the Deductive Qualitative Analysis (DQA) as a theory-driven but flexible approach that allows qualitative researchers to test theories. According to Gilgun (2015), 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 the 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. (p. 13)

Gilgun (2015) suggested that DQA is suitable for Ph.D. students, whose dissertation committees often require them to show their knowledge of existing theories and literature in the research plans. Similarly, funders often reject research proposals without detailed descriptions of the research framework and methods (Gilgun, 2015). These situations often drive early-career researchers to use deductive thinking in their research. Gilgun (2015) further argues for using QDA, suggesting that without a preliminary literature study, early-career researchers could miss essential aspects of the studied phenomena and spend more time finding the research focus.

The researcher transcribed the interviews and applied deductive coding to the interview texts, based on Gilgun's (2011) understanding:

With grounded theory type of coding, you usually first do open coding, which means you simply go through the material and mark up the text with any ideas that come to mind. In deductive qualitative analysis, you also do open coding, but you can do it before or after you code using your prior codes. (p. 2)

Initially, the researcher applied coding based on the research questions, looking for the description of effects of the programs, perceptions of participants and barriers towards the program. Following that the researcher applied open coding in data analysis. The researcher analyzed interviews in Russian and English language. At a later stage, the researcher translated the coded interview quotations into English language.

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

In this chapter, the results of the data analysis are represented based on the interviews with Central Asian and European groups of experts who took part in the Tuning initiative in Central Asia. The purpose of the chapter is to show that the TuCAHEA project provided a fertile ground for fruitful professional collaboration between Central Asian and European TuCAHEA experts. It strengthened the academic links which were established during earlier EU-funded inter-university cooperation projects and ensured the organization of work along the key directions of the TuCAHEA project. Finally, it ensured the continuation of the project ideas within the community of the TuCAHEA experts. Based on the collaborative approach, the TuCAHEA project created a unique atmosphere, which facilitated the development of the project participants into a new regional community of competence-based learning experts in Central Asia. As a result, the Central Asian experts felt that they became a part of one community. Finally, the purpose of the chapter is to reveal a number of barriers to increasing regional inter-university cooperation in Central Asia, as perceived by both European and Central Asian TuCAHEA experts. The chapter will show that many participants perceive political barriers to be among the key challenges towards the common higher education area in Central Asia.

Perspectives of the European Tuning Experts on the Effect of the Tuning Project in Central Asia

The analysis of the interviews with European experts reveals three main ways in which European Union was able to shape higher education cooperation in Central Asia. First, through the Tempus project, European Union supported several projects related to the learning and adoption of the Bologna model in Kyrgyzstan, as well as in other Central Asian countries. It was mainly after interacting with Kyrgyz academia and the Kyrgyz Tempus office that one of the European TuCAHEA project leaders decided to set up the “Bologna KG” (KG is an abbreviation for Kyrgyzstan). Following that project, the idea of the Tuning project in Central Asia emerged. By doing this, European Union created academic links between European and Central Asian universities and faculty.

Second, the TuCAHEA project gathered a team of European experts who had previously long experience in a series of European ECTS and Tuning projects. Thus, European expertise was brought to Central Asia.

Third, once the TuCAHEA project came to life, the European founding partners shaped the meaning of the CAHEA, which included the five post-Soviet countries of Central Asia. Although one of the interviewees suggested that this was done for practical reasons, in another comment, the same interviewee mentioned that this was the vision of Central Asia in Tempus, which influenced the involvement of all five countries in the project, and no other potential countries, like Afghanistan or Azerbaijan.

Finally, the project ideas have been thriving among Central Asian academia, and its ideas have been continued in time, both in the legislation of CA countries, as well as in the form of new projects that continued the ideas of Tuning and applying its method. Specifically, one of the interviewees mentioned the health project in Uzbekistan that employed the Tuning methodology.

Overall, the major themes that emerged during the interviews include:

- 1) Establishing EU-CA academic links before the project and keeping them after the project.
- 2) Structural impact: shaping the definition of CAHEA, organizing the joint meeting of ministries, pilot mobility scheme.
- 3) Continuation of ideas.
- 4) Positive assessment of the project results.

Establishing EU-CA Academic Links Before the Project and Their Continuation

Before creating the TuCAHEA project, one of the interviewees, a leading expert in TuCAHEA, was involved in the project named Bologna KG. The interviewee EUEXP1 was engaged in various projects, many of which were Tuning initiatives in other regions and countries. At the same time, the interviewee took part in other Tuning projects simultaneously with the Bologna KG project. The interviewee shared that the interviewee connections established with the faculty members of Kyrgyzstan led to the creation of a Tempus-funded project called the “Bologna KG.” Simultaneously, the Kyrgyz Tempus Office was particularly active during the period, and it contributed to the development by arranging a meeting of CA coordinators of Erasmus plus offices. The interviewee said participants kept in touch via email after the project ended. To sum

up, funding the TuCAHEA project has helped establish academic links between Central Asian and European experts, who both had a mutual interest in the Bologna process (Table 9).

Table 9. Establishing EU-CA Academic Links (interview quotations of the study participants).

EUEXP1	I was also engaged in Tuning in other parts of the world. And I was also guiding [name of another inter-university cooperation project in Europe], so it was quite a busy time, but nonetheless, we carried out the Kyrgyz project with [unclear]. And then, we proposed a second one, which eventually did Tuning for 11 subject areas with using the Tuning methodology. And in the meantime, I was involved in Tuning educational structures in Europe, and Tuning educational structures in Latin America and also Tuning Russia. And so, I was involved in Tuning in all these areas, and I'm very happy to use this knowledge for Central Asia
EUEXP1	On the basis of the friendships that were built up at that time and my dedication to Kyrgyzstan and to Central Asia in general, I decided to propose a Tempus project called "Bologna KG," which was to bring Bologna understandings and Tuning practices to Kyrgyzstan and actually we did this in two phases.
EUEXP1	There was a meeting promoted by the Kyrgyz Tempus office of the coordinators from the other Central Asian countries in the definition I just mentioned. At that time, I tried to; I decided to make a Tuning for all of Central Asia.
EUEXP2	It was very open. It was very open. Maybe it was more open in the second half and at the end of the project. Because let me say, you know this what we call human relationship chemistry. At the beginning, we didn't know one another later. Of course, I mean in particular with these conferences, dinners and social events, you learn that another person from the other country is a collector of stamps and you are a collector of stamps as well. You know, and this makes them much closer links. At the beginning, so there were some constraints maybe in communication, and in particular, the constraint was language. But later on, it was better and better, and at the end

	actually, we left as good friends, and I still receive some Christmas greetings from some people and sent greetings of course back.
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Bringing European Expertise

Overall, all the experts involved in the TuCAHEA project came from one community founded based on their activities within two European projects: the European Credit Transfer System Pilot Scheme (see Erasmus, 1991) and the Tuning projects in other regions. Furthermore, all the participants were recognized experts in their subject, many of whom had occupied leading research positions in their universities. The experts had known each other and had cooperated for many years. Two universities led the project: the financial part was managed by the University of Groningen, and the University of Pisa managed the scientific part of the project. According to the interviewee EUEXP1, both universities were in the ECTS pilot project, which later became a foundation of many years of collaboration. The interviewee EUEXP1 has defined the cooperation between the University of Pisa and the University of Groningen as a natural partnership. “But it's important to know that since 1989 we have been collaborating with the University of Groningen again, first in the ECTS pilot project, and then in all the Tuning projects in Central Asia and Latin America and so forth. So, this was quite a natural partnership, but my role was designer, writer, and coordinator of the project.” European expert EUEXP2 stated that he perceived European colleagues as people from the Tuning world and the ECTS world. Furthermore, the members of the European expert groups were people with expertise from the previous ECTS and Tuning projects.

Furthermore, EUEXP2 highlighted the importance of friendship and trust ties between the European experts from different countries. However, while EUEXP2 mentioned the friendly ties that had existed between European academic experts, their expertise was particularly important for the selection in the TuCAHEA project. According to EUEXP1, the ECTS pilot project involved her in the long-term activities in the sphere of Erasmus projects based on EUEXP1’s university. This active and long-term involvement in the ECTS pilot project made EUEXP1 an expert on the Bologna process.

This experience in earlier European projects connected European experts in the TuCAHEA project (Table 10). Furthermore, the experts were chosen for the European experts' role due to their experience. Similarly, EUEXP2 mentioned that European experts participated due to their

experience in previous Tuning projects rather than their institutional membership. Similarly, the interviewee EUEXP2 is still involved in some Tuning activities. In another place, the interviewee mentioned involvement in the peer review of the Tuning journal. The interviewee EUEXP3 had also participated in previous Tuning projects. The previous experience of European experts made them valuable for further projects and their universities. The interviewee EUEXP1 mentioned the importance of manpower that was driving the project. The interviewee EUEXP1 referred to her expertise as the manpower that was the basis of EUEXP1's involvement in the TuCAHEA project. Similarly, interviewee EUEXP3 specified that they had previously coordinated another Tuning project, and EUEXP3 stressed that European experts were required to be experienced and knowledgeable in certain areas to participate in the project.

Table 10. *Bringing European Expertise (interview quotations of the study participants).*

EUEXP1	The administration was done by the University of Groningen. Still, the project was designed, written, and coordinated from the University of Pisa as it had the role of scientific coordinators.
EUEXP2	Well, all the other European partners. We had eight. These were, but these were people that I knew from ages, I mean. They were people that I was in close relationship with and chose to be in this project; it was eight universities you've probably seen which ones they were. These were all people that came from the Tuning world and the ECTS world. And so, we knew each other very well.
EUEXP2	We were all not only old friends but people that trusted each other to work, I mean to work together in a Tuning international context.
EUEXP1	[My] university got involved because, in 1989, a message was sent out to European universities that they wanted to volunteer for the ECTS pilot project, and the [name of subject] degree course president of the time called me and said, "Are you going? Could you help?" We applied, and we were accepted as one of the originally 11. Later 15-22 countries were involved in the pilot project for history, so I became the participant and eventually the coordinator of this whole sector. I became an Erasmus coordinator, and it was the largest part of the Erasmus involvement of the [name of university]. And now, of course, there are [many] Erasmus representatives in the [many] departments in there. 30 or 40

	<p>people in the international office. But at that time there was me and two other people.</p>
EUEXP1	<p>And also, I was a Bologna expert, an ECTS expert, and everything. Well, I was useful in advising on how to deal with all the students. I was the coordinator for the student mobility for [my] faculty. So, I had about 150 or 200 mobile students every year. So, I was really at the core of all the Erasmus involvement in the university.</p>
EUEXP2	<p>I was one of those, who were invited to join this new project, so the content of this new project, TuCAHEA, was actually the same as with other countries across the world, namely that we will try to use the so-called Tuning tools, Tuning methodology to harmonize curricula and courses between countries within one higher education area. Some ten subject areas were identified like chemistry, history, languages, and educational science or pedagogical sciences. I was... in the European part of the project in 2001, 2003. I was a member of the education group. In this capacity, while I was invited to the TuCAHEA group, I took the task of counseling the Central Asian group, so my task was to present how we did this task. This was my first task. My second task was one of my favorite topics in research. This is the internationalization of higher education. So, also in this capacity. [Name of project leader] and the colleagues invited me to help eventually with some strategic questions regarding how the European higher education area was composed and developed, and can this experience help to other regions in the world like Central Asia, so this was at the beginning. I was glad to receive this invitation. I said yes, and I joined the group for a couple of years.</p> <p>Here I have to tell you that the European part was not very much institutionally based or institutionally framed. Rather, we were individuals mostly. Plus, on the European side, only two institutions were really involved. One of them was the University of Pisa in Italy, and another one was the University of Groningen in the Netherlands. Other ten people in the group. I think we were individual representatives of particular single-subject groups—one from management, one from history, one from chemistry, one from education, and so on. We were not</p>

	invited on behalf of an institution but as individuals experienced at the previous stages of Tuning. Of course, that my university knew that I received this invitation, and of course, that my institution gave me permission to be involved. But again, I mean that this task did not involve other people at my uni.
EUEXP2	I'm still, from time to time, in contact to [another European TuCAHEA and Tuning expert] because from time to time, I still do some little tasks not for TUCAHEA but for the Tuning group as such.
EUEXP3	We were working for several years starting in 2001, and then there was for three years. And then there was another three-year project Tuning two and so on and so forth, and sometime in late of the first decade, around 2008, and maybe 2009, we more or less finished. And now, curricular approaches, competencies to be achieved, and so on were harmonized across a number of European universities. It was much easier for students to move from university to university and to know that their credits would be recognized when they come back to their home university. It was easier also for professors because we understood what was going on at another university, and so on and so forth.
EUEXP1	They had the Erasmus Charter so they could present the project and they could be partners in the project, so that is manpower. Yes, womanpower - I would call it. Why don't we change that to womanpower?
EUEXP1	They have been supportive. And when they weren't, then I exerted woman power on them, and we did what we needed to do.
EUEXP4	The focus of the project was to involve the most important institutions in the Central Asia Educational space and experts from different European Countries, with good practice in International Educational projects and Student Mobility, in order to create a common Central Asia Educational space following the Tuning Methodology.
EUEXP4	[The name of colleague] took part in these meetings, and then [that colleague] had some family issues. And she couldn't join really the project. I felt missing this part of the project as quite important part. I had to work myself and ask colleagues for [help].

EUEXP4	As I told you, I couldn't attend this meeting in Brussels. My colleague attended the meetings. I know that during these meetings, they explained to all the participants the methodology of the project and how the project should have developed this curricular design thing. I think that missing this part has influenced my participation. Of course, I tried to do my best in getting into the [work process, so I read] many European publications, so I tried to keep up. In the end, I think that we did our job. It's just to say that if someone is joining one of these projects, [they] should join them since the beginning and then carry them on. It's a very important point; one shouldn't undervalue this moment.
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However, one interviewee was involved in the project through the snowball effect. Interviewee EUEXP4 said that she had joined the project one year after it had started because one of the European Tuning experts had had some family issues. According to the interviewee EUEXP4, she was invited because she had been an expert in one of her subject groups. Unlike other European experts, EUEXP4 expressed less confidence in their project involvement.

To sum up, the European team of the project was gathered based on previous academic and inter-personal links that had existed for a long time between the involved European experts based on their participation in an earlier inter-university cooperation project. Overall, the key project that had created ties between the European experts was not a Tuning project but the European ECTS pilot project, which took part as far back as 1988. Initially, the interviewees took part in the ECTS pilot project on behalf of their universities. However, with time they have developed closer academic and personal links.

The TuCAHEA Project Culture

The interviewees EUEXP1 and EUEXP2 recalled how project work was structured in detail (Table 11). One distinctive way of the TuCAHEA project was its involvement of several levels of cooperation: international Tuning experts, education ministries, universities, and students. While universities and students did the biggest work, the TuCAHEA work engaged multiple actors.

Table 11. *The TuCAHEA Project Culture.*

EUEXP1	The financing came from the European Commission. The people that did it were professors of European and Central Asian institutions that already knew each
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	<p>other and wanted to collaborate. Great, the ministries were involved as much as we can involve them. The NEOs [National Erasmus Offices] were involved in so far as they too had had a role in promoting cooperation and Erasmus projects, and all these things. But basically, it was rectors and university professors and students because the students that were mobile gave a huge contribution in terms of their own willingness to do something that was totally original and to go to another place and study.</p>
<p>EUEXP2</p>	<p>On the other hand, I would say that actually the main business was done by universities. And not by other agencies which were involved and sometimes gave some quality input. But actually, the real hard work was done by people from universities.</p>
<p>EUEXP2</p>	<p>Yeah, on the European side, we were also in contact with the European Commission Directorate General Education. But this is normal. I mean, this was financed by them, so from time to time, we were either in personal contact, they sent somebody to be with us, or maybe we reported in a written form on the Central Asian part. What I remember most more, most remarkable in my memory these are people from international offices of universities. They are not teachers. They do not teach. Yeah, so they can't work on harmonizing curricula or defining competencies and so on. They don't have enough knowledge, and this does not mean that they have no knowledge. They have some knowledge but not enough, but they were great with their knowledge about international cooperation and possibilities, options for international cooperation. Further on, I like to remember these people because all of them spoke English fluently, which was of course not the case with all the subject groups and we worked in groups, actually bilingually in Russian and English. So that there was a translation from both languages. Just to make things [...] clear, and people from international offices were very, very helpful. In my memory, these were the people to whom I still say, "Thank you." On the other side, there were sometimes some people from the leadership of the universities, let me say onboarding people, like vice rectors or deans and so on. And there were a few people from ministries again, people responsible for issues of international</p>

	cooperation and similar so knowledgeable people who sometimes provided a very good input to our discussion. But this was quite different from country to country. People from international offices, they came from all countries, but this involvement of other people like [people] from ministries this – was quite different from country to country.
EUEXP2	I was in contact with all of them because we had to report one to another. What is the progress in education? What is the progress in physics? What is the progress in history because we had to go in parallel one with another, so I was working with all these people, and they worked with all of us?

Similarly, the interviewee EUEXP2 stressed the importance of universities as a key group of players in the project. The interviewee EUEXP2 recalled the cooperation with different actors within the project. In addition to interviewee EUEXP1, the interviewee recalled the help of international offices of participating universities in Central Asia.

Furthermore, the participants constantly checked their work with each other, even with people from other subject groups. The interviewee EUEXP2 explained that they had often communicated with other members of the group about the progress of their work.

The Main Principles of Collaborative Work between Participants of the TuCAHEA project

The participants had to participate in long professional discussions to achieve the project goals (Table 12). While the interviewee EUEXP2 referred to the Tempus rules or national legislation of Central Asian countries as essential aspects that had to be considered during the discussion, all the interviewees suggested that the discussion was based on the following principles:

- Open discussion culture
- Consensus approach
- Equality
- Collaboration

The interviewee EUEXP2 suggested that searching for the agreement was the main priority during the group work, rather than following specific rules. There was a lot of flexibility and discussion during the project.

Table 12. *The Main Principles of Discussion (interview quotations of the study participants).*

EUEXP2	At this point, there are quite often differences between countries, so of course that, we took this into account. However, we had to search for what I mentioned earlier, the common denominator. What is our general agreement? Regardless of national rules, you will do your national rules later when you come home, but our joint agreement, what is the standard for all of us? Had to be achieved at these plenary meetings as well as this agreement should not be in contradiction with a particular rule in your country, so it was again a little bit difficult task, but generally, I think that that we did it quite well.
EUEXP2	Well, at least from that point the view which I shared, different opinions were appreciated. Different opinions should be appreciated in academia because they are the only way forward that we can wait. That's right. What is good and what is better, and what is not so good? I don't know if there was any other hidden agenda in that, but actually, if there was a different opinion, we always, frankly and friendly, discussed it and tried to see which one of the several opinions may be fit best to our aims to the project proposal.
EUEXP2	I must say that that that we were working on the so-called full consensus approach. So, if there was an issue, we pronounced that issue, and then we tried to agree on what is a solution.
EUEXP3	I must tell that it was not always easy to agree on what is it. So, it was necessary to have sometimes a longer discussion simply to understand one another, but later at the end of the day, as we say, there was always consensus.
EUEXP3	At the beginning of the project, there was some different approach in defining competencies, but thanks to fruitful debate and detailed study of different documents, a common position was reached.
EUEXP4	Well, I would say that there was discussion lively discussion, but I couldn't say that there was a position. We had really [laughs] hot discussions on some subjects, on the competencies, but we always reached a mediation compromise. I think the people were collaborative.
EUEXP2	I think that we were all equal, all different. I can't say that in the group I cooperated with [there was] one person who was so important, so different from all others. It's very difficult to say. I still have the picture of these people around the table in

	<p>my eyes, and some of them were senior scholars from Central Asia. Some of there were juniors. So, in this case, maybe sometimes it appeared that senior scholars are those important, but other times it was the reverse. I notice that, of course, senior scholars were extremely knowledgeable with great experience with excellent theoretical knowledge, and so on, but they did not have that knowledge of world processes that junior staff. And so even junior staff and sometimes with great ideas and with great help, because the senior staff in that period was not so familiar with the Internet and so on, as the junior staff was. So, if you take one and another position, then you see that all of them were, how do you say, important for us.</p>
EUEXP2	<p>Well, as we had been told, the experts had this role. They should join each subject group. They didn't have to impose anyhow their role but just suggest and try to keep all the discussion going and going in the right way, the right direction.</p>
EUEXP3	<p>Usually from the university in the country, which is either the oldest or the most promoted in that way, so there were a few universities from each country, and it was possible to see that that there is a kind of kerky [university?] among them that some of them are junior with less international experience and they rather listen at seminars. While there is another one with excellent experience with long-lasting cooperation, and they took the lead in the conversation.</p>
EUEXP3	<p>At the beginning of the project, there was some different approach in defining competencies, but thanks to fruitful debate and detailed study of different documents, a common position was reached.</p>
EUEXP1	<p>It seems to me that it was very [collaborative] that is everybody working together. Of course, there were the lazier people, the more able people, the faster people, the slower people, or people that understood more the people have understood less, but basically, the force of this kind of project is people working together. Having, for example, almost everything done around the table, not with somebody lecturing to the others. And that, maybe you could say as a rule, but it's more than a rule; it's the practice, it's the culture of the project, which was very collaborative.</p>

The analysis of the interviews with European experts revealed the main principles on which the discussions were held within the TuCAHEA project. The interviewee mentioned the open discussion culture present in the project.

The interviewee EUEXP2 called the consensus approach the main approach of the project. According to the interviewee EUEXP2, there was always a consensus at the end of discussions. Similarly, the interviewee EUEXP3 positively assessed the discussion as a fruitful debate. Another interviewee, EUEXP4, confirmed the words of the interviewee EUEXP2:

The interviewee EUEXP2 described discussions as based on the principle of equality. The interviewee EUEXP2 describe the role of subject experts in this project. However, the interviewee EUEXP2 mentioned that universities that were more internationally experienced took a lead role in the discussions. Similarly, the interviewee EUEXP3 positively assessed the discussion as a fruitful debate. The interviewee EUEXP1 described the collaboration as the force driving the project. The interviewee EUEXP1 mentioned that the TuCAHEA project had a very collaborative project culture.

Defining CAHEA

Once the TuCAHEA project emerged as an idea, the definition of CAHEA became important. Thus, the TuCAHEA project has shaped a vision of a potential Central Asian Higher Education Area (CAHEA), as the region includes five post-Soviet countries from Central Asia (Table 13).

The interviewee EUEXP1 suggested that the inclusion of five post-Soviet Central Asian countries into a Central Asian Higher Education Area was for practical reasons. However, in a certain way, European Commission has influenced on the definition of CAHEA as an area, including five CA countries from the post-Soviet Union.

Table 13. *The Definition of CAHEA (interview quotations of the study participants).*

EUEXP1	It just is a working definition, and if that works out to be a good useful definition, why then it can be used and kept? But if it's better to enlarge it or contract it in a different way, I would enlarge rather than contract. By then, that could be done.
EUEXP1	Well, I mean, obviously, the fact that the European Commission considers those five republics to be the Central Asian area influences

	in some way, and the fact that we considered that to be the relevant area. Because in Tempus, that was seen as a coherent area.
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Unique Dynamics of the TuCAHEA Project

As the result of involving many actors, the TuCAHEA project received its own unique dynamics (Table 14). Overall, the interviews suggest that the project had collaborative culture, where people were driven by the project itself rather than by any formal rules. The project was driven by unique dynamics, which involved the work of many elements from many levels.

The interviewee EUEXP1 rejected the idea of rules, either formal or informal, as a guiding principle of the project. The interviewee EUEXP1 referred to the work process in TuCAHEA as project-driven rather than rule-driven.

Table 14. Unique Dynamic of the TuCAHEA project (interview quotations of the study participants).

EUEXP1	I mean, it was just organized in a certain way that certain activities were done, and I wouldn't say that there were rules we had. We did have a memorandum of understanding, which I could probably share with you and just contain the usual sorts of things that we all go ahead according to the project. And we all agree, and if there's a problem, what to do about it, but this never happened, so I don't really think it's a rule-driven thing. It's a project-driven thing.
EUEXP2	Actually, I must say that on the one hand, of course, we had to fit to the rules of the European Commission. This was part of the Tempus program, and the Tempus program has its own objectives, and also, there are certain standards and rules which a proposal needs to comply with. This is what we did. On the one hand, you must understand European Union the requests on the other side. Of course, you need to translate these rules into more concrete clusters, and now this [TuCAHEA] booklet, so we designed our project. There was a timeline; there was content. There are several steps and so on. This was self-rule, if I may say so, and we had, of course, to fulfill it and to report at the end. There were no other rules for the project as a whole, but I, of course, have to

	<p>say that in a certain way, the national legislation of the Central Asian countries was also important because if there is a law on higher education in Uzbekistan for example, which says that that, then, of course, colleagues from Uzbekistan had to confirm that they did that, so they must translate Tuning into specific national circumstances. This was this. This means speaking in terms of credits, how many credits should be devoted to that field and how many to others, and so on?</p>
EUEXP2	<p>It was like that; I hope to remember it well, but I think that we met regularly twice a year, one in Autumn and one in Spring usually, something like that. During this meeting, we had [plenary meetings] with all the members of all the groups. We had conferences, [in which] we invited all the stakeholders involved in this project. After the meeting of all the experts at the beginning of the session, we had a meeting of all the subject groups, and then each subject group would work on its own by itself.</p>
EUEXP2	<p>You see, in each country, we would have one plenary meeting for all partners each year, and we would have two country meetings in each country each year. And we all [had] steady visits to Europe, and we also had the student mobility, and I think it's very difficult for me to say that any of these were more significant than the others because it was the working of all these elements together. That is meeting altogether, meeting in the countries. And, of course, the subject area groups, because the subject area groups were across all five countries, so if you had the group in history or in whatever it was, there would be members from all five countries.</p>
EUEXP1	<p>What is most important about this? Nothing, it's the dynamics that you set up between the different levels.</p>
EUEXP1	<p>It seems to me that the TUCAHEA project, in some ways, is self-contained; that is, it has its own dynamics that have to do with being part of a general university-driven change in higher education, and ministries are sometimes the enemy and sometimes the friend. But the reasons for</p>

	<p>the project come from universities, and this was the theory of Tuning from the very beginning that the Bologna process is done by ministries and the Tuning is done by universities, and we both get support from the European Commission. And in TuCAHEA, you could say in some ways it's the same that it seems to me that the dynamism in the project came from academics, rectors. There are all sorts of mixtures of influence and authority.</p>
<p>EUEXP1</p>	<p>I do think that one of the problems with the current situation of the Bologna process is the lack of a direct understanding of what it is in universities, so that most people, even though the framework in which they are working and living, the Bologna Process, they don't really know what it is, so if they say there's something that doesn't work, they say, well, that's the fault of Bologna. If there's something that does work well, who knows where that came from? It seems to me there's a real break between the level of the BFUG and the European Higher Education Area and real life in the 4000 universities of Europe. One of the levers of my action is to try to get them connected better so that the people are more aware of what's going on.</p>

Similarly, the interviewee EUEXP2 mentioned Tempus rules and national legislation as important for the project. EUEXP2 also discussed the work process. The interviewee EUEXP1 stressed that the project was well structured, with regularly held one plenary meeting each year and two country meetings per year. However, the interviewee EUEXP1 stressed that any event, for example, a plenary meeting or a country meeting, did not have priority one over another. The interviewee EUEXP1 described the project dynamics as elements working together. In connection with this, the interviewee EUEXP1 suggested that it is the multilevel dynamics that characterized the project. Finally, the interviewee EUEXP1 connected this unique dynamic of the TuCAHEA with the university-driven change as the main domain of the Tuning initiative.

The interviewee EUEXP1 pointed out helping people to connect with the Bologna process as one of the Tuning goals. The interviewee EUEXP1 stressed the importance of experts to represent universities in the Bologna process. A similar opinion was pointed out by the EUEXP2.

Main Project Results

As a result of the work process, the following results were achieved (Table 15):

- Learning about the education systems and programs of each of the Central Asian countries.
- Searching for common denominators.
- Agreeing on the common competencies for involved universities from the five Central Asian countries.
- Creating the list of common competencies.

The interviewee EUEXP2 recalled in detail the main stages of the work process within the project. The interviewee described in detail the way work was organized in TuCAHEA. The first task of the participants was to learn about each other’s educational systems and programs and to try to find common denominators.

Table 15. *Main Project Results (interview quotations of the study participants).*

EUEXP2	The main task over the first, second, maybe even third year was, first to identify what are common denominators in in the in the institutional or national curricula in five countries. So first, it was important to understand not only to me because I came with less knowledge about Central Asia but also to colleagues from the other five countries to understand particularities, specifics of teaching, learning, and assessment in the pedagogy of educational courses in their countries. This was the starting point. Then we are able to search for what I call the common denominator.
EUEXP2	So, can we put these diverse pedagogical approaches, which are sometimes even in opposition one to another? Let me make an example. One country or one university gives students the possibility to take a course in the history of education in the country. The other one not. So, if we exchange students, then there is a problem. If an exchange student who is at home required to have credit points in the history of education cannot achieve these points, then this is a serious problem. So, in this case, we must agree about what is the compulsory curriculum among us. So, this was you can imagine this was quite hard work because we had to collect the data from several universities in five countries, and then we had to look into the material. So where are these points which connect one to another, and where are those points which are disconnected? And then, we had to build bridges in this

	<p>process. Of course, I try to be as helpful as possible with similar examples from European countries, So we faced with the same challenge ten years earlier, and I tried to help them with this.</p>
<p>EUEXP2</p>	<p>After that, when we did this first task, then, of course, we started to draft a common list of competencies to be achieved within the study program. General competencies those cross-curricular as well as specific, which relates to a particular part of the curriculum, and this was very, very hard work again. I think that we spent the most time on this, but there was a success until the end. We harmonized these lists, which helped a lot. The point of this competence list is that there is an agreement between different universities in different countries, what should be the most important outcomes with graduation, so this is what we let's say, identify under particular individual competencies now universities teach. University actually is allowed within the regulation of its country to put a competence, one of them, into that part of the curriculum where they find it best, so it is not to harmonize the curriculum in that way that all subjects, all courses are the same. Far from that, we [unclear] need that universities must remain independent and diverse. The point is only that if, for example, we identify critical thinking as an important competence for graduates in teacher education, then an individual university must find a proper place in its curriculums courses where these competencies will be changed.</p>

The interviewee EUEXP2 gave an example that explained the importance of having commonly agreed competencies between the five CA countries. Furthermore, the participants had to draft a common list of competencies to be achieved with a study program. The interviewee EUEXP2 stressed that the purpose of these activities is to find commonalities without harming the diversity of universities' curricula.

Organizing the Meetings of Central Asian Ministers of Education

According to the interviewee EUEXP1, one of the successes of TuCAHEA was that TuCAHEA managed to organize the First Meeting of Ministers for Education of the Member States of the European Union and of the Central Asian countries (Table 16) (Education Ministers of the EU and the Central Asian Countries, 2015).

Table 16. *Organizing the Meeting of Central Asian Education Ministers (interview quotations of the study participants).*

EUEXP1	It seems to me that although TUCAHEA has been, it made, in my view, amazingly successful in having meetings of authoritative people from the ministries agreeing to cooperate further.
EUEXP1	I think one of the most original things was student mobility within the Central Asian countries. But I mean, this could only happen because of working out the other events in the network.

Another success mentioned by the interviewee EUEXP1 is that interviewee has referred to the success of Tuning ideas in Central Asia. Furthermore, the interviewee described the student mobility scheme as “one of the most original things” that characterized the TuCAHEA project.

Continuation of Ideas

The interviewee EUEXP1 shared the perspectives on the effect of Tuning in Central Asia. Furthermore, the interviewee EUEXP1 mentioned that Tuning further continued its activities, focusing on the area of public health (Table 17).

Table 17. *Continuation of Ideas (interview quotations of the study participants).*

EUEXP1	Well, I mean, what can you say? I think the project ideas have been amazingly successful in there. Also, amazing from what my Central Asian colleagues tell me, they are continuing in time.
EUEXP1	I must say maybe this is interesting in a way that Uzbek public health [project] grew out of TUCAHEA and it too. It's had a lot of influence. I mean, all its findings are now being put into law. There have been institutional changes as a result of it and all sorts of things, but it was really a Tuning of the health professions because in TUCAHEA, as it turned out, we were not really able to do the natural sciences part or the health sciences part because partners we had didn't have the competences is to do it so well, that meant there were that TUCAHEA should have gone ahead on to develop other disciplines. But the public health area was too complicated because you have to have three ministries. So, I had the Ministry of Public Health, the Ministry of Education, and the Ministry of Agriculture and Water Resources. Because the inspiration there is to revolutionize the way that public health is seen.

	You know, so that's a very inspiring project. And of course, I'm not an expert in these things, but I am an expert in Tuning, and I was able to get the doctors, veterinarians, ecologists, and librarians to work together. So that for me is also a very big thing that I'm really glad to have done in my life. And but the idea was to have it to extend it to the whole of Central Asia.
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Overall Assessment of TuCAHEA

All the participants positively assessed the results of the project (Tables 18 and 19). According to the interviewees, the project was a success despite the ambitiousness of the project. Specifically, the interviewee EUEXP2 defined the project aim as “mission impossible.”

The interviewee EUEXP3 highlighted that the Tuning methodology allows for building regional convergence without any prescriptive uniformity to EHEA. Furthermore, according to the interviewees, 34 Central Asian universities, which formed the TuCAHEA consortium along with European partners, make TuCAHEA a non-typical project due to the large number of universities involved. The interviewee EUEXP1 described TuCAHEA as unique.

Table 18. *Overall Assessment of the TuCAHEA Project (interview quotations of the study participants).*

EUEXP3	The Tuning Methodology focuses on cooperation among educational structures on specific subject areas, looking for common understanding and points of convergence without any prescriptive uniformity to EHEA. This is very important for this particular region.
EUEXP1	It's unique. I mean, there aren't any others. You can say that there's some things it has in common with all Tuning projects, which is certainly true. But of course, it really grew up from Central Asia, so it's using a Tuning methodology and a Central Asian context.
EUEXP1	If the Commission, for its own reasons, decides that they want smaller projects, less ambitious projects, well, what can you do? This is an error, in my opinion. It seems to me that if you're going to fund something, you might as well fund something that's worthwhile and just having 100 small projects - maybe it's helpful, but maybe you just have people repeating things all the time without even knowing it. Whereas in our case, we had a major project that made a major difference.

EUEXP2	I would only add to this that as much as I know Tempus programs worldwide, the number of cooperating people and institutions in this project was very-very high. So, it was not a small project. This is a huge project.
EUEXP1	We really made a very conscious effort, as I said to have district, regional distribution, and countries. [...] We had Osh, we had Jalalabad, we had Naryn, we had Bishkek – we had people from all parts of the country. And also, in Uzbekistan, we have people not only from Tashkent and from the Ferghana Valley but even from Nukus.

The interviewee EUEXP1 mentioned that the EU Commission supported smaller scale projects and described the project’s large scale as its advantage. In the opinion of EUEXP1, TuCAHEA is “a major project that made a major difference.” Similarly, interviewee EUEXP2 considered a Tempus project a huge project, even in comparison with other Tempus programs. Finally, the project aimed to include universities that could represent different national sub-regions of Central Asian countries in the project.

Table 19. *Positive Assessment of the Project Results (interview quotations of the study participants).*

EUEXP2	Yeah, so this was “mission impossible,” and they're getting very hard. But then, of course, I mean day by day, I think that we finished with quite the success.
EUEXP2	One of the [conferences] I would say, but maybe that in a certain way the decisive conferences were in in the year 2015 when we were in at the last stage of the project, we need to think about final results and so on. And the very last conference, which was in January 2016 in Rome, in Italy, we agreed that for all of us, for colleagues from Central Asia, as well as for others from Europe, it is best to go to a southern country like Italy in January, because there was no snow and no cold. But this [was] a very good conference but it was a great finale. This was not so much about answering hard questions. It was more about saying, “We did it - we succeeded,” and these main results were presented there.

Similarly, the interviewee EUEXP3 expressed an opinion that “the cooperation was mostly satisfactory,” adding that “The project was a great experience from the professional and human

point of view.” The interviewee EUEXP2 mentioned a conference in Italy as an important concluding event of the project.

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. While most scholars admitted that the project left a footprint in their national higher education context, 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 effects of the EU-Central Asia inter-regionalism can be identified in several categories, which will be elaborated on in the following sections:

- 1) Creating Europe-Asia academic links prior to the TuCAHEA project.
- 2) Creating a positive vision for the common Central Asian Higher Education Area at the level of the ministries.
- 3) Mutual learning experience between European and Central Asian universities, as well as among Central Asian universities.
- 4) Participating in the equal discussion.
- 5) Equality of positions in the discussion.
- 6) Main project achievements.
- 7) Promoting competence-based learning as a foundation for inter-university cooperation in Central Asia.
- 8) Creating academic links between Central Asian universities from different countries.
- 9) Continuation of the project ideas in other international projects.
- 10) Identifying a common framework for inter-regional cooperation in higher education.
- 11) Positive assessment of the project results.

High Motivation of Participants

Overall, the Central Asian experts claimed their high motivation during the process of joining the TuCAHEA project (Table 20). In addition, in the opinion of the interviewee CAEXP4, the preceding European projects has laid a good foundation for the TuCAHEA project.

Table 20. *Europe-Asia Academic Links Prior to the Project (interview quotations of the study participants).*

CAEXP4	Erasmus+, including Erasmus Mundus programs, have played a positive role in laying the ground for the TuCAHEA project.
CAEXP1	It was an opportunity for professional development and to represent our university and country at the international level. I think no one pursued any personal goals. We had a tolerant culture within the project.
CAEXP1	The project was great and inspiring, especially because its ideas were new to us. Competence-based learning was a novelty for us. Two years before the project, we joined the Bologna process, so we were new.
CAEXP2	Everyone was motivated to be involved and take part in the discussions to contribute to achieving a common agreement.
CAEXP1	It was an issue of constant commitment and responsibility for us. We realized that it was an international level, involving international-level or country-level meetings. We often informally met with colleagues from our country with our country coordinator. We tried to consult on various issues and the best ways of dealing with them. We tried to solve the issues together.
CAEXP9	In general, I am quite experienced in international projects. When we speak about involving universities, we consider the concrete people working in it. I know concreted people in some universities who can not only work but also involve the whole university community in any project. These people have a good reputation for being effective contributors to inter-university projects. This influenced my decision to invite some universities because of the people who worked in them.

Highly professional interests were recalled by the interviewee CAEXP1. The interviewees CAEXP1 and CAEXP2 recalled that they were very inspired to take part in the project. The interviewee CAEXP1 said that their team perceived the importance of the project.

Participating in Equal Discussion

Overall, the interviews revealed that discussion in the TuCAHEA project were held in democratic manner (Table 21). According to the interviewee CAEXP1, the work in the project was based on the principle of tolerance to other people’s opinion. Similarly, the interviewee, CAEXP3, recalled the atmosphere of comfort during the work of the project. CAEXP2 also recalled the collegial manner of discussion within the project.

Table 21. *Participating in Equal Discussion (interview quotations of the study participants).*

CAEXP1	Tolerance was the first rule of the project. It was important to be able to listen to other people and hear them. But at the same time, people had to defend their ideas for the rest to agree. We requested them to provide arguments for their ideas. Thus, the discussions were based on scientific argumentation. During Skype meetings, we tried to give the floor to everyone, and everyone was able to edit the common reports.
CAEXP3	The major rule was following democratic behavior and respecting other people. The project leaders made a lot of efforts to make us feel comfortable from this perspective.
CAEXP2	I do not recall any influential persons. We had group meetings during which we gathered and considered certain issues. And we held discussions in a collegial manner, aiming to achieve a common result. So, this collegial approach reduced the influence of any individuals. I found the most interesting fact that both group leaders and ordinary members like me were equal in discussions. We could easily take part in the discussions, and everyone could express their opinion and take part in drafting the working documents. After that, we visited fellow CA countries, where we shared the results of our work, after which we considered the matters together.
CAEXP2	Everyone was motivated to be involved and take part in the discussions to contribute to achieving a common agreement.
CAEXP3	In our opinion, the project was characterized by openness and friendliness.
CAEXP1	We did not have especially influential persons, although people always listened to the opinion of European experts. The European expert tried to reduce arguments

	and help find commonalities. While all of us were actively involved in the work process, nobody was dominant in the project.
CAEXP2	No people were more influential than others. Even representatives of universities got involved in discussions on equal grounds with us. We easily shared with them our work issues. In my opinion, this approach made the TuCAHEA project very successful.
CAEXP2	We always accepted different opinions; I even remember one project member who wrote feedback in 15 pages. Everyone provided their feedback, which we had to translate into English. We had to work till late at night in other Central Asian countries. Of course, there were many discussions. For Kazakhstan, the Tuning method was easier to adopt because of the Bologna changes that we were implementing at that time. Same in Kyrgyzstan. Uzbekistan had to consider every small detail, unlike us.
CAEXP3	Our European experts were interested in everybody's opinion. They often asked questions, clarifying the opinion of various people.
CAEXP4	People with experience in leadership positions and knowledge of national standards, who regularly engaged in the work of the group, provided the biggest contribution to the discussion.
CAEXP10	The project had an interesting organization in that we were united by doing common work, as we were grouped well by subject disciplines, and every group had its own task. There was very good management [of the project] and very good communication among the project participants. It is not always easy to achieve. That is when free communication is achieved; when all the participants understand that they are working on a common goal, then the project has better results. [Inter-university] projects can be strong and weak. But when good communication fails to be built, such projects are doomed. Communication was the strength of the project.

According to the Central Asian interviewees, everyone in the project was involved in the equal discussion. According to the interviewee CAEXP2, everyone was motivated by the project. Similarly, the interviewee CAEXP3 recalled the atmosphere of the project. The interviewee,

CAEXP1 recalled the equality of discussion within the TuCAHEA project while mentioning that participants listened to the opinion of European experts [due to their experience in the previous Tuning projects].

Similarly, CAEXP2 recalled that all the participants were equal within the project. CAEXP2 also recalled that members of the TuCAHEA project were open to different ideas. According to the interviewee CAEXP3, European experts regularly asked the opinion of CA scholars. According to the CAEXP4, more experienced people could influence more on the work in the project.

Equality of Position and Discussion with Various Stakeholders

According to the interviewee CAEXP2, everyone was involved in the project on equal positions, including various stakeholders (Table 22).

Table 22. *Equality of Position and Discussion (interview quotations of the study participants).*

CAEXP2	We cooperated with members across all subject groups and shared our progress with our peers and partners.
CAEXP1	At the second stage of the TuCAHEA project, we were especially pleased to the interest of our employers and parents to the training process. Although we discovered differences between the expectations of employers and what we teach, it was important for us to reveal the reasons behind the differences and why parents are disappointed with the training results.
CAEXP3	The students and graduates highly appreciated the survey made with the framework of TuCAHEA.
CAEXP1	Since the Soviet period, the university operated on its own. One thing was that students had field experience at enterprises, but there was no close contact. We have been interested in establishing closer contact with employers for several years, as well as in the credit system. Therefore, we have a counsel of employers and the expert committee which approves educational programs. Members of both counsel and committee were surprised to learn about the European experience, where employer opinion plays an important role.
CAEXP1	I think the European experts could motivate us, which was very important for the project. My personal motivation was learning something new, as well as testing my professional skills if I can be successful and gain new experience.

CAEXP1	By listening to the European experience, we were strongly encouraged and motivated to do our work.
CAEXP3	Our European partners were both moderators and brought inspiration to the work process.
CAEXP1	I consider my university as one of the leading in project. We were knowledgeable about the topic and issues of scientific reporting. This experience led to our leadership within the work process. We had more opportunities because our administration made an effort to give their best support to us. They were always enthusiastic, and they helped us to free our time for the TuCAHEA project. It's a policy in our university that people involved in important project receive an opportunity to get more time for their project. Our management supported us in our activities and gave us additional financial and administrative support, so we could produce better results. And we always had to report back on our activities at high-level meetings with university leadership. Furthermore, we made big workshops and conferences for our university faculty members.
CAEXP2	We received a lot of support from our peers at the university. We could often ask for their expert feedback.
CAEXP1	Our core team consisted of six members, with four actively involved members in it, but we could involve the members of other schools as well. They were involved in our work on creating documents for the TuCAHEA project. For example, we organized an expanded meeting of scientific-methodological counsel, in which almost everybody was present. We spoke there with a presentation and listened to our colleagues' feedback. It happened on several occasions.
CAEXP1	At the national level were incredibly lucky that we received the support of our ministry, which was also involved in the project. We also got lucky that we received support from our university management. We conducted a lot of workshops dedicated to competence-based learning and conducted a large-scale survey of 1000 people in the university. Our partner enterprises got interested in the TuCAHEA project. Naturally, it is for them we are training our graduates. We involved them in drafting the educational programs and syllabi based on European standards.

CAEXP2	And we conducted a series of workshops in which we invited people and students when define and create the framework, and we agreed on certain moments with academic and technical experts from our university. Furthermore, we contacted closely with the ministry and consulted with them on the project matters.
CAEXP7	I really liked that the representatives of education ministries attended all the country meetings. They were involved as much as we were. It was nice and interesting. They shared with us their perception of possible ways to support the project goals. We told them what we wished to see, and they accepted our suggestions.
CAEXP10	The Tuning idea is about defining target groups, who can shape the structure of the educational program, and its content, involving target groups, motivating them to be involved, define certain correctives [in the design of educational programs]. Because, when defining various competences, the opinion of teachers or students can vary drastically, which makes it important to find ways to correct [educational programs].
CAEXP6	We had on the ground practitioners of higher education, including the rectors of universities themselves, who were quite open for collaboration. They were quite open for collaboration because they understood what to do and they understood that process very clearly, and they were eager to work together.
CAEXP6	As a result, we achieved to have representatives from each area of the country. So now in these partner institutions now they have experience. Now they have centers. There can be also disseminative points which can support the sustainability of the project [ideas].

The interviewees CAEXP1 and CAEXP6 mentioned that they were happy to involve other stakeholders in the project. Similarly, the interviewee CAEXP3 recalled the involvement of students in the project. The interviewee CAEXP1 highly appreciated the involvement of employers within the TuCAHEA project. Similarly, the interviewee CAEXP2 shared that working with employers was a valuable experience for them. The interviewee CAEXP1 highly appreciated the involvement of European experts in the project. Similarly, the interviewee CAEXP5 said that they appreciated learning the experience of European universities. Furthermore, CAEXP6

expressed an opinion that involved universities represented all main geographical sub-regions of the Central Asian countries.

Similarly, the interviewee CAEXP3 positively assessed the involvement of European experts. The interviewee CAEXP1 recalled high support from their university. Similarly, the interviewee CAEXP2 said that colleagues not involved in the project really supported the TuCAHEA members. The interviewee CAEXP1 said that their university provided them with a lot of support. The interviewee CAEXP1 recalled high support from various stakeholders. Similarly, the interviewee CAEXP2 recalled involving various stakeholders.

Main Project Results

The Central Asian experts positively recalled the main results of the TuCAHEA project. Similarly, the interviewee CAEXP1 recalled the key processes of the TuCAHEA project (Table 23).

Table 23. *Main project results (interview quotations of the study participants).*

CAEXP1	We have been assessing the national qualification standards [frameworks] of the five Central Asian countries, along with European standards. During the process of comparison, we identified commonalities and differences, trying to bridge the standards and reduce the differences, aiming for the goal of carrying out academic mobility. Finally, mobility was an important way to test how effective our work had been and whether it was actionable, realistic, and could bring any result. It was required that our student could study in another program and come back without any differences, about which we were not informed. We were very pleased to discover that we had a lot in common, and we tried to bring the differences we had to a minimum.
CAEXP2	One of the most exciting moments was when we managed to achieve correlations of competence frameworks with employers, parents, and students and with feedback from our peers.
CAEXP3	We had to do a lot of work with students, graduates, and teachers, for example, explaining our survey questions. We also were involved in the discussions in country-level and international meetings with our colleagues from other CA republics and European experts. We did not share functions within the project, acting as one team.

CAEXP1	<p>In the beginning, there were a lot of arguments. Each country wanted to demonstrate its knowledge. Not everyone was ready to admit their lack of understanding of competence-based learning. The difficulty was that not all countries have moved to credit-based education. And because for them, the credit system was a new thing. They had to do double work. They tried their best to learn and understand the credit system, but they had to do extra work. They often asked me to share additional materials with them.</p>
CAEXP1	<p>Sure, there were disagreements: in the first stage, we had to agree on the organizational principles and define common and subject competencies. In the second stage, we had to define methods of teaching and learning.</p>
CAEXP1	<p>If there is an abstract agreement that it is good to cooperate, there is still a concrete problem of how to do it on the institutional level. And there were quite often very good discussions on that. For example, there should be a kind of a governmental agreement between countries on how to issue a visa or stay permission from one country to another to sign a document and to make it easy like in Europe. All this used to be [a] problem also in Europe. These are these practical issues. But if you don't solve these practical issues, there is no mobility. There is no cooperation.</p>
CAEXP1	<p>We did not start the project blindly. First, we tried to find out information about the previous projects and their results. We had to continue and redefine it. The second important step was gathering a team. I am very grateful that I had an excellent team in this project. We tried to involve representatives of other schools from our university. The signing of the joint memorandum by the representatives of ministries of Central Asian countries was the final important step. This event sets the responsibility for the process, which plays an important role in defining the results.</p>
CAEXP9	<p>As regards key events... At the end of the project, when we went to Rome, and there in the pompous atmosphere in the large Renaissance hall, the communique [between the five ministries] was signed. Even visually, everything was impressive about it. Probably, this was rather an extraordinary event.</p>

Similarly, the interviewee CAEXP2 recalled the key moments of the project. Similarly, the interviewee CAEXP3 recalled the main work process of the project. The interviewee CAEXP1 recalls the work process. Finally, the discussions were not only about the current project tasks but also about the future of higher education cooperation in Central Asia. The interviewee CAEXP1 expressed that they perceived the importance of the project and its results.

Positive Assessment of the Project Results

The interviewees highly assessed the importance of the project results Table 24.

Table 24. *Positive Assessment of the Project Results (interview quotations of the study participants).*

CAEXP1	It is incredibly difficult to adopt foreign practices in the local context. I guess it’s everywhere. But we tried to do it because it is important for us. We developed and implemented two English-language programs based on the identified competences. When we started to analyze this experience, it turned out that it was not as difficult as we thought and quite possible, but we had to consider local conditions. In the final stage, we had the task of mobility. We sent our students to Tajikistan and received a student from them. For teachers, the differences were not as visible as for students, so we had to make corrections to the program. Thus, academic mobility is a real test of our activities. It showed us the reality of the unnoticed differences, which made us correct our work.
CAEXP5	The development of common competencies in Central Asia is already a sign of our unification. We have developed common learning outcomes. On every subject within the project, we strived to find commonalities to be able to start cooperation between our universities.
CAEXP1	The importance of academic mobility as a test of the things we had done. It showed us the reality, the differences, which we had to correct later in our work.
CAEXP1	Within the faculty, we regularly conducted workshops, and we created a special webpage on the website of our university dedicated

	to the TuCAHEA. We covered our activities in the press and in the university newspaper, and we published the results of our work in the scientific publication of our university.
CAEXP10	We are now braver in using the English language in educational programs. We have defined certain program modules in English, and we are now braver in cooperation with our business partners. We understood how we can make them interested in what we do. We have also begun to listen to students' opinions more, as their opinion turned out to be very interesting and very different from ours.

Furthermore, the interviewee CAEXP5 positively recalled the results of the project. The interviewee CAEXP1 expressed the opinion of the importance of academic mobility as a test for competence-based learning and whether the work in the TuCAHEA project was done. Furthermore, the interviewee CAEXP1 said that they made many efforts to spread the results of their activities within the TuCAHEA project.

To sum up, Europe has provided some foundation for EU-CA academic links prior to the project. These academic links were continued and kept after the project. Furthermore, the project helped to define the Central Asian Higher Education Area and established pilot mobility between universities. The project left a footprint in the form of ideas, which were continued in another international project. All the European and Central Asian experts assessed the results of the project positively.

Creating a Positive Vision at the Level of the Ministries

The interviewee CAEXP5 positively assessed the results of the TuCAHEA project (Table 25). Similarly, the interviewee CAEXP1 expressed an opinion that project ideas have been influential in the Kazakhstani higher education context. Similarly, the interviewee CAEXP4 said that the ministry of education is considering the experience. Another interviewee CAEXP5 expressed an opinion that they were happy to witness the communication of their ministries.

Table 25. *Creating a Positive Vision at the Ministerial Level (interview quotations of the study participants).*

CAEXP5	We managed to create the vision of the possibility of a common higher education area. I believe that education ministers should decide to create a common education
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	space, whether using Bologna principles or developing their own principles. Upon they decide to commit to the idea of common higher education space, then universities will be able to operate within such a common agreement.
CAEXP5	Although there are no concrete decisions on competence-based learning yet from our Ministry of Education and Science, they express support for this idea. This is one of the successes of the TuCAHEA project.
CAEXP1	The ideas they introduced to us received continuation, and the project, in a way, still exerts its influence. We continue to work on promoting competence-based learning, which is now legalized in our country. Changes have been made in the law “On education” so that education in our country is now developed based on competence-based learning with the definition of learning outcomes and the descriptors at the three levels: Bachelors. Masters and Doctorate.
CAEXP4	In the ministry of education, this experience is being considered as well.
CAEXP5	For example, I contacted the representatives of the Ministry of Education and Science of Kazakhstan. We spoke a lot, and it was interesting to learn that a particular center under the Kazakh Ministry is dedicated to the Bologna process. I was pleased to witness representatives of our ministries discussing the issues. Unfortunately, there is no special structure dedicated to the Bologna process in our country. We need to learn about the Bologna experience from our Central Asian neighbors. Sharing experiences can be beneficial for the development of the Central Asian higher education area.

Mutual Learning Experience

The interviewee CAEXP5 learnt that it was an experience of mutual learning for the involved universities (Table 26). The interviewee CAEXP5 positively assessed learning the experience of European universities and the way it was shared.

Table 26. *Positive Learning Experience (interview quotations of the study participants).*

CAEXP5	Central Asian faculty members exchanged experiences and offered their ideas. We learnt the experiences of involved universities and suggested solutions to their issues.
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CAEXP5	It was important for us to learn about the experience of European universities. I appreciated that they shared their experiences in a non-obligatory way. They just shared their experiences, and we discussed that. Expert ideas are important in such projects.
CAEXP7	I think European colleagues also wanted to learn about the situation in Central Asia in terms of education to comprehend our education system. The people with whom we worked included a lot of positively motivated persons, with whom we had very good professional relations, as colleagues and experts. They had a wish to share their experience. They were interested to know which part of their experience we found useful and which not useful. I think European colleagues were driven to take part in this project by their research interests.
CAEXP7	I was very interested in taking part in the project. When we developed competencies, spread questionnaires, and gathered conferences, in which we invited school teachers, university teachers, and students and asked them: “Do you need this? Is this interesting for you?” Country meetings, which involved representatives from Central Asia and European experts. It’s great to learn something new every day. I recall that our students wanted to visit only Turkmenistan; they wanted to see the Turkmen universities from the inside. And we also wanted to visit Turkmenistan. But we were not let there, despite the hopes.

Academic Links between Central Asian Universities

In the opinion of another interviewee CAEXP5, the project has united all the participating universities (Table 27). The interviewee CAEXP5 expressed an opinion that increased inter-university mobility was one of the main results of the TuCAHEA project. Similarly, another interviewee CAEXP3 said that they continued cooperation with their partners from the TuCAHEA project.

Table 27. *Academic Links between Central Asian Universities (interview quotations of the study participants).*

CAEXP5	Our university has taken part in Tempus and Erasmus + projects, but TuCAHEA was a unique project because the participants had clear understanding of their interests. The project has united all the involved universities.
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CAEXP5	In my view, the idea of cooperation was central to the project.
CAEXP5	The most important result of the TuCAHEA project was that we continued to cooperate with each other. We signed memorandums between our universities on issues of mobility. For example, we cooperate with the university from Kazakhstan, which was also a member of the TuCAHEA consortium. We yearly send students to Kazakhstan in frames of mobility programs.
CAEXP5	The most important result of the TuCAHEA project was that we continued to cooperate with each other. We signed memorandums between our universities on issues of mobility. For example, we cooperate with the university from Kazakhstan, which was also a member of the TuCAHEA consortium. We yearly send students to Kazakhstan in frames of mobility programs.
CAEXP3	The members of the TuCAHEA project became our international partners in other activities. When we invite them to cooperate, they are always willing to join.
CAEXP6	We had very friendly relationships between partners, and we felt close to each other, which finally led to the creation of good network between partners.
CAEXP10	We continue communication with other colleagues after the continuation of the project, having some draft ideas on ways to continue cooperation between universities. The project had a website where we could discuss various issues and share draft ideas with each other. That is, there was a platform for open discussion.
CAEXP9	With [names of key members of the European Tuning], we meet at the international conferences and hug like darling friends.
CAEXP9	We have developed friendly relationships with almost everyone: Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan. These relationships continue into other projects. For example, later, in another project, Turkmen colleagues could not obtain a visa to Bulgaria in their country. They wrote to me and asked for help. Very late at night, I went to the [Almaty] airport and was waiting for the Turkmen passports, which I then re-sent to Astana from Almaty. So we have some mutual support. And if I have any issues in other Central Asian countries, I have full trust in [Central Asian colleagues].

Promoting the Competence-Based Learning

The interviewee CAEXP4 said that competence-based learning is being used in the activities of the faculty (Table 28). Similarly, another interviewee CAEXP3 said that they made competence-based learning a part of the study process at their university.

Table 28. *Promoting Competence-Based Learning (interview quotations of the study participants).*

CAEXP4	Our educational programs and courses are all based on competence-based learning. Teachers strive to define competencies and descriptors. We have a National Qualifications Framework, which is an appendix to the Labour Code. Therefore, the ideas of the TuCAHEA project are being slowly implemented in the Kazakhstani context.
CAEXP3	We have been introducing competence-based learning in our study process.
CAEXP9	The Tuning experience was absolutely useful to our university faculty members when we were preparing the materials for the accreditation of the university.

In a similar vein, another interviewee CAEXP9 expressed an opinion that the ideas of the TuCAHEA project have left their footprint on their university. Another interviewee CAEXP3 mentioned that their university is taking part in the new project, in which the Tuning methodology will be used (Table 29). The interviewee CAEXP5 said that while competence-based learning is only being discussed in their country, they are using the approach in the new project.

Table 29. *Application of CBA in New Inter-University Projects (interview quotations of the study participants).*

CAEXP3	Although this project has ended, we still use the experience of the project and its ideas because competence-based learning is very actual. Currently, we are using competence-based learning as part of an ongoing project unrelated to TuCAHEA
CAEXP5	We are taking part in the new project, in which the Tuning methodology is going to be applied. However, it's early to speak about all the details.
CAEXP5	At the country level, competence-based learning is only being discussed. But we are implementing the principles of competence-based education in a new international project.

Summary

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 connections 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 Asia authors, 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 (Table 30).

Table 30. *The Summary of Perceptions of EU and CA TuCAHEA Members about the Effect of the EU-CA Higher Education Inter-Regionalism.*

Theme	EU experts	CA experts
Beginning of the project	Establishing EU-CA academic links prior to TuCAHEA the project	
Project experiences	Bringing ECTS and Tuning experience Unique project culture: multi-actor, multi-level approach	High motivation in project involvement The positive experience of involving various stakeholders
	Discussion on equal grounds	
Structural impact of the project	Shaping the definition of CAHEA Organizing the joint meeting of ministries, pilot mobility scheme Keeping EU-CA academic links after the project	Mutual learning experience between European and Central Asian universities, and among Central Asian universities Creating a positive vision of the common Central Asian Higher Education Area at the level of the ministries

		<p>Promoting competence-based learning as a foundation for inter-university cooperation in Central Asia</p> <p>Creating academic links between Central Asian universities from different countries</p>
Project results	<p>Positive assessment of the project results</p> <p>Learning about the education systems and programs of each of the Central Asian country</p> <p>Finding common regional denominators</p> <p>Agreeing on the common competencies for participating Central Asian universities</p> <p>Creating the list of common competencies</p> <p>Continuation of ideas</p>	

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 Asia authors specifically perceive EHEA as a model for aspiration and European education as a standard of quality for Central Asian universities (Table 31).

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 Asia authors 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.

Table 31. *Perceptions of Central Asian and Europe as Global Actors in Higher Education by the Members of the TuCAHEA Community.*

EU experts	CA experts
The strong interest of Central Asia in the Bologna process.	EHEA and European quality standards as a model for aspiration. High interest in the project involvement of CA scholars.
Central Asia is an important world region.	Unique aspects of Central Asian culture need to be considered. Measures needed for building CAHEA.
Central Asian countries lack interest in cooperation with each other.	Positive assessment of other CA countries. Political will, competence-based learning, and financing are needed for further progress.

Perceptions of EHEA and CAHEA by European Experts

Strong Interest in the Bologna Process.

Firstly, one of the interviewees was invited to give a keynote address to Central Asian rectors about the Bologna process. As an expert on the Bologna process, the interviewee EUEXP1 got to visit Central Asia and meet with the rectors of Central Asian universities (Table 32). Furthermore, the interviewee EUEXP1 was invited to do a Tuning project in Kyrgyzstan. Similarly, the interviewee EUEXP2 mentioned a high level of interest from non-European countries. Finally, the interviewee EUEXP1 observed a high interest in Kyrgyzstan in the BP. As the interviewee EUEXP1 recalls, Kazakhstan has already been a member of the Bologna process, although it still was a beginner in the process. According to the interviewee EUEXP1, Tajikistan also expressed an interest in ECTS. The interviewee EUEXP1 has observed the change of attitude in Uzbekistan, which started with the election of the new president.

Table 32. *Strong Interest in the Bologna Process in Central Asia (interview quotations of the study participants).*

EUEXP1	Who originally invited me in 2003 to come to Kyrgyzstan? And at that time, I was actually in Turkey - training with Turkish people in Turkish universities in the use of ECTS. And I said, "yes, yes, that's what I want to do, I will come," but it ended up that in April 2004, I was invited to give the keynote address to the Central Asian rectors about the Bologna process. So, I went to Almaty, and I did that.
EUEXP1	And then, in the summer, the Kyrgyz presidency in, let's say, the framework of the transition of the economy asked me to go and lead a pilot group of representatives of Kyrgyz universities from the entire country to create Tuning-based curricula for Economics and Business management. And so, in August of 2004, in Bishkek, where it was very hot, I can say we actually did that, and we created these curricula that were then implemented in the universities.
EUEXP2	Now there was over the night a lot of interest from other non-European countries. And the Tuning group was a group of maybe 100 people from various countries. That Tuning group was invited to cooperate with consortia in other countries. So, this was the start of the so-called Tuning US, Tuning Russia, Tuning China, and so on.
EUEXP1	It seems to me that, as a matter of fact, Kyrgyzstan has always been the most advanced, I would say, in actually implementing Bologna reforms. Kazakhstan as a signatory of the Bologna agreement, in theory, has been a real part of it. Although, for a certain period of time was considered a kind of provisional member, and in any case, up to the end of the TUCAHEA project applied ECTS in a non-compliant way
EUEXP1	Tajikistan just had some important meetings on whether to decide to follow ECTS or a sort of American credit system, and they decided to follow ECTS.
EUEXP1	Uzbekistan is now very interested in moving rapidly toward Bologna. But I think the [other four CA] ministries were more collaborative than in Uzbekistan. And now, of course, with the change - since their former president died and the new one is [elected?], they're trying to move very, very swiftly.
EUEXP5	That's where the Bologna process can help Central Asia: by establishing a minimum level, this is what you have to do. This is what students have to get.

Central Asia is an Important World Region.

The interviewee EUEXP1 expressed the idea that cooperation is key to the development of Central Asian cooperation in higher education and other areas. Furthermore, the interviewee EUEXP1 expressed an opinion of Central Asia’s importance as a region (Table 33).

Table 33. *Central Asia is an Important World Region (interview quotations of the study participants).*

EUEXP1	How do I see it? Well, I see it as a part of the world that I see like history, and I see it as the center of the world, of course. Perhaps it's somehow often considered to be marginal, or kind of a place where who's where's that? Oh, the ‘stans,’ what ‘stan’ is that? And I think, well, just think after all Samarkand, Almaty. These are all...This is an immensely important region. I am a historian. I'm an absolute lover of Central Asia in its history, and I think it's absolutely. I don't think it is able to right now to play the part it could because of various things that are being fragmented because of the governments, or it has, for example, Turkmenistan really isolating itself in a totally non-positive way. And so, what do I think about what its place in the world? I think it could have an important place in the world. I think that with the demography that it has and the wealth of its resources and the vigor and importance of the people, it could have a very great influence, but at this point in time, I think the best hope for Central Asia and in fact for any place in the world is to be able to cooperate and avoid conflict with the other areas. That's what I think, and so that's what I'm working for. I don't know if we'll be successful, but I certainly hope so.
EUEXP1	In this situation, my feeling and my opinion on what I have been working on so far have been to see whether there could become sufficient cohesion of the five republics to be able to be a Central Asian Higher Education area.
EUEXP1	I would say that for now, the Central Asian Higher Education area is the hope. With a lot of very interesting things happening. But it itself has to organize in some way. If we can have this macro-regional relationship that I'm hoping for.
EUEXP1	Can they do it country by country? And the answer is "not really" because it seems that the rule of the European Higher Education Area is that it can be signed only by those who can sign the European Cultural Convention, and since if you're not in Europe geographically defined, you cannot sign this convention. This means, ipso

	facto, that the Central Asian republics cannot be full members of the Bologna process, except for Kazakhstan, which has its European part.
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The interviewee EUEXP1 referred to cohesion as an important goal for CAHEA. The interviewee EUEXP1’s answer shows that there is a potential for building CAHEA, but action is required from CA countries to act as a coherent regional actor.

However, the strong interest of the Central Asian countries in the Bologna process has faced the challenge of not being in Europe “geographically defined.” Therefore, the interest was challenged by these circumstances, which the interviewee EUEXP1 considered a problem.

Lack of Interest in Cooperation with Each Other among CA Countries.

In connection with this, the interviewee EUEXP1 identified the necessity for Central Asian countries to work together. The interviewee EUEXP1 noted that this macroregional cooperation “makes a lot of sense.” (Table 34)

Table 34. *Lack of Interest in Cooperation among CA Countries (interview quotations of the study participants).*

EUEXP1	So, this obviously is a problem because can cooperation is built? I don't know. I hope so because it seems to me that it makes a lot of sense. But this also means working together instead of working separately to have country-by-country relationships with single European countries. So that's why I think one of the most meaningful things we did in TUCAHEA, and I don't remember if you have a question about this later, was to have student mobility within the five countries because everyone wants to [do] mobility with Europe, but nobody had thought about having it between Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. And so, we did it in TUCAHEA, which was eye-opening, I would say.
EUEXP2	Actually, at the beginning of the project, I didn't know anything about Central Asian higher education. I know about Tuning. I know about the interest of individual countries in Central Asia to learn about the European Tuning methodology. But I had no idea: is there any political initiative of the five countries to do something on that on a similar level than in Europe? During the duration of the TuCAHEA project, I learned that actually, there was not something very firm, very consistent on this level. On the other hand, we members of the project could

	<p>not see behind the curtains of the ministries, so I don't know exactly. Is there any discussion between ministries and governments in five countries or not? It was obvious that there was interest in this project, not only at universities but also at ministries or some other governmental institutions. However, this interest was not on the same level in all five countries. This was quite easy to understand to figure out, as I mentioned earlier. But this is a personal feeling. This is not a research result.</p>
EUEXP2	<p>My personal feeling was that the most interested country is Kazakhstan, and I explained to myself with the fact that Kazakhstan applied for full membership in the Bologna process. In this case, of course, we can fully understand what the reason is. Kazakhstan was also a kind of pushing forward part of the Central Asian train [?]. While on the other side, I mean, it looked like there is sometimes some hesitation about all this. I remember that one of the conferences... These conferences required delegations from all five countries. You can understand if there one missing, then it is impossible to make conclusions.</p>
EUEXP2	<p>But I remember at least one conference where one of the delegations was absent. And the only information we received was that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in that particular country doesn't matter which one is, didn't give visas to these people or didn't allow them to travel. This was, of course, a signal that there is still quite a lot of political work to be done in Central Asia to come to that level, as in Europe, where all countries actually, not only European Union countries, also non-EU countries, were willing to work very hard and to come to every meeting to push forward the idea of building higher education area.</p>
EUEXP2	<p>I can say that basically, at the beginning, there was always the same obstacle, namely, two different academic cultures come together, and now you can. OK. You must always then translate your understanding into other circumstances and vice versa. And at the beginning, this is tiresome. OK. It's not easy. Yeah, later on, it went rather well, and so I would say that overall, this project runs with a similar pace like any other in the world, I know.</p>
EUEXP2	<p>This is Kazakhstan's wish to join the Bologna process; this was an event this was a factor that was visible. And on the other side, maybe also a little bit of</p>

	<p>disappointment from the other countries because due to the rules within the Bologna process within the European Higher Education Area, the other four countries cannot be members, so membership in the European Higher Education area is quite strictly formalized, and Kazakhstan is the most eastern country which has a right to apply and was of course accepted. But this cannot be, let me say, Turkmenistan or Kyrgyzstan, which is even farther. I felt a kind of disappointment. In that way, maybe there is a specific in TUCAHEA or in the Central Asian Higher education area, namely that this is in a way a bipolar area because one country is a member of another higher education area while the other four cannot be. In this case, maybe this bipolarism is an issue.</p>
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However, interviewee EUEXP2 expressed an opinion that the interest of countries was not equal. The interviewee suggested that Kazakhstan was more active in the project. The interviewee recalled a time when one of the delegations could not attend the meeting. While they did not name a country, they probably referred to Turkmenistan. The interviewee EUEXP2 described that the participants came from 2 different academic cultures during the project. The interviewee mentioned disappointment in other countries as an issue in CAHEA.

Personal Values.

Two interviewees shared some key values that drove their involvement in the work on the TuCAHEA project (Table 35). The interviewee EUEXP1 expressed mainly two values:

- The power of ideas.
- Making a better world through knowledge sharing.
- The role of individuals who can help or bother in the implementation of a project.

The interviewee EUEXP2 expressed two key beliefs:

- The importance of internationalization.
- The importance of inter-university cooperation.

Table 35. *Personal Values (interview quotations of the study participants).*

EUEXP1	<p>Maybe the most important thing is this: when we started Tuning as when we started ECTS as, when we started TUCAHEA. Maybe it wasn't clear that this was needed, but when people finally discovered they needed it. And they find that it's there. That</p>
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	<p>may be sufficient. And then you say, “Well, look, here's a little book we wrote together. Well then, what you've done becomes powerful because it's needed, so in some way, I would say that it's the power of thinking ahead of what will be needed. And so that it's available when people realize that [they need it] maybe.</p>
EUEXP1	<p>My personal hope is that the people who share knowledge and understanding of each other will be able to make a better world, but sometimes I'm quite discouraged.</p>
EUEXP1	<p>It isn't the rules that make the project; it's that the project exists and it complies with the rules in order to have the funding. I'm sure that there are lots of people that just write the projects looking at the call and doing exactly what maybe I don't know, I would say, but certainly, in our case, there was a deep inspiration that could find a space in the call, and so it was presented in such a way that we got the funding and did the project.</p>
EUEXP2	<p>The internationalization of higher education is one of the topics which interest me most in my research. I knew a little, but I didn't know much about Central Asian higher education, so this was a great opportunity to learn. This learning opportunity was the main motivation</p>
EUEXP2	<p>I think that in a simple way, this is how to make it easier to cooperate across the walls of an individual university and across the borders of an individual country. How to empower both students and staff. How to make them learn more and better.</p>
EUEXP1	<p>And this is another big problem in this kind of project that there are some individuals that really have the drive and love capability to organize these things, but most people don't have the energy or the desire or the understanding to be able to do it.</p>
EUEXP1	<p>This situation obviously changes, but I don't think as usually your main enemy in things is ignorance, laziness, and self-interest. Yeah, but you fight those. That's what you have to fight - ignorance. People that don't know what you're talking about. Laziness - people that don't want to act and self-interest of people that are thinking about themselves rather than about the success of their country and the good of their young people. And there's also a lot of that in our [European] country.</p>
EUEXP2	<p>So, the Bologna process is, let me say, construction of the European Higher Education area from above and Tuning - from below. Yeah, so the Tuning project was born with a very, very simple idea. The main aim of the European Higher education area is that universities cooperate one with another. Easier, more transparent way, and better</p>

<p>quality. And this was what ministers signed in their documents. However, when you come to the concrete life of campus, when you see a concrete, a real Erasmus student, for example, coming from another country to your country, then there are a lot of problems. Starting from language and ending, for example, with curriculum because curricula at another country can be different. And courses can be different; methodologies can be different. If these differences are too high, then cooperation is not possible. So, the idea of Bologna was to establish certain, let's say, certain systemic structures like three-year bachelor's, two-year master's, and similar. ECTS – these were tools for cooperation. Now it was clear that we need something else at the level of institutions. But even at the level of study programs. If, for example, you are a student of teacher education in Budapest and you are coming for three months to us, then curricula and courses between Budapest and our university should be a little bit harmonized. Otherwise, your credits cannot be recognized when you come back. The task of the Tuning was - to tune to harmonize curricula across Europe. This was basic.</p>

The interviewee EUEXP1 suggests that ideas are an important way to influence society. Furthermore, the interviewee EUEXP1 expressed a belief that knowledge-sharing and “understanding of each other will be able to make a better world.” In connection with this, the interviewee EUEXP1 referred to the importance of inspiration, which drove the proposal.

Similarly, the interviewee EUEXP2 expressed their interest in internationalization and the wish to learn more about Central Asian education systems as sources of motivation to take part in TuCAHEA. The interviewee EUEXP2 described cooperation as an important goal of higher education spaces.

The interviewee EUEXP1 mentioned the importance of active individuals in driving inter-university cooperation projects. Similarly, according to the interviewee EUEXP1, individual people and their attitudes can also be a challenge for an inter-university cooperation project like TuCAHEA.

To sum up, the values of both interviewees do not contradict each other, but they align together. It seems that sharing ideas and knowledge is important for inter-university cooperation and further internationalization of higher education. The beliefs in these ideas motivated both interviewees to be involved in the TuCAHEA project.

Bologna process suggested the implementation of structural changes at universities in the Bologna member countries or in the countries interested in the Bologna model, as is in the case of Central Asian countries. However, the previous experience showed that structural reform is not sufficient for ensuring successful inter-university cooperation. Describing the structural changes within the Bologna reform, the interviewee EUEXP2 stressed the importance of the university level and the role of Tuning in it. Therefore, the Tuning experience became important for universities from countries outside the Bologna process.

Perceptions of EHEA and CAHEA by CA Experts

CA group of scholars have shown a complex understanding of both EHEA and potential CAHEA. They see the differences between EHEA and CAHEA and identify unique aspects of CAHEA and the Central Asian regional context. Despite the positive perception of other countries as participants in common higher education space, they see the interest of Turkmenistan in the involvement in CAHEA pessimistically.

Overall, the answers of the Central Asian interviewees reveal that they view EHEA in its complexity and understand its ongoing challenges. Nevertheless, CA scholars associate EHEA with high education quality, to which Central Asian should aspire.

The interviewees positively assess the opportunities for building the Central Asian Higher Education Area. All the participants expressed confidence in the interest of other Central Asian countries in the common higher education space. However, Turkmenistan is an exception out of five countries whose government seems not to be interested in the idea. All the interviewees express an understanding that the Central Asian region has a unique cultural context, which needs to be considered.

Overall, the interviewees expressed an opinion that political measures need to be taken by CA governments to build a common higher education space. Furthermore, the interviewees stressed the importance of Central Asian academic mobility, which needs serious financing and promotion of competence-based learning to become a reality.

To sum up, the interviewees identify three key factors for building a common higher education space:

- Political will
- Financing academic mobility
- Support of competence-based learning

EHEA as a Model.

Overall, the answers of the Central Asian interviewees reveal that they realize view EHEA in its complexity and understand its ongoing challenges. Nevertheless, CA scholars associate EHEA with high education quality, to which Central Asian should aspire (Table 36).

The Central Asia authors understand the international influence of EHEA. In the opinion of the interviewee CAEXP1, the influence of the European Higher Education Area has extended beyond geographical Europe, going as far as Kazakhstan.

Table 36. *EHEA as a Model (interview quotations of the study participants).*

CAEXP1	Now with the global migration of people, European Higher Education Area has partly covered other countries [beyond the European Union]. That is, European education has expanded into post-Soviet countries, which the Bologna process is evidence of. Since Kazakhstan joined the Bologna process, it has joined its mission to promote the Europeanization of higher education.
CAEXP3	We understand European Higher Education Area as mostly related to the countries-members of the European Union. At the same time, we observe that EHEA has gone beyond the borders of the EU. Thus Bologna process includes countries like Kazakhstan.
CAEXP6	But, of course, European Union, especially EHEA, has a plan. They have a striving forward plan to extend their coverage to neighboring countries, especially these neighboring countries first become Eastern European countries, which is also in some level they achieve this demand, achieve their goal in Eastern Europe and also Western part of the CIS countries. This includes the Central Asian countries, too. This is how I understand the EHEA.
CAEXP4	In Europe, there is economic interrelationship and political interrelationship, as well as educational cooperation and standardization.
CAEXP3	After talking to our European colleagues, it was revealed that they have not achieved complete uniformity as well, which makes their experience important.
CAEXP2	We must aspire to the European level because we have a lot of gifted youth who are themselves able to be involved at the international level.

CAEXP2	In my opinion, all project members had the same motivation – to keep education along the modern times. This was the primary goal – to prepare advanced graduates who can compete at the international level.
CAEXP2	The projects like TuCAHEA are needed so that we can show that we can also cooperate in education at the level of European countries, to demonstrate that our students are also able to receive the education of European quality level. We often visit Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan. For example, I have already visited Uzbekistan numerous times. I see that these countries have developed universities that can share their experience with us.
CAEXP8	It is difficult to define the unique characteristics of the European Higher Education Area in one sentence. There are country differences in education quality there.
CAEXP7	As regards the idea of Central Asian Higher Education Space, these ideas are promoted by the European Union, by the European countries. It seems to me there could be a place for an ideological moment here, connected with w wish to create a unified education system that could be transparent and easy to govern. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, ex-Soviet republics, including our region, became the object of close interest of the European Union. I believe there are also good intentions here to create a unified system here and enhance cooperation and making contacts. [However], the promotion of the education system based on the European model makes it easier for such an education system to be governed.
CAEXP7	One of the Central Asian colleagues involved in the project was a great supporter of the Soviet system. I agreed with him on many points because I believe that the European experience is something that we already had in the Soviet system of education. Unfortunately, after the collapse of the USSR, we destroyed all this.
CAEXP7	I believe that we are an Asian country. Europe will always perceive us as Asians. We know and observe it very well. Russia also has a similar attitude (looking down) towards Kazakhstan. In the Asian direction, there is no such attitude. From my experience of communicating with Indians and Japanese, they have a different mentality and culture [rather than Western countries]. Asian culture is much closer to us than European. I would search for new partners and directions in higher education in Asia.

A similar opinion was expressed by the interviewee CAEXP3, who said that European Higher Education Area has gone beyond geographical Europe. A similar opinion was expressed by the interviewee, CAEXP6. At the same time, the interviewee CAEXP4 expressed an understanding that EHEA is based on the strong interrelationship between European countries.

Although one of the interviewees CAEXP3 noted that the Bologna process did not suggest complete uniformity or that the European countries have achieved the level of convergence. The interviewee CAEXP2 expressed an opinion that European education is a good standard to which Central Asian countries should aspire. The interviewee CAEXP2 expressed an opinion that all Central Asian countries strive to improve the quality of their education systems. The interviewee CAEXP2 suggested that regional cooperation with other Central Asian countries is important for achieving a higher quality of education, similar to that of the European level. By contrast, the interviewee CAEXP8 presented a more mixed view of the European education quality, suggesting that it varies in Europe from country to country.

Unique Central Asian Context.

The interviewees positively assess the opportunities for building the Central Asian Higher Education Area (Table 37). All the participants expressed confidence in the interest of other Central Asian countries in the common higher education space. CAEXP6 and CAEXP10 referred to common history that could influence the development of common education space in Central Asia. However, Turkmenistan is an exception out of five countries whose government seems less supportive of the idea.

The interviewee expressed an opinion that CAHEA means the future unification of Central Asia as one region. According to the interviewee CAEXP1, the education crossing borders in the form of dual degree programs and double degree programs means that Central Asian Higher Education is developing beyond the national borders.

Table 37. *Unique Central Asian Context (interview quotations of the study participants).*

CAEXP1	Central Asian formation means unification. Specifically, educational unification of countries, which also provides higher education training and prepares specialists for their original enterprises, and production. It is important to say that since all the Central Asian republics became independent, they got concerned not only with issues of their national identity in education but also with the issue of
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	<p>adopting best world practices. In connection with this, the Central Asian education space has also expanded. It operates not only within the national frameworks but many of our states are engaged in dual education and double-diploma education. We also have branch campuses of European universities. Thus, in the city of Nur-Sultan, our leading university, Eurasian National University, we have a branch of the Sorbonne University.</p>
CAEXP4	<p>In comparison with EHEA, the Central Asian Higher Education Area has not been realized yet as we do not have economic integration like in Europe. Especially Turkmenistan, which is isolated from other countries. Economic cooperation in Central Asia faces a lot of barriers, while political cooperation or unification is not even a matter of discussion. We have different approaches to the Central Asian Higher Education Area.</p>
CAEXP5	<p>The issue of national identity cannot be ignored in the Central Asian Higher Education Area. Since obtaining independence, all our states have aimed to reach global standards in education. But they will strive to world standards while keeping their national identity and culture. Furthermore, there are regional peculiarities that can shape the Central Asian Higher Education Area differently from EHEA, from the perspective of culture, lifestyle, and experience that the countries have accumulated.</p>
CAEXP5	<p>Maybe each country has its own national peculiarities, although I believe that in education, we should not have significant differences. Although maybe gender issue is treated differently in all countries.</p>
CAEXP5	<p>I don't know about Turkmenistan, but I observe new ideas in Uzbekistan. They will probably also implement the Bologna principles.</p>
CAEXP3	<p>We have faced that not all countries received the idea of CAHEA with the same excitement as us. We have observed more reserved reception in other Central Asian countries.</p>
CAEXP8	<p>All the countries are very different in Central Asia. Probably, Kazakhstani higher education is a bit more similar to that in Kyrgyzstan, rather than Uzbekistan or Tajikistan. Turkmenistan is a very isolated country. In geopolitical terms, we are part of one area, which makes some people think of the idea of a common Central</p>

	Asian education space. But we are very different by development, for example, in terms of the reception of the Bologna experience. Naturally, we are different.
CAEXP7	<p>It is necessary to be careful when using terms such as “Central Asia” or “Central Asian space” – what do we mean theoretically under such terms? From a geographical perspective, it can have one meaning. From a geopolitical perspective, meaning can be different. I think that from a European perspective, the approach to the use of such terms is rather simplistic, suggesting that Central Asian space is five post-Soviet Central Asian countries.</p> <p>Figuratively speaking, everything that is “behind the Urals.” I wish such terms and concepts were used more accurately. Logically, for the European countries which sponsor Tuning through the European Union, Central Asian space means five post-Soviet republics located on the territory of the CIS.</p>
CAEXP7	Some countries in Central Asia are very different from Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan in terms of openness and inclusiveness, which makes it difficult to gather these countries in one block.
CAEXP8	<p>It is also needed to take into account the language factor and the mentality of people. Are the people ready for it? I think young people will eagerly go for it. Probably older people will be reluctant towards this. I think the closeness of Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan creates a challenge for this purpose. There could be some fear or misunderstanding at a certain level.</p>
CAEXP8	It would be easier to do a common education space with Russia because we have a common language factor. [...] Honestly, I personally have sympathy towards Soviet education. Possibly, [education space could include] Russian and Central Asian countries, or even Russian and Kazakhstan. Our countries have good scientific bases. I doubt that Turkmenistan and Tajikistan would join such an initiative, as they might be careful towards it, thinking of it as a return of the Soviet Union.
CAEXP8	In terms of information technologies, Americans used to be the leaders, but who is leading now? Singapore, Malaysia, China, and Hong Kong. We need to be closer to them in this perspective.

CAEXP7	Our master's students visited the Czech Republic on an exchange program. They were not received very well there. However, later, everyone was amazed by their knowledge during classes. Our students were shocked at the poor knowledge of world geography of the Czech students. I believe that the general education of our Master's students is much higher, which can be a shocking revelation for Europeans.
CAEXP10	Here [in Central Asia], it is rather easier to build cooperation because we have common historical roots and common tendencies in education development, that was in Soviet times and after, when countries became independent, then basic links remained in place, as well as common organizational approaches.
CAEXP6	When it comes to the Central Asian [common higher education area], it's much more easier because historically Central Asian countries lived for 70 years together in a single [Soviet Union] and we worked and we studied and we did research in the same education system long time ago. So there was a root system. Based on historical roots, establishing CAHEA will be much easier than [EHEA].
CAEXP10	In general, it is my opinion that every country must have individual peculiarities in its own education system. That is, it is impossible to strive to make all education systems unified and similar. This [unification] could be convenient for [inter-university] cooperation, but it will lead to losing peculiar cultural and national aspects. And cooperation should be built on learning the best experience. Another factor is applicability; that is, what can be good for one side, may be less appropriate or not actual for another country, for example, due to different levels of economic development. What is a past stage for some countries may be a new experience for others. Therefore, priorities and aspects are different for all.

It was pointed out by the interviewee CAEXP4 that in Central Asia, the building of CAHEA faces both political and economic barriers. In the opinion of CAEXP1, the issue of national identity, as well the issues of local cultures of Central Asian countries, are going to play a significant role in the local context. Similarly, the interviewee CAEXP5 suggested that gender issue is one of the problems specific to the Central Asian region. The interviewee CAEXP5 positively assessed Uzbekistan's interest in the European approach. By contrast, the interviewee

CAEXP3 expressed an opinion that not all countries are interested in the idea of a common higher education space.

High Interest of CA Scholars in the Project.

According to the interviewees, all the participants were highly motivated in taking part in the project (Table 38).

Table 38. *High Interest of CA Scholars in the Project (interview quotations of the study participants).*

CAEXP1	The process involved only interested individuals. It was evident that for Central Asian delegations, it was a novelty. They quickly got involved in the process because they were immediately strongly interested in it. This motivation, as I see it, partly defined the success of that project.
CAEXP2	We were interested in the application of competence-based learning in the credit system and wanted to learn which competencies shall be supported by other countries and ways to mobilize students in the future. This was our first experience.
CAEXP3	Involvement in TuCAHEA is a great life and personal experience, as well as professional experience, which has brought new contacts. I strive to employ competence-based learning in my teaching and other professional activities.
CAEXP5	We were interested in taking part in the project most of all in connection with the improvement of our educational programs. This was the primary interest. We were interested in competence-based learning and trying it at our university.
CAEXP3	Based on my personal experience, we were very interested in the project ideas from the beginning. We involved teachers, graduates, and students in our work. Graduates were very interested in taking part in the survey. We were excited about identifying the learning outcomes. Personally, for me, it was an exciting scientific experience. Another motivating aspect of the project was the opportunity to communicate with colleagues from other universities and countries. I visited Bishkek in frames of the TuCAHEA, while my other colleague visited Samarkand.

CAEXP5	We were also interested in taking part in the project because universities from all five countries were involved. The organizers should be applauded for their efforts to involve such a large number of universities.
CAEXP2	Although I did not pursue any particularly personal goals, I was very interested to learn something new. I was interested to learn about the new direction [in teaching methods], so I took part in the project.
CAEXP5	Central Asian faculty members exchanged experiences and offered their ideas. We learnt the experiences of involved universities and suggested solutions to their issues.
CAEXP7	My prior goal was to learn something new, to create a program that could be optimal for everyone, and to use such a program as a foundation for a common education space that would allow our students to expand their knowledge. [...] Prior to getting involved in the project, I did not pay much significance to competences. When writing syllabuses, me and my colleagues used to approach the description of competencies in a superficial manner. Working on this project, I understood how well-structured the system of competences can be by different levels. I started to treat the description of competencies differently since then. I also pay more attention to competences, whole reading various normative documentation related to educational standards.

The interviewee CAEXP2 said that they were interested to learn about competence-based learning. Similarly, the interviewee CAEXP3 recalled their involvement in the TuCAHEA project. Furthermore, the interviewee CAEXP5 recalled their high interest in cooperation with other Central Asian countries. The interviewee CAEXP2 expressed a similar idea.

Positive Perception of Other Countries in Central Asia.

The interviewee CAEXP3 expressed an opinion that the TuCAHEA project promotes a framework for regional cooperation and academic mobility, in which all the countries are interested (Table 39). The interviewee CAEXP5 expressed that the reason they were interested in taking part in the project was that it involved participating universities from all five Central Asian countries.

The interviewee CAEXP1 positively assessed the interest of other Central Asian countries positively, except for Turkmenistan. Similarly, the interviewee CAEXP4 mentioned that the representatives of Turkmenistan provided weak feedback on the project work. Similarly, the interviewee CAEXP5 positively assessed cooperation with other countries, bringing the example of Uzbekistan. The interviewee CAEXP1 positively assessed the issue of trans-border travel between Central Asian countries.

Table 39. *Positive Perception of Other Countries in Central Asia as Cooperation Partners (interview quotations of the study participants).*

CAEXP3	The TuCAHEA project definitely promotes the opportunity for unification in the framework of the regional cooperation between Central Asian countries. Despite this, we are interested in active cooperation and student and faculty exchange within the framework of academic mobility. This is a significant feature of the European Higher Education Area, which allows our students to study for two semesters in Europe.
CAEXP5	We were also interested in taking part in the project because universities from all five countries were involved. The organizers should be applauded for their efforts to involve such a large number of universities
CAEXP1	Kyrgyzstan had already joined the credit system, as we know. Uzbekistan has joined it, and Tajikistan is on the same way. Turkmenistan is a closed country for us. We tried for information about it during the project. We had a big challenge with finding information, as Turkmenistan almost did not give us any information. We had to report this issue to the project leaders. And this issue remains until now.
CAEXP4	Turkmenistan did not send their representative to work with us, so we had to enquire information from Turkmen people in other subject groups, but they could not provide sufficient information.
CAEXP5	Talking about Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, there should not be any problems, as well, with Uzbekistan. Three years ago, we had few Uzbek students, but then cooperation between our countries improved, so now we have over 40 students from Uzbekistan in our university. So, mobility can be successful.
CAEXP1	In our countries, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan, borders are always open, and we can easily visit those countries. And we visited those

	countries. Even if there were not any planned meetings, I personally visited Bishkek in Kyrgyzstan and met my TuCAHEA colleagues.
CAEXP9	Inside the project, there were sometimes tensions. For example, when we had a plenary meeting in Tajikistan, the Uzbek delegation did not attend the meeting at all. Their ministry [of education] completely prohibited them from attending the meeting in Tajikistan. When we had a meeting in Uzbekistan in Kyrgyzstan, the Turkmen delegation did not attend. Finally, we could not visit Turkmenistan at all.

Measures Needed for Building CAHEA.

Overall, the interviewees expressed an opinion that political measures need to be taken by CA governments to build a common higher education space (Table 40). Furthermore, the interviewees stressed the importance of Central Asian academic mobility, which needs serious financing and promotion of competence-based learning to become a reality.

Similarly, the interviewee CAEXP5 expressed an opinion on the importance of the governmental level for regional cooperation in Central Asia and the role of TuCAHEA in it.

Table 40. *Measures Needed for Building CAHEA (interview quotations of the study participants).*

CAEXP5	A lot of efforts have been made to develop an understanding of this use at the governmental level, specifically at the level of the Ministry of Education and Science. This is one of the main tasks of the projects, which was probably achieved in all the countries except Turkmenistan.
CAEXP5	For the common Central Asian platform, it is important that everyone should join and that ministries of education develop common approaches for the common higher education space. In the example of Kazakhstan, we see how far they have advanced. They have government support, which is important, including the aspects of financing. I believe it is needed to develop common approaches to the development of a common system.
CAEXP1	I think creating common Central Asian Higher Education is a complex project which cannot be implemented in one project. Even the memorandums that were concluded will be effective once they are acted upon. Signing is one issue, and

	implementation is another. But undoubtedly, the ideas of CAHEA are great. It is important to make academic mobility a widespread process.
CAEXP1	Today the cases of mobility are single rather than widespread. We have more academic mobility with Russia than with CA countries. It can be explained by the influence of politics on the issues of academic mobility. I guess it is important to make mobility transparent and transnational. Any country shall not stick to its national principles but learn to appreciate good foreign practices. As regards the common educational space, I believe that serious measures need to be taken to implement this idea. One project is not enough, which was clear from the start. I believe that we made the first step to knowing each other better, which was a sign that a common higher education Central Asian space is possible. But more structural measures are needed.
CAEXP2	For the mobility of students, financing is very important, with which universities have to deal on their own at the moment. Financing is one of the key factors for the issues of mobility, but we are taking all opportunities to increase mobility on a yearly basis because this is a good opportunity for students.
CAEXP2	Competence-based learning needs to be promoted, although, in the process, we should not fixate on a certain moment. The first stage has been passed. Now we need to move into a further stage when all countries understand [the importance of regional cooperation]. Kyrgyzstan understands this and wants to do it. We observed it when we visited Kyrgyzstan. Uzbekistan wants the same. In those years, it was somehow a more closed country; now, it is almost fully open and is interested in cooperation. They could join as well. For example, in the Central Asian case, our students are more actively involved in the mobility to Russia or European countries like Poland. When we have Central Asian countries with whom we can exchange students.
CAEXP8	While we have some academic mobility between [Central Asian] countries, it is not comparable to the European level of mobility. [...] Therefore, I believe some unification is needed, for which a common legal base is required to be developed at the higher governmental and ministerial levels so that this legal mechanism could work in our countries.

CAEXP10	Financing is an important factor that can facilitate academic freedom in terms of mobility. Naturally, to achieve a good dialogue with our European partners, we need to have an opportunity to travel, meet and organize dialogues on some platform. For this aspect, financing plays an important role. All other aspects can be resolved by the efforts of universities at the local level.
CAEXP10	Probably, the main reason [behind TuCAHEA] is to define the rules of cooperation. That is, in principle, it is impossible to imagine any [education] system which could be closed and would be developing successfully. A system that is open that is engaged in cooperation in the exchange of information is more apt for development. Therefore, to make this cooperation happen and be successful, naturally, some common space must be created that cooperates according to certain standards on accepted rules. This means global rules for everyone. But all participants of such [common education] space must have the right to define their local rules and their own priorities.

The interviewee CAEXP5 suggested that ministries of education of Central Asian countries should develop common approaches to make the Central Asian Higher Education Area. The interviewee CAEXP1 assessed the idea of building as a positive but complex process. The interviewee, CAEXP1, suggested that serious political measures are needed for the implementation of CAHEA. Furthermore, the interviewee CAEXP2 expressed an opinion on the importance of financing for the development of academic mobility in Central Asia. The interviewee CAEXP2 expressed an opinion that competence-based learning needs to be supported to develop the regional academic mobility between Central Asian countries.

To sum up, the interviewees identify three key factors for building a common higher education space:

- Political will
- Financing academic mobility
- Support of competence-based learning

Summary

Overall, the answers of Central Asian and European experts rather complement or contradict each other (Table 41). 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 Asia authors 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.

Table 41. *Summary of the Perceptions of the TuCAHEA Members about the EU and Central Asia as Global Higher Education Actors.*

EU experts	CA experts
Strong interest in the Bologna process.	EHEA and European quality standards as a model for aspiration.
Important world region	Unique aspects of Central Asian culture need to be considered.
Lack of interest in cooperation with each other.	Positive assessment of other countries. Political will, competence-based learning, and financing are needed for further progress.

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 authors. 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.

Barriers to Central Asian Regional Cooperation as Seen by European experts

Overall, the interviews revealed both large-scale, regional challenges, as well as specific country challenges, which were barriers to cooperation between higher education systems in Central Asia, and the EU capacity-building efforts in this field. Furthermore, the level of individuals also turned out to be important in the processes of regional cooperation building in CA.

At the country level, the low interest of Central Asian countries in cooperating with each other resulted in an unequal and insufficient quality of ministerial involvement in the project. Furthermore, a lack of motivated individuals was also mentioned as a problem by one of the interviewees.

Regional Level Challenges.

The strong interest of the Central Asian countries in the Bologna process has faced the challenge of not being in Europe “geographically defined” (Table 42). Furthermore, the strong interest of Central Asian countries in cooperating with the EU and being a member of the Bologna process is balanced by the countries’ low interest in cooperating with each other. So far, countries do not show the wish to become a single regional actor. According to the interviewee EUEXP1, the countries are more preoccupied with state-building. Furthermore, the interviewee EUEXP1 specified a practical issue, which is the material interest of ministerial officials, who had to be persuaded to take part in and support the TuCAHEA project because the project could not pay them any salary for involvement in the TuCAHEA.

Finally, one of the interviewees, EUEXP4, suggested that the influence of the Soviet model is the reason behind the hidden resistance to change towards the European model of cooperation in higher education. The European Tuning experts noticed a lack of strong wish for educational cooperation between countries in Central Asia, which was strongly echoed by all the international experts with experience in Central Asian projects. However, while European Tuning members did not touch on the political context of Central Asia in their interviews, all the international experts were more critical in the assessment of possible barriers toward inter-university cooperation in Central Asia. Specifically, international experts discussed the issue of competition between Central Asian countries at the regional level and between universities at the domestic level.

Table 42. *Regional Level Challenges (interview quotations of the study participants).*

EUEXP1	In the Central Asian Higher Education area, as far as I can see, I mean the only real thing that has tried to build it has been TUCAHEA because all the countries tend to want to have links with Europe but not between themselves because of various reasons. I mean, coming out of the ex-Soviet times, evidently, each country, even though the current borders are the result of Stalin's ideas of division, rather than unification or cooperation. Each country has tried to become more different and confirm its own ethnic identity and so forth.
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EUEXP1	<p>As I said, it could be personalities, it could be orientations of governments, it could be orientations of ministers, it could be basically, I think, the most powerful element is the second layer of ministerial involvement that is usually, it's not the ministers themselves who know something about this kind of thing, but it is somebody that is in some position where they are responsible for higher education or whatever, and so their attitude is very important. Well, you probably know that I have always done structural projects because ministries have to be official partners, and they have to be involved in the project, and they have to hopefully change the norms or the directives of the legislation or orientations as a consequence of the project. And I think we were reasonably successful in this.</p>
EUEXP1	<p>The one slight problem at that time was that it had become impossible for Tempus funds to pay ministerial staff. And since probably they had been used to having some money from these things, they weren't that happy. This has now changed, and you now can again pay ministerial staff from capacity-building projects, but in our time, you could not; you could pay for their travel. But you had to really convince them that it was worthwhile because you could not give them any sort of stipend. As I told you, there was one person in Uzbekistan who was helpful in some phases and unhelpful in others, but fortunately, there were other people working on the project that were in fairly powerful positions, so that was OK.</p>
EUEXP4	<p>I think they are still influenced by the Soviet model. Which is, I think, quite good as a matter of fact, and so this area offers a kind of resistance to change towards the European model. Again, honestly, I don't even know if it has to, because it is quite a good system, I think. Of course, if we want to increase mobility, if we want to increase all this exchange, deal with other countries, we have to get to a form of equivalence in [unclear].</p> <p>To the extent of the specifics of its particularities, I don't know enough about all of this, but it comes to my mind first that in the European higher education area, there are 49 countries. In Central Asia, there are five. So the size matters, and therefore, of course, certain dimensions of the higher education area should be different on the other side. But I guess that Central Asia, also due to this smaller size, is not so diverse as the big European area. Last but not least, what I found very helpful. It is that there</p>

	<p>is a lingua franca. OK. Russian is spoken just by all of them, so it was very easy to communicate. While in Europe still nowadays, sometimes people from the Iberian Peninsula, Spain in particular, have problems with English or French. Yeah, and vice versa. So, in this way, I mean this can be advantageous. Disadvantages what they had just mentioned that might be linked was that that cooperation, open borders if I may say so between the five countries. But this is still not a fully solved issue, and this is a kind of obstacle if you need to do a lot of bureaucracy in your country just pass the checkpoint at the border to another country where you have to join an academic meeting. OK. Then this is a problem. In European Higher Education Area, in particular, those of us who are living in the so-called Schengen countries, we don't need passports, I travel with my identity card, and now, of course, this is very helpful because as an academic or also a student needs to invest his or her time into studies and not in waiting in the queue for a visa for three days and paying all that and so on. So, this is also a practical but very, very important issue.</p>
<p>EUEXP5</p>	<p>I see problems, a lot of problems. There are political problems, economic problems, and educational problems. Political problems are, of course, that you are not best friends. There are problems between the countries in Central Asia. One of the main problems that we had was Turkmenistan, whose cooperation was haphazard at best. And then, of course, there are inter-regional problems between countries. And that affects, of course, any kind of cooperation on any level.</p> <p>The second is corruption. There's too much corruption in Central Asia, which means that money talks rather than science or education. I'm sorry if I'm frank. And then you have economic problems. So you have to fight for money constantly, so we do. We can fight for money, too, or we have to fight for money but what we get is rather good states of subventions /subsidies. I do not really know well how it works in Kazakhstan or Central Asia at this date, but I have a feeling that external money is extremely important.</p>
<p>EUEXP5</p>	<p>There was a lot of competition between national universities. So the best university is the best university with the best economy. They like to call themselves, and I quote, "elite universities" and weren't that prepared to let the lesser, if you don't mind</p>

	the word lesser universities, join in. There was a competition between universities. We have that problem in Europe too.
EUEXP5	It [CAHEA] definitely can be, but the quality of your education isn't good enough yet. That is, that is my impression. The education must be improved. You are far, far behind. European universities include quality. Bologna process, of course, is a way to improve the quality. But in the end, it's again a question of economy, a question of recruiting the right persons to have qualitatively high education.

In addition to the position of country governments, the interviewee EUEXP1 stressed the importance of the second layer of ministerial involvement in the project, which the interviewee considered the most powerful element.

The INTEXP1 raised local religious and cultural traditions as factors that cannot be ignored for building a common higher education space. The INTEXP2 named nationalism, religious fundamentalism, and domestic players as possible factors which could halt inter-university cooperation in Central Asia. Furthermore, the international experts raised the issue of competition between countries and universities as an important barrier to furthering cooperation (Table 43).

Table 43. *International Experts' Perspectives on Barriers toward Inter-University Cooperation in Central Asia (interview quotations of the study participants).*

INTEXP1	I believe that the lack of political will is the biggest challenge [towards regional cooperation in education between CA countries]. Naturally, the lack of a political will means insufficient funding, which is slowing down the cooperation process.
INTEXP3	At that time when I was there, [the Central Asian countries] didn't give a sign of wanting to work together. There was some rivalry for being the most important country. There was some relationship that you wouldn't define as always very friendly between the governments of these countries. So I had to train together ministerial functionaries of four different countries. On a human level, they were an excellent atmosphere and willingness to cooperate, and I think we succeeded to a certain extent in creating a positive collaboration spirit, but it was quite obvious that when we went to a higher level, in the ministerial conferences, the attitudes were not the same.

INTEXP2	So what I mentioned as an [possible] obstacle is 1) nationalism; 2) religious fundamentalism; and maybe the third obstacle is given the fact that international cooperation is very often used as a modernization tool. The further obstacle could be domestic players. They are not necessarily against cooperating. But they are afraid; they are anxious that if this kind of cooperation emerges, then the forces of modernization will come through the door open. And they do not want to modernize, so they are conservative, and they can keep the existing institution untouched much better if they remain closed.
INTEXP1	While it is worth looking at an example of the [European Higher Education] Area, this should not be blindly copied in any case, as Central Asian countries, like all countries, may have their cultural and religious peculiarities.
INTEXP2	In that respect, the most interesting place in Central Asia is probably Kazakhstan. A further obstacle if one of the members of the community is too much advanced, and now it's clear that Kazakhstan is progressing at a much higher speed, then the differences within the [Central Asian] community, that could be an obstacle because the more advanced the country could be seen by the others, as is gaining too much control on them. So that means that the more advanced country needs a very cautious policy behavior when cooperating so as not to become too dominant.
INTEXP3	Then, of course, there was this that Kazakhstan was the most integrated country in Europe and so it was more or less acting like an example to the other [Central Asian] countries, sometimes they were happy and sometimes they were a bit irritated by it.
INTEXP1	I have noticed that involvement in the EU-funded programs has increased competition between universities. And that aspect that universities themselves in Central Asia could cooperate more with each other, but they are not doing it just due to the fact that they are natural competitors to each other in relation to the EU-funded programs. I consider this as a negative influence of such programs. Although, in general, there are many positive aspects of the EU-funded programs, I have noticed the increase in inter-university competition within Central Asia.

INTEXP2	<p>I have never seen this [positive] impact, and I have seen the opposite of it several times. I was involved in the 90s and also later in the development of an inter-university center to train school leaders. Our international partner had a very strong condition, so they said that “We give you support only if you are able to cooperate.” So they said it very clearly, “If you are not able to create a consortium where you have common goals, money is immediately withdrawn.” That's one of the most important, and I could see how painful it was cooperating for these universities, for these academics who were used to a culture of competing for scarce resources, including resources connected with international cooperation. And they wanted to fight with each other. And they were suffering for being forbidden to fight. So that was their instinctive reaction. But I was the national coordinator of this project, and I have many memories of how difficult it was to convince domestic universities to cooperate.</p>
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Country Level Challenges.

Furthermore, the interviewee EUEXP1 mentioned some challenges, which were specific barriers to region-building and EU-CA cooperation in each Central Asian country (Table 44). Thus, the interviewee EUEXP1 specified a lack of Erasmus + office in Turkmenistan as a problem. Table 44. *Country-Level Challenges (interview quotations of the study participants).*

EUEXP1	<p>Turk[men] minister is obviously a problem because they come and go, so to speak, and right now, they seem to be unable to cooperate on a number of levels. They don't even have an Erasmus plus office at this time because the coordinator [name of person] has not been able to find an agreement with the European Commission to have an Erasmus plus office, so I don't know.</p>
EUEXP2	<p>It was the case in Kazakhstan, I still remember. Well, Kazakhstan was very, very active in this group. I guess that one of the reasons was also the application of Kazakhstan to join the Bologna process. There was for sure more interest in Kazakhstan than in other countries, and maybe this was the reason that they were more active in also with this participation of other people in the group.</p>
EUEXP1	<p>In Kazakhstan, it was slightly more confused, and I would say it's even more confused now in the Bologna process because they're different agencies or bodies</p>

	<p>that don't seem to communicate very well together. In fact, one of the problems in the Bologna process now. Is that one Kazakh agency says, "yes, we are the people," and another one says, "no, those aren't the people, we are the people," and it's really quite ridiculous. If we write to everybody then half of them are angry, and sometimes you write to one set, and the other ones come to the meeting.</p>
<p>EUEXP1</p>	<p>I mean, what I would say is that we had some very good support from ministries. Of course, one of the problems with ministries is that if people change or then you have to start over in some way, and I would say that in the Uzbek Ministry at that time, we had official support, but not particularly good real support because the person with whom we were in contact with, a very powerful person who in words was very supportive. But I don't know how supportive he was, in fact, but the good part is that the rector of [name of university] was the in the main committee of the Ministry for deciding on curricula and this sort of thing, and so he was able to push the TUCAHEA agenda in the ministry and in the legislation and in other countries similar things happened.</p>

The interviewee EUEXP2 described Kazakhstan as the most interested country. However, despite Kazakhstan’s membership in the Bologna process, cooperation with Kazakhstan was still far from what could be expected from a Bologna member country. According to the interviewee EUEXP1, in Kazakhstan, there was a big confusion between the agencies responsible for cooperation.

The interviewee EUEXP1 said that one of the Uzbek ministry workers provided support more on the surface than in practice. However, one of the Uzbek university presidents that were part of the TuCAHEA consortium has helped to “push the TuCAHEA agenda in the ministry and legislation.” According to the interviewee, “in other countries, similar things happened.”

Individual Level Challenges.

Furthermore, the challenges to cooperation might also exist at the level of individuals (Table 45). The interviewee EUEXP1 mentioned the importance of active individuals in driving inter-university cooperation projects. The interviewee described that the participants came from 2 different academic cultures during the project.

Table 45. *Individual Level Challenges (interview quotations of the study participants).*

EUEXP1	And this is another big problem in this kind of project that there are some individuals that really have the drive and love capability to organize these things, but most people don't have the energy or the desire or the understanding to be able to do it.
EUEXP2	I can say that basically, at the beginning, there was always the same obstacle, namely, two different academic cultures come together, and now you can. OK. You must always then translate your understanding into other circumstances and vice versa. And at the beginning, this is tiresome. OK. It's not easy. Yeah, later on, it went rather well, and so I would say that overall, this project ran with a similar pace like any other in the world, I know.
EUEXP2	But as I already said, I mean each of these Tuning projects in non-European countries was different in a certain way because circumstances are different. There was nothing so different from other countries that I would say this is something very particular in Central Asia, but for the European part of the team, of course, the challenge was to understand the regional academic culture or structures and so on, and this is what more or less we learned during the first year and a half, and then when you understand how the system is functioning, what are the values on campus? What are relationships? For example, students, professors, and so on. Then everything you see is. But I can't say that there is something so specific that that differs from all other experiments in the world.

Barriers to Central Asian Cooperation in Higher Education as seen by Central Asian Experts

Overall, Central Asian experts identified three types of barriers to regional cooperation in higher education: technical, political, and local values. According to the Central Asian experts, more face-to-face communication was needed. The Central Asian experts argued that more face-to-face communication was required. Although they communicated via technology, more frequent in-person meetings might have enhanced their work on the project. Furthermore, one of the interviewees raised the following issues: lack of trained teachers, lack of common chosen lingua franca, and lack of agreed regional credit framework.

Next, Central Asian experts identified political barriers: the existence of national borders, lack of regional integration, and fear of changes by policymakers.

Finally, Central Asian experts identified different local values and Soviet heritage as barriers to the implementation of the regional model of higher education cooperation.

Technical Challenges.

According to the interviewee CAEXP1, working using distance technologies was more difficult than face-to-face meetings (Table 46).

Table 46. *Technical Challenges (interview quotations of the study participants).*

CAEXP1	We always expressed an opinion that face-to-face meetings needed to happen more often and that they were scheduled in the project plan.
CAEXP2	We needed more international meetings. We did, of course, have some international meetings, but outside them, we had to arrange work through Skype, so we could not consider all the issues face-to-face. More face-to-face meetings could increase the value of our experience.
CAEXP3	The only disadvantage, as I mentioned, was a lack of international-level meetings where we all could gather together. It should have been more. Then maybe every participant could attend it there, but unfortunately, the coordinators were more involved than the rest.
CAEXP4	It was upon coordinators who would attend a certain meeting within the project, although usually, coordinators attended all the meetings on behalf of the country.
CAEXP5	The level of our students' knowledge is different from that of European students. We need to know well at least the Russian language to be able to create a common higher education area. There must be some common language, like the English language, in the Bologna process. However, we have heard from European colleagues that the language problem exists in the Bologna countries too. Central Asia needs to choose its common lingua franca. Some prefer to study the English language. Currently, the Russian language is used in frames of mobility programs. The choice of lingua franca will be decided on the political level. In my opinion, this issue needs to be considered.
CAEXP5	Another important aspect is human resources. When we speak about mobility, we need teachers to be equipped with language skills. For example, if we do a

	mobility program, a teacher has to speak Russian or English. We need technical resources and skilled teachers.
CAEXP5	Recognition of credits is the most important challenge in frames of mobility. For example, a subject may require six credits in our country, but a student has obtained two credits on the same subject during the mobility scheme. We are still dealing with this problem. It creates a problem as if a student has not learned enough knowledge on that subject.
CAEXP7	The regional academic mobility between Central Asian countries is below the desired volume. I understand that the lack of funding support is the main reason behind this. Financial matters are decisive for the development of academic mobility.

In connection with this, the interviewees expressed that they needed more international meetings for discussion of small issues. According to the interviewees, country coordinators were more involved in meetings with other Central Asian countries. Similarly, the interviewee CAEXP4 recalled the country coordinators were involved more in international meetings. The interviewee CAEXP5 expressed an opinion that common Lingua franca is required for the functioning of the Central Asian Higher Education Area. In connection with this, the interviewee CAEXP5 raised of language and technical skills of teachers. Finally, the interviewee CAEXP5 discussed the importance of an agreed credit system for the future of CAHEA.

Different Levels of Integration.

Similarly, the interviewee CAEXP4 expressed the opinion of a different level of integration in the European Union, while Central Asian cooperation in higher education operates in a different context (Table 47). Similarly, the interviewee CAEXP3 expressed an opinion that state borders make the operation of academic mobility more difficult. The interviewee CAEXP3 expressed an opinion that regional cooperation in higher education faces political barriers in Central Asia.

Table 47. *Different Levels of Integration (interview quotations of the study participants).*

CAEXP4	The big difference between CAHEA and EHEA is that our countries are not integrated like in the EU, so barriers in Europe are removed, and they can intensively cooperate on matters of education quality. We don't have such context, so only European efforts can help to increase regional coordination and unification.
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CAEXP3	State borders create certain barriers to academic mobility.
CAEXP3	At the same time, these are not even economic but political challenges that are the barriers to CAHEA. For example, our colleagues from Turkmenistan could not always attend our meetings. This suggests that TuCAHEA was just an attempt to create CAHEA based on the European model. We faced a lot of barriers, especially during the stage of the pilot mobility project. Everyone was hoping to visit Turkmenistan, but this did not work out. Thus, political barriers interfered with the goals of the project.
CAEXP4	<p>Overall, the fear of changes, new things, misunderstanding, and lack of knowledge regarding the necessity of competence-based learning. Its benefits are not obvious. The benefits, which are obviously positive in the European context and based on European ideals, may not be perceived as obvious benefits in the Central Asian context. Therefore, challenges in implementation can cause a negative response regarding any innovation.</p> <p>Freedom and academic mobility could be perceived negatively by university leadership. If a student can choose courses, they may eventually wish to leave their school. Therefore, some goals and values, which may seem positive in general, can seem frightening at the moment, with unclear prospects for the future of higher education. Such goals and values can be misunderstood by students and teachers, parents, and employers. Therefore, if the ground for ideas is not ready, there can be challenges at the stage of implementation.</p>
CAEXP4	We do not have the aim of free movement of labor; in our region, expats are called <i>gasterbeiters</i> , etc. Free movement is not as habitual well as renting accommodation in Central Asia. Therefore, there is a problem with the recognition of diplomas because free movement of labor is not an important goal in the region.
CAEXP7	Our universities work under the auspices of the Education Ministry. Even if universities wish to increase cooperation within the Central Asian region, it must be based on a certain normative-legal basis. We cannot skip the ministerial level in matters of cooperation. At the level of academics, we try to [increase collaboration], we write scholarly articles together, invite them to our conferences. Unfortunately, we do not have sufficient funds to sponsor Central Asian colleagues

	to visit us. It is quite expensive to make a visit from Kyrgyzstan or Tajikistan to Kazakhstan, or vice versa.
CAEXP6	Now, I mean, starting from the 2016 - it is really a political change. So now, 5 governments 5 state leaders in Central Asia are very keen to develop improved internal collaboration between higher education institutions, especially, it is especially very encouraged in border provinces.

Furthermore, the interviewee CAEXP4 expressed an opinion that the policymakers and decision-makers may fear changes and freedom, which are values of the European Higher Education Area. For example, the interviewee CAEXP4 pointed out that Central Asia does not pursue such a goal as free movement of labor, which is one of the principles of the European Economic Area. By contrast with the statements of the other participants, CAEXP6 expressed a positive vision of the interest of Central Asian countries in regional cooperation in higher education.

Local Values.

Furthermore, interviewee CAEXP3 expressed an opinion that some European values, which lie in the foundation of the Europeanization of higher education, will be hard to transplant into the Central Asian context (Table 48).

Table 48. *Local Values (interview quotations of the study participants).*

CAEXP3	There are cultural differences that we have faced during the discussion of certain competences. For example, the definition of patriotism is very different in the Soviet and Central Asian contexts. There are some traditional European values that cannot be transferred to our regional context. Therefore, the role of Tuning is to adapt modernization efforts taking into account the Central Asian context.
CAEXP3	We invited our peers from university, and everyone was interested to learn about the European experience. However, I believe that the Soviet model of education leaves its footprint, which can create barriers to regional cohesion in higher education.
CAEXP1	There was a big difference between the teaching method inherited from the Soviet times and the credit-based system, which we had started to do in our country. This

	created a big difference in experience during discussions with members of those countries that had no credit system implemented in their universities. For example, we had different times allocated to lectures in the programs. One lecture could be about 50 minutes in our university, while it could require 1 hour 20 minutes in another country. This influenced the volume of information taught and the competences acquired by students. Furthermore, the absence of a credit system in some countries meant that universities in these countries did not have time allocated for the individual work of students. We had to explain to them that once they adopted the European approach, they would have to allocate time for individual work.
CAEXP7	In Turkmenistan and Tajikistan, in the course of learning national history, it is necessary to have a special course on the life of a president of those countries. European experts could not accept this. The Turkmen and Tajik experts struggled to explain that this course was mandatory for them.

Another interviewee CAEXP3 said that the heritage of the Soviet model creates challenges for the reforms inspired by the Bologna process in Central Asia. Similarly, the interviewee CAEXP1 expressed that achieving mutual understanding required a lot of work.

Irregular Participants and Turkmenistan.

Overall, despite the positive remarks regarding the involvement of other Central Asian countries in the project, the Central Asian experts perceived that the participating countries could not always ensure regular involvement of the same experts from their side (Table 49). Furthermore, the cooperation with Turkmenistan was described as problematic from the Turkmen side. Similarly, the interviewee CAEXP2 recalled easy communication with members of Central Asian countries, except Turkmenistan.

Table 49. *Irregular Participants and Turkmenistan (interview quotations of the study participants).*

CAEXP2	We could easily communicate with Kyrgyzstan; for example, we even communicated on project unrelated matters, like we congratulated each other with Nowruz. Same with Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. The only communication with Turkmenistan was rare. We wrote 20 letters. In response to these letters, we
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	could receive a reply to only a couple of our questions. And they answered us in a very brief manner.
CAEXP3	Overall, we cannot say that the process of cooperation was closed; it was going quite well, just some representatives were quieter and more reserved, and some representatives were more active and open. However, there were diverse opinions spoken and debated, and often discussions sparked.
CAEXP4	Overall, I cooperated on a regular basis with representatives of two other countries, but one of the countries sent a new person to every meeting. Furthermore, a representative of Turkmenistan was absent.
CAEXP4	Diverse opinions were considered, although regular members of our group dominated the discussions. Those who gained experience after the first, and second years, were more influential than people who accidentally ended up in the meetings. Furthermore, my groupmates and I regularly exchanged communication and worked on project matters together.
CAEXP4	In my group, one of the countries constantly sent new people as representatives. They had problems working due to a lack of knowledge or understanding of the work process because they had not attended previous meetings. Therefore, they could not provide a quality contribution to the group work.
CAEXP4	Those who met regularly on project matters created teams, although the subject groups did not mean that all members of the subject groups were members of the group of people who were actually working.
CAEXP4	At the same time, each group set its informal rules of group work. These rules were based on the moral values of group work and international cooperation.
CAEXP7	Although in limited number, Turkmenistan representatives collaborated well in the project, both in terms of attending country meetings and email communication. They shared materials easily. It was not up to our Turkmen colleagues that they were not allowed to visit us. They were very open and actively engaged in written communication. They responded to my request on competencies eagerly. We called each other by phone and shared contacts without problems.

CAEXP6	The bureaucracy of ministries most of the time they created some barriers for us. And the most support came from the National Erasmus + offices, I mean National Tempus office. So these are the major organizations which most important they we worked.
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However, the interviewee CAEXP3 recalled that the level of openness varied among the project participants. According to the CAEXP4, this influenced the dynamics of work within the subject groups. In connection with this, the interviewee CAEXP4 pointed out that the regular participants expressed more knowledge and influenced the work process more than irregular participants. Finally, the interviewee CAEXP4 specified that the members of the subject groups established links, but unequally because it depended on the involvement of the participants. The interviewee CAEXP6 referred to the bureaucracy as the main challenge for collaboration. Similarly, the interviewee CAEXP4 set that the group dynamics were mutually set by the group members.

Summary

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 COMMUNITY⁹

In the Theoretical Framework chapter, it was suggested that the concept of epistemic community can be applied to explore the Tuning initiative in Central Asia. Following the theoretical proposition, the interviews revealed that the members of the TuCAHEA project indeed strengthened professional and academic links during joint collaboration on the project. The project changed the practices of involved universities in the sphere of competence-based learning. Furthermore, the interviews with the project participants revealed that they felt like a one community by the end of the TuCAHEA project. Many participants explained this result by the open and collaborative atmosphere of the TuCAHEA project.

The analysis of the Tuning initiative in the Theoretical Framework chapter revealed that the Tuning had many features of epistemic community during its development. By contrast, many of the Central Asian TuCAHEA members revealed that prior to the project they were not deeply acquainted with the competence-based learning. However, many of the Central Asian experts from TuCAHEA published their articles about competence-based learning in Russian and English language after they got involved in the project. It can be suggested that the TuCAHEA project influenced not only practices of Central Asian universities and faculty members, but also their beliefs.

The purpose of the present chapter is to analyze the causal and principled beliefs of European and Central Asian Tuning experts, in order to reveal, if these members could develop into a regional epistemic community.

Introduction

The dissertation draws on the literature on epistemic communities to reveal the role of European ideas in the Central Asian higher education context. Applying the concept of epistemic

⁹ The paper based on the present section is accepted for publication in 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. The paper was accepted based on the conditions of the Exclusive Licence Chapter Agreement with Emerald Publishing Limited.

communities helps to understand the process of norm diffusion with EU-Central Asia capacity-building inter-regionalism. Along with the “track-two diplomacy,” the concept of epistemic communities is one of two major ways to research scholarly involvement in regionalization (Acharya, 2011). The literature has shown the role of ideas in driving the involvement of epistemic communities in policymaking processes. Risse-Kappen (1994) further suggested that domestic structures can shape international traveling policies. Similarly, Acharya (2004) proposed the “localization” framework, which took into account local policy dynamics and suggested that the support of local epistemic communities is important for successful norm reception (p. 248). In connection with this, Schmidt criticized the top-down view of the policy process, suggesting that policy actors take ideas from discursive communities, including the epistemic communities, and engage in discursive interaction, in which certain ideas get selected over others (Schmidt, 2005, 2008). Similarly, it was suggested by Bislev et al. (2002) that epistemic communities using the ICTs and global inter-connectedness spurred by ICT diffuse the discourse of New Public Management (NPM). Almagro (2018) shows how epistemic communities re-produce discourse on gender security. Inspired by Schmidt (2005, 2008), these authors did analytical theorization on the role of ideas in curriculum policy, but the researcher did not find any empirical examination of causal ideas driving the activities of epistemic communities in higher education.

Existing empirical studies have interpreted the activities of communities as driven by just one or two core beliefs, stressing the top-down approach to the role of ideas in policies (Bloodgood, 2008; Löblová, 2017; for an exception, see Machoň, 2015). In connection with this, Risse-Kappen has criticized research on epistemic communities for failing to reveal why and how particular policy ideas are selected (p. 187). It was noted by Risse-Kappen that “Ideas, however, do not float freely” (p. 187). He further suggested that domestic structures can shape international traveling policies. Similarly, Acharya (2004) proposed the “localization” framework, which considered local context and stressed the role of epistemic communities in the process of norm adaptation (p. 248). In connection with this, Schmidt (2005, 2008) suggested that the epistemic communities provide policy ideas to the political decision-makers. Inspired by Schmidt (2005, 2008), Wahlström and Sundberg (2017), and Sivesind and Wahlström (2017) examined the role of ideas in curriculum policy analytically, but the researcher did not find any empirical studies of causal ideas spread by epistemic communities in higher education.

Furthermore, some scholars suggested the role of epistemic communities in the EU higher education policy but did not analyze the level of actual activities and implementation (Börzel & Risse, 2009; Börzel & Risse, 2012; Vögtle, 1970; Vögtle & Martens, 2014). This leads to a problematic assessment of the impact of European policy diffusion in higher education in countries outside Europe.

Principled and Causal Beliefs of TuCAHEA Members

The present section will present the results of the qualitative content analysis of publications of the European and Central Asian members of the TuCAHEA project, dedicated to competence-based learning. The section will first present the principled beliefs of the participants, followed by their causal beliefs.

Principled Beliefs of TuCAHEA Members

The present section will describe the principled beliefs of European and Central Asian members of the TuCAHEA project. Overall, the European experts were found to give more attention to the importance of addressing societal needs. By contrast, Central Asia authors focused more on the need for higher education reform in their countries. Furthermore, European authors provided 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.

Principled Beliefs of European TuCAHEA Members.

Overall, Wagenaar (2019) justifies the need for education to change to international challenges. Furthermore, Wagenaar (2019) stresses the importance of the involvement of the university level in European education governance. He suggests that a multi-level and multi-actor approach is necessary for the successful implementation of the Bologna principles.

The required level of quality and effectiveness of higher education programs are no longer determined at local or national level only, but today is also referenced internationally. This has and should have consequences for the governing system applied. From its very start, Tuning has distinguished the involvement of five levels to make reforms a reality. As said, it introduced and applied a multi-level governance philosophy before it had been defined as a conceptual framework. It identified not only levels which should be aligned in the policy-making and implementation process but also the different actors and stakeholders and their roles and responsibilities. (Wagenaar, 2019, p. 7)

Furthermore, Wagenaar (2019) expresses several principled beliefs: the importance of the institutional level in the Bologna process, the need for education to be relevant to societal needs, and the need for education to ensure the employability of graduates.

Wagenaar (2019) believes that education must respond to societal needs:

In the Tuning context, the notion of convergence would also be used as a means to reform, that is to make higher education programmes more tailored to the needs of society, in particular to improve the chances of graduates to find employment matching the level of education. This besides preparing them for active citizenship, fully respecting the aim of higher education to form experts in a particular field and to facilitate the joy of learning in itself. (p. 5)

Wagenaar (2019) also believes that education must provide ground for the employability of graduates. According to Wagenaar (2019),

Education is simply not intended to be ‘art for the sake of art.’ Although preparing for the labor market is an important feature of education, as an important condition to enjoy a pleasant life, there is the other role higher education institutions have claimed to have, namely, to prepare its students for active citizenship. (p. 9)

In a similar vein, Eizaguirre et al. (2019) have expressed the belief that universities can prepare graduates to respond to sustainability challenges. However, Eizaguirre et al. (2019) focus more on a narrow issue of sustainability. In contrast with Wagenaar (2019) and Eizaguirre et al. (2019), Nováky (2017) and Zgaga (2013) expressed a more balanced view of competence-based learning. Nováky (2017) stressed the importance of academic freedom first of all. He suggested that not all societal demands benefit academic goals. Admitting that consulting with stakeholders is important for the legitimacy of the subject, Nováky (2017) wrote that academic freedom is important for the quality of educational programs. Similarly, Zgaga (2013) expressed the opinion that teacher education needs to respond to the demands of society and research but should not neglect those who need support.

Overall, all European TuCAHEA experts acknowledge that education must aim to be relevant to societal needs and employability (Table 50). However, some authors express their beliefs in a more careful way, calling for a balanced approach.

Table 50. *Principled Beliefs of European TuCAHEA members Based on the Excerpts from Their Publications.*

Author name, publication year	Excerpt from their publication. (Page number)	Principled belief in brief
Almudena Eizaguirre, María García-Feijoo, and Jon Paul Laka, 2019	In other words, universities are considered to play an essential role in providing future professionals with the necessary attributes to respond to the sustainability challenges of the 21st century in increasingly complex and global contexts. Universities can become catalysts for change and must play an increasingly important role in helping students become responsible and active citizens with a clear vision of the importance and future challenges of sustainability. (p. 1)	Universities can prepare graduates to respond to sustainability challenges.
Nováky, 2017	Yet what society or ruling elites consider desirable or necessary, can work against scholarly academic approaches; this problem is well-known to historians of historiography. On the opposite side, we have a jealously defended academic freedom, which does not allow space for external influence, totally depending on the ability of academe to decide what is important to teach and learn and what is not. Such an attitude does not help to make employers see what makes History education an valuable asset. This is the yin and yang of Tuning History. (p. 412)	Not all societal demands benefit academic goals.

	<p>On one hand, if we do not consult stakeholders the legitimacy of our discipline might erode. The utilitarian views discussed above have already started to corner History as an unprofitable and unproductive subject area. On the other, for the sake of academic freedom, we should not uncritically follow the needs and desires of external stakeholders when constructing History programmes. Not least, we must continue to defend the critical ideals of the discipline. (p. 412)</p>	<p>Consulting with stakeholders is important for legitimacy of the subject. However, academic freedom is important for the quality of educational programs.</p>
Zgaga, 2013	<p>Conversely, new productive ways to connect the university and society should be found: this is necessary not only for teacher education but also for other professions as well as for the university of the twenty-first century as a whole. Teacher education needs to strengthen its research-based character and the ‘liberating influence of the university’ (as we heard above), but it should also strengthen its ‘caring and understanding’ for the ‘distressed men and women,’ girls and boys. (p. 13)</p>	<p>Teacher education needs to respond to the demands of society and research but should not neglect those who need support.</p>

Overall, both European and Central Asia authors echo each other. However, Central Asia authors seem to consider their national context of higher education more than European authors. Thus the national higher education context shapes the values of Central Asia authors, driving their attention to policy solutions and ideas relevant to the national needs of their higher education systems.

Principled Beliefs of Central Asian TuCAHEA Members.

The present section will present principled beliefs of Central Asian TuCAHEA members by country. In the presentation of principled beliefs of Central Asian experts, their country of origin is identified because Central Asian countries are not yet a member of common education space, like the European Higher Education Area, which makes it important to pay attention to the countries of Central Asia authors. It is important to note whether different national education contexts influence the principled beliefs of Central Asian experts about competence-based learning.

Principled Beliefs of Kazakh TuCAHEA Members.

Overall, the Kazakhstani authors expressed the view of the outdated knowledge-based approach and the necessity to improve education quality (Table 51). Tuleuova et al. (2016) referred to the Kazakhstani educational strategy, in which it was required to modernize education content: “The State Program of development of education and science in 2016–2019 years noted that in order to modernize the content of higher and postgraduate education the main emphasis will be directed to the formation of professional competencies of graduates that meet the expectations of employers” (p. 80). Manapbayeva (2014) referred to the paradigm shift from knowledge-based education, although in an indirect manner: “It is not enough to gain a certain amount of knowledge and master a specific number of skills and abilities for modern students. Time demands from them the ability of self-realization, self-development, and thinking creatively beyond one subject” (p. 108). The same author also specified the importance of competence-based learning in connection with the Bologna process.

Table 51. *Principled Beliefs of Kazakh TuCAHEA Members.*

No.	Author name, year		
1.	Manapbayeva, 2014	It is not enough to gain a certain amount of knowledge and master a specific number of skills and abilities of modern students. Time demands from them the ability of self-realization, self-development, and thinking creatively beyond one subject.	The shift from knowledge-based education requires a new approach.

2.		Competencies will help organize the teaching process in a way that will be effective, helpful, and interesting for undergraduate and graduate students, university teachers, and employers. The importance of competence-based teaching can also be seen in the fact that many European universities, after the implementation of the Bologna Declaration have reformed or are in the process of developing and reforming their curricula in relation to competences in order to ensure that the graduates of these universities will reach higher quotas of employability and also increase their competitiveness on the international job market [8].	Competencies help to improve teaching quality.
3.	Tuleuova et al., 2016	The State Program of development of education and science in the 2016–2019 years noted that in order to modernize the content of higher and postgraduate education, the main emphasis will be directed to the formation of professional competencies of graduates that meet the expectations of employers.	State strategy calls for modernization.
4.	Tuleuova et al., 2016	The purpose of modern education, which is aimed at the training of history teachers of a new formation, has been to increase the personal potential of students, forming their abilities to competence activities in the upcoming professional and social situations.	The shift from knowledge-based to competence-based learning.

Principled Beliefs of Kyrgyz TuCAHEA Members.

Kyrgyz authors spoke more about the necessity of reform to the educational crisis and the value of the Bologna model for reforming higher education (Table 52). Thus, Azhybaev et al. (2015) spoke about the existing challenges for Kyrgyz higher education. In another article, Azhybaev et al. (2014) spoke about the importance of the Bologna model. In conclusion, Azhybaev et al. (2015) wrote that not just structural reform but better qualifications are the final goal. He suggested that learning outcomes are a key to higher education reform in Kyrgyzstan (Azhybaev

et al., 2015). Similarly, a Kyrgyz author Mambaeva (2018), established a connection between the overall competence of graduates with the Bologna standards: “Existing educational programs and their standards are created according to the Bologna systems of development of educational programs, where the competence of graduates is the major requirement” (p. 411).

Table 52. *Principled Beliefs of Kyrgyz TuCAHEA Members.*

No.	Name of authors	Principled beliefs	Brief
1.	Azhybaev et al., 2014	Global society has acknowledged a crisis of education as a current reality. Not by accident, processes of reforming education systems have been initiated by most leading world countries. Bologna Declaration has paved the way for reform not only in European but also in Central Asian countries.	Modern society has to deal with an educational crisis. Bologna model helps to reform higher education.
2.		The shift to two-level preparation for Bachelor’s and Masters must provide widescale education reform (p. 1). Learning outcomes are a necessary condition for the successful achievement of the Bologna goals.	Shift to Bologna structures, and learning outcomes is necessary.
5.	Azhybaev et al., 2015	The problem is in the transfer of all the system of professional training to the credit-based training system. The first challenge is that in universities, sufficient conditions for productive work of students and teachers are not created. Another challenge is the organization of the educational process. First of all, the slowness of the educational process, its detachment from real achievements of science and technology, societal development, stable science disciplines throughout decades, and traditional approaches in the organization of learning. Higher education aims not to create competencies and free use of opportunities to deepen general and special knowledge but to learn the content for passing examinations and tests. (p. 4)	Kyrgyz higher education faces many challenges.

6.		The participation of Kyrgyzstan in the process will undoubtedly support the development of a competitive environment in the national system of higher school and the improvement of the quality of its educational services.	Bologna process is important for the competitiveness and quality of Kyrgyz higher education.
7.	Mambaeva, 2018	Existing educational programs and their standards are created according to the Bologna principles, where the main requirement is the competence of graduates. (p. 411)	The competence of graduates is the main requirement of the Bologna process.

Principled Beliefs of Tajik TuCAHEA Members.

Tajik authors have stressed the importance of the labor market due to the peculiarities of Tajikistan, which is a source of labor migrants for other countries (Table 53). It was stated by Sanginov and Kadyrova (2014) that “Taking into account that Tajikistan is a region characterized by the extra human labor force, the qualities of graduates of universities of the Republic should respond not just to national, but also to the external labor market” (p. 319).

Table 53. *Principled Beliefs of Tajik TuCAHEA Members.*

No.	Name	Principled belief	Brief
1.	Kadyrova, 2016	The introduction of competence-based learning in the educational process at university is a key factor in raising the effectiveness of the interaction between the university and subjects of the labor market. (p. 63)	Competence-based learning helps to connect universities and the labor market.
2.	Sanginov and Kadyrova 2014	Considering that Tajikistan is a region characterized by an extra human labor force, the qualities of graduates of universities of the Republic should respond not just to national but also to the external labor market. (p. 319)	Employability is important for graduates of Tajik universities.

Principled Beliefs of Uzbek TuCAHEA Members.

A scholar from Uzbekistan connected competencies with the shift from knowledge-based education to competence-based learning (Table 54).

Table 54. *Principled Beliefs of Uzbek TuCAHEA Members.*

No.	Name	Principled belief	Brief
1.	Giyasova, 2015	Numerous problems caused by transition processes in the economy and globalization, make us pay special attention to the quality of education, and the compliance of education with the needs of the labor market. (p. 103)	Education must be compliant with the labor market needs.

To sum up, all the Central Asian authors expressed a positive view of competence-based learning. Kazakh and Uzbek authors expressed the desire for modernization of higher education and the view that the new approach is required due to the paradigm shift from knowledge to competencies. Kyrgyz authors stress more the value and importance of the Bologna process. By contrast, Tajik authors mention the Bologna process less and focus more on employability. We can notice of national education background here.

Causal Beliefs of TuCAHEA Members

The present section will present the causal beliefs of two groups of TuCAHEA participants: European and Central Asian experts who were involved in the project. Overall, all the European TuCAHEA members believe that the use of competencies leads to a better response to the needs of society and increases the transparency and accountability of academic programs. However, Nováky writes about the importance of a balance between academic freedom and societal needs.

Overall, the causal beliefs of both European and Central Asian TuCAHEA members establish similar connections. Both groups relate competence-based learning and employability and transparency of the education process. However, Central Asian experts stress more the connection between a competence-based approach and education quality. By contrast, European experts stress more the connection between competences and the needs of society. Finally, Central Asian experts sound less critical of the competence-based approach than their European peers. Only one Central Asian expert noted that life experience might interfere with the training received in educational programs.

Causal Beliefs of the European TuCAHEA Members

Wagenaar (2019) established several cause-effect connections (causal beliefs), which help to address the issues of employability and societal needs.

Causal belief 1: competence-based approach leads to harmonization and convergence in accordance with the Bologna goals. Wagenaar (2019) connects the competence-based approach with harmonization and convergence aimed at the Bologna process.

Causal belief 2: competence-based approach increases transparency and accountability to society. According to Wagenaar (2019) competence-based approach provides transparent, comparable, and compatible tools, which work well in the context of the Open Method of Coordination: “All these instruments should offer transparency and should allow for comparability and compatibility through quality assurance and by giving more substance to the adopted Open Method of Coordination for bringing the Process forward” (p. 79).

Out of the TuCAHEA European experts, the most detailed narrative of causal beliefs was given by Nováky (2017). Similar to Wagenaar (2019), Nováky (2017) expressed a belief that the Tuning method can ensure the social relevance of the subject, especially the employability of graduates. Furthermore, Nováky (2017) sees the strength of Tuning in the ability to provide a balance between academic standards and stakeholder demands. However, Nováky (2017) noted that Tuning could omit innovations of the history discipline because it forms competencies on the basis of consensus between various historians, which leads to a more classic than innovative approach. In a more specific way, Eizaguirre et al. (2019) connect competencies for sustainability with ensuring a good response to sustainability challenges.

To sum up, all the European TuCAHEA members believe that the use of competencies leads to a better response to the needs of society and increases the transparency and accountability of academic programs (Table 55). However, Nováky is more careful about the approach, insisting on the importance of balance between societal demands and academic freedom.

Table 55. *The Causal Beliefs of European TuCAHEA Members.*

Expert	Causal belief	Cause-effect link
Wagenaar, 2019	Harmonization, to make higher education programmes in Europe comparable and compatible. Convergence of degree programs to facilitate recognition. (p. 5)	Competence-based learning – harmonization and convergence

	<p>Transparency is facilitated when the set of competences to be developed is dynamic and responsive to employability and society and made explicit and public. The focus in this respect is on its outcomes to prepare students best for their future role. Competences accommodate the definition of measurable indicators which will promote accountability. Their use implies active involvement of the student in the learning process, individually and in groups, by preparing written assignments, offering presentations, obtaining organized feedback, etc. It also impacts the evaluation of student performances, moving from knowledge as the dominant (even the single) reference to (include) assessment methods centered on competences, capacities and processes requiring a variety of approaches to new assessment methods (portfolio, tutorial work, course work...) being used, as well as in situational learning. (p. 232)</p>	<p>Competence-based learning- transparency</p>
<p>Nováky, 2017</p>	<p>However, perhaps the most valuable contribution of Tuning in general has been the Tuning ‘method’: a systematic tool for constructing programmes and degrees based on a set of reference points that take the needs of the society and the views of stakeholders into account (ClioH Guide II, n.d.). If this method is used, the social relevance of History programmes can be more easily demonstrated and not least in relation to the employability of students. (p. 411)</p>	<p>Tuning method – social relevance of the program Tuning method – employability of graduates</p>
	<p>Tuning provides a method that helps balance good academic standards and the external demands of stakeholders. (p. 412)</p>	<p>Tuning method – a balance between academic standards and stakeholder demands</p>

	There are, nevertheless, some potential weaknesses in the Tuning reference points. They are the result of discussions between historians from many countries and therefore a compromise of a sort. The most central aspects of teaching/learning History are present but lists of competences ignore potential for innovation and overlook the latest developments in the discipline. In sum, there is a need to take changes in society into account but also a necessity to monitor them critically and adjust the competencies in ongoing proactive ways that reflect these but also shifts in disciplinary practice. (p. 413)	Tuning weakness – omits innovations
Almudena Eizaguirre, María García-Feijoo, and Jon Paul Laka, 2019	The role of higher education is essential for providing future professionals with the necessary profiles to respond to the sustainability challenges in increasingly complex and global contexts. That is why numerous authors have sought to define key competencies, skills and learning outcomes for sustainability. (p. 1)	Competences for sustainability – response to sustainability challenges.

Causal Beliefs of Central Asian TuCAHEA Members

Overall, two groups of causal beliefs were identified. The first group of causal beliefs was dedicated to the topic of competence-based learning and its related elements. Overall, the analysis reveals that the authors stated the importance of competencies but used different language or stressed different elements of competence-based learning in their cause-effect statements. There is a strong pattern of linking competencies with labor market demands. Thus, Kazakh author Abilova (2013) stated that “Key competencies are basic competencies, developed within the framework of educational programs, related to the functions/roles/activities, which are supposed to make the [program] graduate demanded in the labor market” (p. 157). Kyrgyz author Tologonova et al. (2021) mentioned that “Technological progress forces enterprises to constantly update equipment, and very often the engineering and pedagogical workers remain on the acquired knowledge and competencies that do not meet the requirements of the developing labor market” (p. 1).

In a similar way, education quality and learning outcomes are also connected with market demands. Thus, Uzbek author Giyasova (2015) stated that “Many problems conditioned by the transition processes in economics and globalization, make us pay a special attention to the education quality, correspondence of education to the demands of the labor market” (p. 103). Similarly, Kazakh author Manapbayeva (2014) connects the importance of skills in general with modern demands. “It is not enough to gain a certain amount of knowledge and master a specific number of skills and abilities for modern students. Time demands from them the ability of self-realization, self-development, and thinking creatively beyond one subject” (p. 108). Although indirectly, Manapbayeva (2014) connects the importance of skills with a change in the demands of modern times.

Some authors mentioned additional reasons for adopting competence-based learning. Kyrgyz authors Azhybaev et al. (2014) connected learning outcomes with the transparency of qualifications. However, this statement was made as an addition to the statement about the importance of the labor market. In a similar vein to the topic of labor market demands, a Tajik scholar Kadyrova (2016), connected competencies with the competitiveness of universities:

In the context of globalization, which increased competition in the market of educational services and labor market, the quality of education outcomes becomes the main factor, which ensures the competitiveness of universities. The main education outcome in these conditions must be the competencies adopted by students through the learning process, which are required for quality performance of professional activities. (p. 55)

By contrast, Kazakh author Abilova (2013) noted that education competencies interfered with life experiences: “We would like to highlight that each of them will be intercepted through the focus of knowledge and life realities in the professional field, through personal experience. Unfortunately, we always tend to forget the human factor” (p. 157).

Overall, independently of their country of origin, all the Central Asian authors stress that competencies provide a way to connect education with labor market demands and other external demands. A detailed summary of causal beliefs of Central Asian groups of authors is given in Appendix V. Tables 56 and 57 give the shortened representation of the causal beliefs by presenting causal links established in the articles of Central Asia authors between a certain novelty in education based on the competence-based learning and its usefulness or necessity.

Table 56. *The First Group of Causal Beliefs about Competence-based Learning by Central Asian TuCAHEA Members.*

Education novelty, related to the use of competence-based learning	Justification of the necessity of that novelty in the eyes of CA TuCAHEA members
Competences*	Labor market demands* Competitiveness of graduates in the labor market Competitiveness of Universities Life experience
Improving education quality	Labor market demands
Learning outcomes	Transparency of qualifications
Skills	Modern demands

*Mentioned more than once

The second group of causal beliefs was about different ways to improve education quality. Thus, a Tajik author Kadyrova (2016), stressed the importance of collaboration with employers for the quality of educational programs: “One of the main Tuning principles is that while teachers are key members at universities, their activities will bring more results if they collaborate with employers and graduates” (p. 57). Similarly, Kazakh authors Tuleuova et al. (2016) mentioned that “In the Republic of Kazakhstan competence approach has also been identified as the main mechanism for the modernization of the education system in the basic regulatory documents” (p. 81). Some authors connected elements of competence-based learning with external systems. A Kyrgyz author Mambaeva (2018), established the connection of overall competence of graduates with the Bologna standards: “Existing educational programs and their standards are created according to the Bologna systems of development of educational programs, where the competence of graduates is the major requirement” (p. 411). Similarly, Uzbek author Lutfullayev (2018) mentioned the necessity to benchmark educational programs. To sum up, all the Central Asia authors express a strong causal link between the application of competence-based learning and the improvement of education quality.

Table 57. *The Second Group of Causal Beliefs about Competence-Based Learning by Central Asian TuCAHEA Members.*

Element of the competence-based learning	Justification of its use in the Central Asian context
Competence-based learning	Education modernization tool
Competence of graduates	Bologna standards
Tuning methodology	Benchmarking tool
Collaboration with stakeholders	Quality of teaching and educational programs

Overall, the causal beliefs of both European and Central Asian TuCAHEA members echo each other. Both stress the relation between competence-based learning and employability and transparency of the education process. However, Central Asian experts more explicitly connect competence-based learning with the improvement of education quality. By contrast, European experts stress more the relationship between competencies of graduates and the needs of society. Furthermore, Central Asian experts are found to sound less critical of competence-based learning than their European peers.

Summary

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 Asia authors 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 authors 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 Asia authors 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 authors 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

The aim of the present section is to discuss the findings presented in two chapters in relation to the research questions, research problem, and the scholarly literature. After a brief summary of the findings, detailed answers to the Research Questions of the study will be provided. Furthermore, the research results will be analyzed in relation to the tripartite Research Problem of the present study. Finally, the limitation of the study will be discussed, and recommendations for future research will be made.

Answering Research Questions

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 experts 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 experts point out distinctive features of the region that would affect the creation of a shared higher education space, European authors 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. The experts from Central Asia are more positive and practical. They emphasize the necessity of political will and financial backing for the development of universal higher education.

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?

The main effect of the EU-Central Asia higher education inter-regionalism was the creation of a new international actor in the Central Asian region. Specifically, a group of Central Asian experts involved in the project developed into an epistemic community that supports competence-based learning in higher education. The interviews revealed that the majority of the European Tuning experts all shared a common experience in previous European Tuning projects. The expertise in the Tuning methodology and the involvement in previous European projects bound European experts together. By contrast, although Central Asian Tuning experts acknowledged their high motivation in the TuCAHEA project, many of them revealed in the interview that there

was not knowledgeable about competence-based learning prior to the project. In fact, several participants indicated that the wish to learn about the competence-based approach actually motivated those Central Asian experts to join the TuCAHEA project.

Overall, the project brought a lot of new experiences to the Central Asian universities. These new experiences shared within the TuCAHEA project included not only competence-based learning but also an open and democratic approach to collaboration, which was different from the top-down approach of Central Asian universities.

The European Tuning members did not exert any pressure on the Central Asian experts in advocating competence-based learning. But according to Central Asian interviewees, the Tuning project significantly influenced their practices at the involved universities.

The analysis of publications showed that many of the Central Asian experts, who were involved in the TuCAHEA project, became advocates of competence-based learning in higher education in the Central Asian region.

Furthermore, the project changed not only the beliefs and practices at the involved universities but strengthened academic links between them. The interviews with Central Asian participants revealed that they kept cooperating with other universities from the TuCAHEA consortium. Additionally, some experts kept personal ties with experts from other Central Asian countries.

Overall, the TuCAHEA project changed both beliefs and behavior of the involved universities and experts, leading them to form a small regional epistemic community. In connection with this, it can be said that the EU-Central Asia higher education inter-regionalism created a new international actor, a Central Asian Tuning epistemic community.

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?

Overall, the interest in the Bologna process was noted both by the European Tuning experts and by their Central Asian colleagues. The interesting difference is that Central Asia authors provided a more optimistic view of the opportunity to build a common higher education space in Central Asia. European experts' view was more pessimistic about this issue. Central Asia authors 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.

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

Responses from both groups indicate that political barriers are the main challenge in building a higher education space in Central Asia, although Central Asian respondents are more likely to have poor communication technology and also point out that it is difficult to move. The next section discusses the results in terms of research questions, research questions, and scientific literature.

The Research Results and the Research Problem

In the present section, the discussion of findings will be organized around the tripartite research problem presented in Chapter 1. The findings will be compared with the existing literature on higher education regionalism. However, the discussion of the findings will go in the opposite direction to the one in Figure 1. The choice for this order is made because solving the problems should start from the easiest to the hardest (Figure 3).

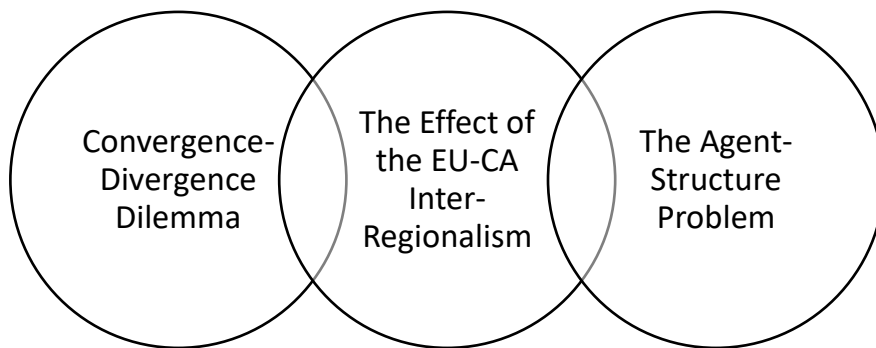


Figure 3. The Tripartite Research Problem in the Opposite Order.

The Research Results and the Convergence-Divergence Dilemma

The efforts of the European Union in promoting the Bologna model did not result in the acceptance of the Bologna model as an example for regional higher education space in some regions, including South-East Asia (Chou & Ravinet, 2017) and Africa, where regional context became a serious barrier towards the Bologna model (Woldegiorgis, 2018). In contrast to these studies, the analysis of publications and interviews with Central Asian experts in the present dissertation revealed the strong influence of the Bologna process and the European ideas on higher education policy and governance in Central Asia.

The concept of localization has revealed the tremendous influence of the Bologna process in the post-Soviet context. However, the analysis revealed factors that reduced the influence of the Bologna model in the post-Soviet context. Specifically, the prestige of the “Bologna club” did not lead to the convergence of the Bologna model in practice. Therefore, in the post-Soviet context, the Bologna process was taken as a reference model, particularly important for university quality assurance. Therefore, convergence with the European model has not been achieved. Instead, what happened was the localization of the Bologna model with the adoption of some Bologna elements. In the long term, the increasing influence of competence-based learning could be predicted. The TuCAHEA activities have shown great effect in the promotion of competence-based learning and changing the causal and principled beliefs of Central Asia authors.

Overall, Central Asian and European experts' responses more often support one another than they do oppose one another. European experts specifically note the keen interest that Central Asian nations have in the Bologna process. Experts from Central Asia emphasize the value of high standards in education as well as their countries' attraction to European models and norms. Both Central Asian and European members of the TuCAHEA project emphasize the significance of the region, which will have an impact on the creation of a shared higher education facility. These findings offer additional proof of the localization of the European impact and demonstrate the efforts made by Central Asian experts to modify European concepts to suit their own national requirements.

To sum up, while European ideas are strong in Central Asia through the efforts of the European epistemic communities like Tuning and through the Bologna process, the lack of structure in the form of a common regional platform has reduced the effect of EU-driven regionalization of higher education in Central Asia. As suggested by Alexander Wendt (1987), both structures and agents play a complementary role in shaping the political process. Therefore, it can be recommended to policymakers not to prioritize agents or structures but to pay attention to both in their political decisions.

The Research Results and the Effect of EU-Central Asia Inter-Regionalism

The literature showed the ASEAN as a key regional structure in shaping the behavior of the regional actors in Asian higher education. In the ASEAN, Khalid et al. (2019) suggest that the ASEAN leadership shall financially and administratively support regional research collaboration programs and scholarships for academics and students to achieve a more harmonized higher

education “ASEAN community.” Similarly, Kuroda et al. (2010) see the ASEAN+ structure can become a platform for developing a regional higher education framework. Indeed, the literature revealed that in East and South-East Asia, the Asian Universities Network and the ASEAN +3 were able to develop a regional research community that is involved in active regional collaborations (Gill, 2018).

In contrast with the ASEAN countries, the interviews in this study revealed the mobility exchange is still higher between Central Asian countries and Russian universities than among universities from Central Asia. Overall, responses from both groups indicate that political barriers are the main challenge in building a higher education space in Central Asia, whereas Central Asian respondents also point out that it is difficult to move. In this regard, European scientists have made a rather pessimistic analysis of the Central Asian countries' interest in cooperation. Central Asia authors were more optimistic. They point to the important role of political will and financial support of Central Asian countries in building a common higher education region. These findings indirectly confirm the existence of alternative regional cooperation projects, which are “competitors” to the European Union's vision of Central Asia as a single, coherent regional actor. We can see that the alternative projects of big regional players, like Russia and China, have the potential to shape the Central Asian region, similarly to the Asian Universities Alliance, developed by China in all Asian countries (Cabanda et al., 2019). Leskina & Sabzalieva (2021) claim that European Union prioritized less cooperation with Russian universities within Erasmus+ program, suggesting that this will lead to reduced Russian involvement in the European Higher Education Area. According to Leskina & Sabzalieva (2021), Russia is trying to create a regional higher education structure in the frames of the European Union, claiming that China can facilitate this process through its Belt and Road region.

While the Tuning project achieved a high-level declaration between education ministers from five Central Asian countries, it is hard for higher education regionalism to build without an actual regional structure that could unite all five Central Asian countries. The Russian and Chinese projects have the advantage, in comparison with European regional projects in Central Asia, because these regional projects have actual existing platforms for cooperation. In the case of the Tuning project, it failed to facilitate the building of the Central Asia Education Platform, which could possibly lower the effect of other European regional programs in Central Asia like the analyzed Tuning project. These findings confirm the views of scholars who stress the importance

of existing regional organizations as a platform for promoting higher education regionalization (Kuroda et al., 2010; Khalid et al., 2019; Gill, 2018).

Even if the Tuning Project succeeded in getting a high-level proclamation from the education ministers of the five Central Asian nations, higher education regionalism is difficult to develop in the absence of a regional organization that might bring the five Central Asian nations together. In comparison to European regional programs in Central Asia, the Russian and Chinese projects have an edge because these regional projects already have concrete platforms for cooperation. The Central Asia Education Platform, another project supported by the EU, could have provided assistance to the Tuning project. But the Platform offered no explanation for its moniker. Other European regional programs, like the examined Tuning project, may have less impact in Central Asia in the lack of a shared platform.

From the literature and the interviews, we can see that several alternative visions of regional higher education space exist in Central Asia. While Central Asian countries may lack the strength in negotiating the development of regional higher education space, they may have their final word in choosing among the visions of the European Union, Russia, or China. Due to geographical proximity, Russia and China can be more mobile in organizing inter-university projects in Central Asia. However, the localization of European ideas is effective in Central Asia, and it is unclear whether Russia or China can provide ideas on higher education governance that could be competitive with European ideas. In the context of the current geopolitical situation, including the USA-China tensions over Taiwan and the war in Ukraine, the effectiveness of the EU projects can influence on the regionalization process in Central Asia.

The Research Results and the Agent-Structure Problem

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 Asia authors and made them a regional hub of an internationally huge epistemic community. Both European and Central Asia authors 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.

Reviewing the activities of regional organizations in Africa, the Arab countries, and South-East Asia, Bekele et al. (2021) see that the regional organizations create elaborate structures without providing good quality content for education policy reforms at the national level. Thus, such regional organizations do not produce any “contextualized knowledge,” which results in the low effectiveness of their activities. By contrast, the Tuning project in Central Asia turned out to be effective in promoting competence-based learning as a possible tool that can facilitate regional convergence of higher education qualifications and structures.

Furthermore, the influence of the TuCAHEA project went beyond the idea of competence-based learning. Additionally, Tuning brought Central Asia European experience and a European approach to the project governance in higher education. The TuCAHEA project created a successful platform for cooperation between Central Asian universities, on which it created unique, multi-actor, multi-level dynamics of cooperation.

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 agents for the success of the European Union Central Asia “capacity-building regionalism.” In response to the set Agent-Structure Problem, not just international structures but domestic agents also matter for successful regional and inter-regional projects.

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 Asia authors. 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 Asia authors.

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Appendix I. Information Sheet and Informed Consent Form of the Study.

INFORMATION SHEET AND INFORMED CONSENT FORM

INTER-UNIVERSITY COOPERATION BETWEEN ASIA AND EUROPE

DESCRIPTION: You are invited to participate in a research study about inter-regional cooperation between Asia and Europe in higher education. The aim of this study is to understand the process of inter-regional cooperation in higher education between Asia and Europe. The purpose of the study is to explore the main factors involved in this process and how the process of policy diffusion during inter-regional collaboration activities takes place. Your expertise and experience will help to deepen the understanding of inter-regional cooperation in higher education and its promotion in your region. The interview will be conducted as follows:

In a face-to-face semi-structured interview, you will be engaged in a _ minute conversation. The interview will have approximately _ questions related to the research purpose. With your permission, the interview will be audio recorded for research purpose. Your personal information will be identified only in pseudonym form in all phases of the study, in all field notes, computer files, and all project texts, including the final thesis.

All possible identifiers in the presentation of data will be removed in all project writing stages, including the thesis, in order to conceal your identity. All the documents with your information will be kept in a separate, secure location: a locked desk drawer. All collected or produced research documents in hard-copy form and field notes, when not with the researcher, will be kept in a separate, secure location: a locked desk drawer. All computer documents related to the project will be kept in a secure password-protected computer. All audio recordings will be destroyed after 5 years upon the completion of the research.

TIME INVOLVEMENT: Your participation will take approximately _ minutes.

RISKS AND BENEFITS:

The risks associated with this study are minimal. Your personal data and interview will be strongly secured and kept safe. Your identity and any revealed information via interview will not be shared with your employer(s) to avoid conflict. Your decision whether or not to participate in this study will not affect your employment.

PARTICIPANT'S RIGHTS: If you have read this form and have decided to participate in this project, please understand your participation is voluntary, and you have the right to withdraw your

consent or discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. The alternative is not to participate. You have the right to refuse to answer particular questions. The results of this research study may be presented at scientific or professional meetings or published in scientific journals.

CONTACT INFORMATION:

Questions: If you have any questions, concerns, or complaints about this research, its procedures, risks, and benefits, contact the Research Supervisor, Dr. Gábor Halász, by e-mail: halasz.gabor@ppk.elte.hu, tel.: (36-1) 461-4500 / 3857 (w).

Independent Contact: If you are not satisfied with how this study is being conducted, or if you have any concerns, complaints, or general questions about the research or your rights as a participant, please contact the Chairperson of the Research Ethics Committee, Prof. Dr. Márk Molnár to speak to someone independent of the research team at (36-1) 461-2600/5614. You can also write an email to molnar.mark@ppk.elte.hu.

Please sign this consent form if you agree to participate in this study.

- I have carefully read the information provided;
- I have been given full information regarding the purpose and procedures of the study;
- I understand how the data collected will be used and that any confidential information will be seen only by the researchers and will not be revealed to anyone else;
- I understand that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time without giving a reason;
- With full knowledge of all the foregoing, I agree, of my own free will, to participate in this study.

Signature: _____

Date: _____

The extra copy of this signed and dated consent form is for you to keep.

Appendix II. Development of the Interview Guide for the Pilot and First Round Interviews

In the development of the pilot questionnaire, the researcher adapted interview questions created by Dalglish (2015) for her study of the development of child survival policy at the global level and its implementation in Niger. Although located in the field of health policy, the work by Dalglish (2015) was efficient in uncovering the development of policy as a result of cooperation between international and local experts and policymakers. Dalglish (2015) also focused on the role of epistemic communities like the present dissertation.

Specifically, the researcher analyzed her questions designed for the study of policy development at the global level, using the four stages of policy development by epistemic communities by Adler and Haas (1992) as an analytical framework. The process of developing a questionnaire went in the following way:

- First, the researcher used the “Demographic” set of questions by Dalglish (2015) to develop a list of general questions for the pilot questionnaire (p. 143).
- Second, the researcher broke the main body of interview questions in Dalglish into four stages of policy development according to the framework of Adler and Haas (1992).
- Third, the researcher eliminated theme-specific sub-questions asked by Dalglish.
- Finally, the researcher adapted the remaining questions for my study by paraphrasing and rewording.

The following introductory paragraph was based on the first paragraph of the interview guide by Dalglish (2015): “The aim of this study is to understand the process of inter-regional cooperation in higher education between Asia and Europe. The purpose of the study is to explore the main factors involved in this process and how the process of policy diffusion during inter-regional collaboration activities takes place. Your expertise and experience will help to deepen the understanding of inter-regional cooperation in higher education and its promotion in your region.”

Reading the questions written by Dalglish (2015), the researcher noticed the way her questions followed the process of gradual development of the policy under the focus of her study. Further, the researcher eliminated a number of sub-questions asked by Dalglish. For example, the researcher eliminated the following sub-questions: “How did actors’ positions vary according to different components of iCCM? [PROBE on malaria, diarrhea, pneumonia]” (Dalglish, 2015, p. 146).

The Question 1. “What is your understanding of the definition of iCCM for child health?” (Dalglish, 2015, p. 144) inspired the researcher to two write Question 8. “How do you understand the definition of the European Higher Education Area?” and Question 9. “How do you understand the definition of the Central Asian Higher Education Area?”

The Sub-question of Question 8. “To what extent did funding availability impact the formulation of the iCCM policy at the global level and at the country level?” (p. 149) on the left inspired the researcher to write Questions 29 and 30: “To what extent did the funding policy behind the project influence the project ideas and goals?” and “What is the influence of funding issues on the promotion of project ideas?”

Appendix III. Questionnaire Guide

The aim of this study is to understand the process of inter-regional cooperation in higher education between Asia and Europe. The purpose of the study is to explore the main factors involved in this process and how the process of policy diffusion during inter-regional collaboration activities takes place. Your expertise and experience will help to deepen the understanding of inter-regional cooperation in higher education and its promotion in your region.

PRESENTATION OF INFORMED CONSENT, EXPLANATION OF THE INTERVIEW PROCESS

1. Participant's profile:

Name:

Organization:

Contact details:

2. **REQUEST TO AUDIO RECORD THE INTERVIEW**

Part I

3. Could you kindly tell me when you started working in your current position?

4. During which period you took part in the "Towards a Central Asian Higher Education Area: Tuning Structures and Building Quality Culture" project (*hereinafter – TUCAHEA*)?

5. What included your main function as part of the TUCAHEA project?

Setting standards in inter-regional cooperation in higher education

6. How do you understand the definition of the European Higher Education Area (hereinafter EHEA)?

7. How do you understand the definition of Central Asian Higher Education Area?

8. In your opinion, how did the TUCAHEA project develop on the basis of previous Tuning projects or previous cooperation policy between Asia and Europe? (bilateral EU-funded projects in Central Asia)?

9. To what extent is the Central Asian Higher Education Area different/shall be different from EHEA?

10. In your opinion, what are the rationales behind the EHEA and Central Asian Higher Education Area?

11. Why do you think the TUCAHEA project was built on the basis of a limited number of universities/Subject Area Groups?

12. What were the most important events in the development of the TUCAHEA project?
13. In your opinion, what are the key documents to understand the policy behind the TUCAHEA project?
14. Is there anything different or unusual in the way the TUCAHEA project was developed?
15. How open was the process of collaboration within the TUCAHEA project?
16. Which actors or agencies supported the development of the TUCAHEA project?
17. Did a small number of actors or partners dominate the working process? Or different opinions were taken into account?
18. How did the partners get involved in the TUCAHEA project? Why did they become partners in the project?
19. Which actors or partners showed the biggest knowledge of the topic within your network?
20. Were any partners in opposition to each other during the project development? (*From the perspective of ideas/project envisioning etc.*)
21. Were there any alliances in the TUCAHEA project?
22. What were the main ideas behind the development of the TUCAHEA project?
23. In your opinion, what else influenced the project?
24. What efforts were made to promote the work of the TUCAHEA project to the wider audience?
25. What factors influence the promotion of the TUCAHEA project ideas at the national policy level?
26. To what extent did the funding policy behind the project influence the TUCAHEA project ideas and goals?
27. What is the influence of funding issues on the promotion of the TUCAHEA project ideas?
28. What are the plans to support the development of the TUCAHEA project in the future?

Appendix IV. Additional Questions Asked to the Leading Members of the Project (Based on Saçlı, 2011).

1. Did you participate in the TUCAHEA project as a representative of your university?
2. Could you describe the history of your involvement in the TUCAHEA project?
 - a. *When and how did your university get involved in the TUCAHEA project?*
 - b. *What activities did your university perform, and how did those activities evolve throughout the time?*
 - c. *Are there any TUCAHEA-related activities in which your university is currently involved?*
3. Within the TUCAHEA project, which other actors were you in contact with?
4. How often did you meet these actors, as a group, sub-group, or one-by-one?
5. Did you share the same objectives with the other actors?
6. With respect to influencing the TUCAHEA project, could you describe which of the following your university was in possession of:
 - finances
 - legal authority
 - manpower
 - strategies followed
 - any other?
7. Which actor/actors among (TUCAHEA members and partners) – do you think – were the most influential in shaping the policy in line with their own interests? What made these actors influential?
 - finances
 - legal authority
 - manpower
 - strategies followed
 - inspiring ideas
 - any other?

8. What were the rules which shaped the policy-making process and the interaction between the actors?
9. Were there other elements that played a decisive role in the TUCAHEA policy? Any unwritten rule, any influential person?
10. What were the interests of your university in its involvement in the TUCAHEA project?
11. Based on its role, what action did your university take in the policy-making arena related to TUCAHEA ideas?
12. Is there anything else you would like to mention?

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. Your expertise will be of valuable help in promoting the understanding of inter-regional cooperation in higher education between Asia/Europe.

References: Sacli, F. (2011). *Understanding the Interdependence between Policy Networks and Policy Outcomes: A dialectical approach applied to business parks in The Netherlands.*

Appendix V. Detailed Causal Beliefs of Central Asian TuCAHEA Members

No.	Name of authors	Causal beliefs	Causal links: <u>Novelty – Reason for adoption</u>
1.	Abilova 2013	Key competences are basic competences developed within the framework of educational programs, related to the functions which are supposed to make the [program] graduate demanded in the labor market. (p. 157)	Competencies- Labour market demands
2.		We would like to highlight that each of them will be intercepted through the focus of knowledge and life realities in the professional field through personal experience. Unfortunately, we always tend to forget the human factor (p. 157)	Competencies – Life experience
3.	Kadyrova	In the context of globalization, which increased competition in the market of educational services and labor market, the quality of education outcomes becomes the main factor that ensures the competitiveness of universities. The main education outcome in these conditions must be the competencies adopted by students through the learning process, which are required for the quality performance of professional activities.	Competencies – Competitiveness of universities Competencies – Competitiveness of graduates in the labor market
4.		One of the main Tuning principles is that while teachers are key members at universities, their activities will bring more results if they collaborate with employers and graduates.	Collaboration with stakeholders – Teaching quality
5.		The suggested model of development of competence can be a foundation for a conceptual model of interaction between universities and the labor market	Involvement of stakeholders – Quality of

		subject in the field of economics. The quality and practical direction of the educational process at university depend on the degree of involvement of the labor market subject in the process of defining competencies of specialists, which respond to the demands of practice, in the development of educational plans and programs, and from their realization.	educational programs
6.	Manapbayeva, 2014	It is not enough to gain a certain amount of knowledge and master a specific number of skills and abilities of modern students. Time demands from them the ability of self-realization, self-development, and thinking creatively beyond one subject. <i>Although indirectly, the author connects the importance of skills with a change in the demands of modern times.</i>	Skills – Modern demands
7.	Giyasova 2015	Many problems conditioned by the transition processes in economics and globalization make us pay special attention to the education quality and correspondence of education to the demands of the labor market.	Labour market demands – Education Quality
8.	Tuleuova et al., 2016	In the Republic of Kazakhstan, the competence-based approach has also been identified as the main mechanism for the modernization of the education system in the basic regulatory documents.	Competence-based learning – Education modernization
9.	Lutfullayev 2018	For instance, tuning methodology was introduced within the TuCAHEA (see http://www.tucahea.org) project, and this tool is discovered as one of the effective and productive tools to benchmark the best practices in the field for educational standards and academic competences. Despite the fact that the tools	Tuning methodology – Benchmarking tool

		are considered important for higher education, the scope of practical usage has not widened.	
10	Tologonova et al., 2021	Technological progress forces enterprises to constantly update equipment, and very often, the engineering and pedagogical workers remain on the acquired knowledge and competencies that do not meet the requirements of the developing labor market.	Competencies - Labour market demands

Appendix VI. Research Ethics Application Approval.

EÖTVÖS LORÁND TUDOMÁNYEGYETEM
PEDAGÓGIAI ÉS
PSZICHOLÓGIAI KAR
KUTATÁSETIKAI BIZOTTSÁG



EÖTVÖS LORÁND UNIVERSITY
FACULTY OF EDUCATION
AND PSYCHOLOGY
RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

Reference number: 2018/298

Research Ethics Application Approval

Name of the Principal Investigator:	Gábor Halász
His/her academic degree:	Doctor of HAS
His/her workplace:	ELTE PPK Institute of Education
His/ her job title:	Professor of Education/scientific advisor
His/her e-mail address:	halasz.gabor@ppk.elte.hu
Title of the research:	Inter-regional cooperation between Asia and Europe in higher education
Further researchers (e.g.student):	Saule Anafinova (PhD student)
Expected dates of the beginning and the end of the research:	15.10.2018 – 31.07.2020

The Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Pedagogy and Psychology (ELTE) grants permission to carry out the above study. This decision is based on the evaluation of the referenced Application submitted to the Research Ethics Committee.

Budapest, 12. 10. 2018.

Research Ethics Committee
Chair or Acting Member

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