

WORKING PAPER

Departures from the Periphery - Central Asia in Times of Global Student Mobility

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Abstract

Today millions of students leave their home countries to receive education abroad, which is provided and advertised by hundreds of higher education institutions in developed countries. As a source region, Central Asia has to deal with this global trend, actively or passively. This article argues that the growing global market of higher education has led to the emergence of a center-periphery logic, which is also driven by the “consumers” and which seems to reduce the risk and complexity of the educational choice. This logic creates tensions between the questions of prestige on the one hand and skills/knowledge on the other hand.

1. Introduction

Education, knowledge and mobility are attributes of the contemporary modernity which increasingly shape lives around the globe – far beyond societies, which mark and market themselves as “knowledge societies”. A clear expression of all three attributes is an increase of the global student mobility, which has become a part of the internationalization and globalization of higher education. As such, it is a highly current topic around the globe, including the discourse of scientific communities.

It may seem “natural” that the international student flow has focused on the industrialized

countries as its destination. But over the last twenty years, the international tertiary education market has become more malleable and is perceived as highly competitive (OECD 2013a, OECD 2012, UNESCO 2013, BLOSSFELD et al. 2012; DAAD 2013, BÖHM et al. 2004). On the one hand, institutions of higher education seek to attract bright and/or well-financed international students. On the other hand, applicants from all over the world are confronted with thousands of different options of international education. Today, Central Asia has become a strong source region for international students and, under the conditions of the growing global market, Europe is only one of the optional destinations.

But is Central Asia still involved in this process? How has it participated in the global trend of international student mobility and what could be the further goals and policies for this region? To address these issues, the article needs to take a look at the recent global student flow and to analyze the relevant characteristics of the current international education market. In this way, it can be shown that different theoretical concepts are necessary to understand the growing phenomenon of the global student mobility, including the concept of symbolic capital that is drawn from the prestige of institutions and places. The goal of belonging to the fifty most developed countries in the world, including the education sphere, which Kazakhstan has set for 2050 (, demonstrates a political will to actively shape the future of the country. The final section of this article will address the questions of the personal price of international education and whether prestige and world-class status should serve as rational goals.

2. Global Student Flows – A Statistical Overview

Worldwide, the number of *internationally mobile students*, i.e. students who are enrolled outside their country of origin, has doubled from around 2 Million in 2000 to around 4 Million in 2012 (UNESCO 2012)¹. Moreover, these figures include only full degree students – all short term students and students within exchange programs, like the ERASMUS students in the European Union or students in the ASEAN *University Network in Asia*, which allow credit transfer (ADB 2014:16), are not considered. Today, the number of *foreign students*, i.e. students who are enrolled outside their country of citizenship, numbers around 4,5 Million worldwide; this number also includes foreign students with permanent residency or those who grow up in their host country (UNESCO 2012; OECD 2013a). Some of these permanent residents, however, may have moved to the country with the specific goal of providing their children with access to the education system of this country.

1 The 2007 IDP Report „Global Student Mobility: An Australian Perspective – Five Years On“ mentions a global demand of international higher education places of around 2,17 Million in 2005. For 2025 it forecasts only 3,7 Million (BANKS et al. 2007). The reason for these clearly different figures under the same label can be explained by different definitions of “international students” and different methods of counting statistical data.

The numbers above go hand and hand with the global rise of students enrolled in higher education institutions and study programs on the whole. Between 2000 and 2010 the share of tertiary foreign students compared to the overall number of students grew by over 10 % (OECD 2012:362). Regarding the global figures, it has to be noted that some of them may be outdated and that there is no consistent statistical pool of data about international students: different states use various definitions of international students and collect different statistics (see ICEF 2014, VERBIK & LASANOWSKI 2007, EUROPEAN COMMISSION 2012). Thus, some figures are absent and others present only approximations (see UNESCO 2012). Despite this fact, the high aggregated figures suggest a global trend to seek international, high-quality and prestigious higher education by going abroad. Several forecasts about global student mobility argue that this trend will grow (BÖHM et al. 2004, BANKS et al. 2007), but possibly with different and new streams of tertiary mobility (BÖHM et al. 2004; CHOUDAHA et al. 2013).

With regard to Central Asia, we do not need exact data to understand that only few states such as Turkmenistan can or want to resist the trend of global student mobility. Conversely, Kazakhstan actively tries to use and shape student mobility for its national goals in economics, social sphere and its position in the region. With the outbound program “Bolashak”² Kazakhstan is pursuing a contemporary strategy by offering extensive international exchange programs for its citizens (see e. g. NURBEK 2013, DAIROVA et al. 2013, SULTANOVA 2011:117-121), in a way similar to Brazil, Saudi Arabia and China (CHOUDAHA et al. 2013).

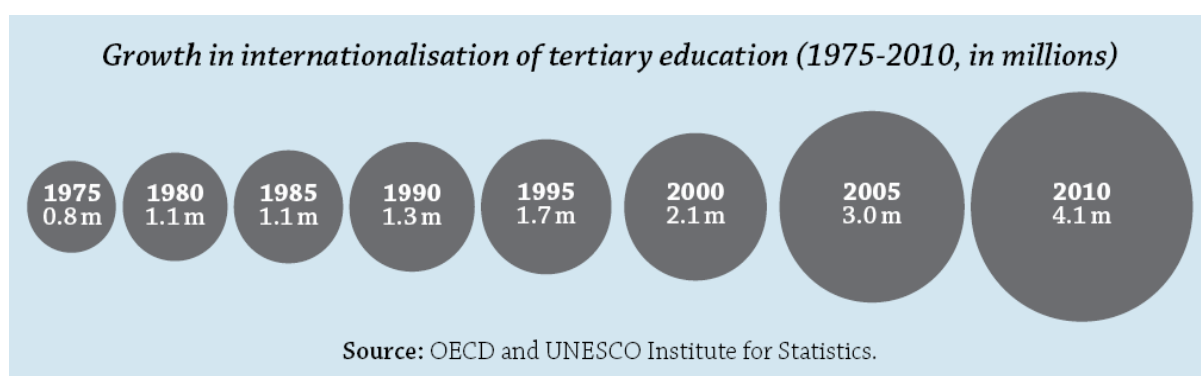


Figure 1. Long-term growth in the number of students enrolled outside their country of citizenship.
Source: OECD 2012:362.

2 The outbound program was introduced in 1994 and has grown strongly since this time, from only per year to an average annual of around 1.000 in over the last years, most of them bachelor and master students. Bolashak scholarships are full-grants and containing the rule that after successful completion the student have to work for the next five years in Kazakhstan. The applicants can choose between several institutions in developed countries from given list. Since 1994 around 10.000 students and academics had studied or worked abroad by a Bolashak scholarship (DAIROVA et al. 2013)

This might be also one reason why Central Asian States of the former Soviet Union are one of the most dynamic regions of student mobility. Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan have become an important part of international student mobility. With the rapidly growing number of outbound students³, which grew to nearly 160.000⁴ over the last decades (UNESCO 2014a), in 2012 just Kazakhstan “contributed” about 60.000 foreign students (OECD 2013a).

Official reports and academic research suggest that the main specific trigger for the high demand for university education abroad is the lack and/or insufficient quality of domestic HEIs in the region (UNESCO 2013/2014a; SCHMID 2012; HUSSNER 2009, DAAD Almaty 2011, SULTANOVA 2011). Other reasons include the emerging or re-consolidation of an economic middle class (DALY 2008; HOLLOWAY et al. 2012; OTAR 2014:262), comparable to the development of the middle class in other emerging economies around the globe (CHOUDAHA et al. 2013). Specifically, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tadjikistan participate in the international student mobility in three ways:

- 1) First, they are source countries for a strong student flow⁵ to Russia, revitalizing the Russian-centered CIS educational system (see TAKALA & PIATTOEVA 2012). More than 50% of the outbound students choose the Russian Federation as their destination country. The figures of Russian-bound student mobility from Kazakhstan are estimated at between 19.000 (OECD 2012) and 35.000 students (WILMOTH 2011) (see also UNESCO 2014b). In some ways such mobility is comparable with European student mobility between neighboring states like Germany and Austria, Germany and the Netherlands or Switzerland and Germany. Yet a considerable difference is that in European programs, such as Erasmus, the student exchange is bi-directional – in case of Central Asia, the outbound student flow to Russia is not reflected by an inbound flow from Russia.
- 2) There is an outbound student flow towards the western tertiary education market, especially to the U.S., Canada and Europe. The official and voluntary participation of CA countries in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) is strengthened through the Bologna process, which makes European countries more available for education seekers from CA.

3 This is shown very poignantly by the outbound mobility ratio. For example, in 2007 the outbound mobility ration in Central Asia was around 5,3 %, while the world average was only around 1,8 %. Specifically, the ratio in Kazakhstan was 7,3% (WILMOTH 2011). There has been no significant decline of the outbound mobility ratio since then (see UNESCO 2014a).

4 However, these figures also include regional student mobility, e.g. from Uzbekistan to Kyrgyzstan (maybe around 10.000 ?).

5 It has to be noted that there is no exact and valid data on international students from Central Asia available. Available figures are often estimates, and the figures presented in this article should only outline the dimensions and tendencies of this phenomenon.

- 3) There is a regional mobility of education, where Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan constitute the main destinations (WILMOTH 2011, see also ILKHAMOV 2006:12-15). Such regional mobility is similar of the mobility in Europe before the Erasmus program. It mirrors the diversity of tertiary education supply in the region and helps to regulate differentiated demands.

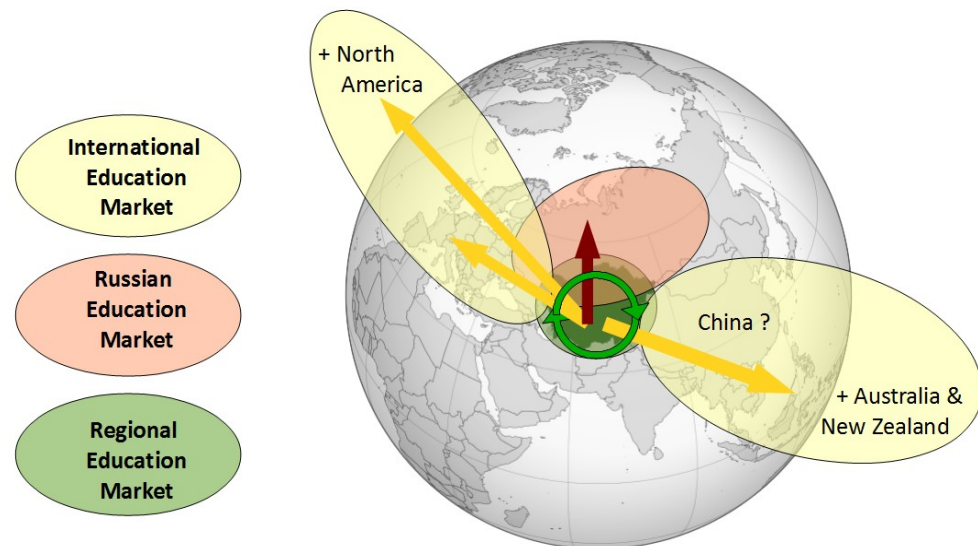


Figure 2. Main flows and mobility regimes of internal students from Central Asia.
Source of the map: <http://de.wikipedia.org>

Although Central Asia is a strong source region and China is a close neighbor, until today the second strongest economy in world has not been able attract many students from Central Asia. This can seem strange, considering that China is not only the largest exporter of international students (440.000 in 2008), but that it also hosted 265.000 international students in 2010 (YUE 2013:18). Furthermore, LIU predicts that the number of incoming students in 2014 will reach 450.000 (LIU 2014:42) and that China will become the second most important international destination for Asian students after the United States (ADB 2013:iii). There is doubtlessly a huge mobility potential for Eastern providers regarding Central Asia, where Hong Kong (SAR), China, Singapore and Malaysia, besides Japan and Korea, are actively competing for foreign students (UNESCO 2013:1). At the same time, there still may remain some historical uneasiness about and much respect for China (SADAVSKAYA 2012:11 (according to Zhenis Kembraev, Almaty 2014)).

3. Rational and Economic Concepts of Global Student Mobility

Although there are no exact numbers on global international students or on international students from Central Asia, we can identify forces which drive and fuel this global trend. This will facilitate the integration of student mobility patterns in Central Asia into the global trends and will allow an analysis of the specific position and options of the region.

Economic explanations and models of *demand* and *supply*, *sending* and *destinations*, *pull* and *push* factors clearly dominate the research of international educational mobility today. Indeed, we live in a capitalist world where economic factors influence every decision in our lives, including the decision of students and their families about whether and where to study. Historically, specific places and centers of excellent or special education have attracted educational mobility and migration (see GARCIA & VILLARREAL 2014).

Nowadays, however, there is a global market of tertiary education, even though most international higher education institutions are not-for-profit organizations (SACKMANN 2010). Nevertheless, the discourse of global student mobility has turned from a focus on development aid to a strong focus on the concepts of capitalism (e.g. UNESCO 2013:4), exemplified in the headlines such as “*global talent war*” or “*global hunt for talent*” (BLOSSFELD et al. 2012:21/23;). The development of the international education market and of high-skill recruitment can be seen as another manifestation of the global neo-liberal turn (see FINDLAY 2012:120; WATERS 2006).

In this global market, universities in developed countries compete for the best and brightest students from around the globe – as well as for students who can finance their education in these universities by themselves. Most scholarships programs and research job offers serve the first group, whereas exchange and cultural programs, intercultural agencies in foreign countries⁶ and advertising in general are tools to recruit “regular”, paying students to a country or to a specific institution. Consistent with the model of marketing where only supply creates demand and not vice versa, FINDLAY (2011) demonstrates this tendency in empirical figures: the growing flow of international student is the result not only of a growing demand, but rather of the extension and advertisement of international study programs, especially in the UK, the U.S. and Australia⁷.

While the recruitment of talent is a long-term business strategy, the broad recruitment of undergraduates and graduates becomes a lucrative business for HEI and for the destination

6 E.g. the British Council, Institut Français, Goethe Institute, DAAD, as well as private recruiting agencies

7 The case of Australia demonstrates how such global education hubs can be self-created: as university budgets were cut severely, higher education facilities developed international full-fee-paying programs especially for Asian students (UNESCO 2013:2)

economy in the short term as well⁸ (BÖHM 2004). Moreover, according to LABAREE, the success of American universities and their power to define world-class standards (see also FINDLAY 2012), is rooted also in their high tuition fees for masses of undergraduate and graduate students (LABAREE 2012). In literature on this issue, *educational industries* has become a common term, especially in connection with the UK, the United States, Australia, New Zealand and Canada (see UNECSO 2013:8; FINDLAY 2012, WATERS 2006), which rely on a stable flow of well-financed international students.

In the case of the UK and the United States, around 70% of foreign undergraduates are privately funded (BÖHM et al. 2004:64). In the recent years, undergraduates from China in overseas universities were largely self-funded – over 90% according to CHOUDAHA et al. 2013. For graduates and especially for PhD programs, scholarships and university jobs act as incentives to participate in highly competitive programs, yet even here about 50% of international graduates and PhD students are funded through their own means, including support from their home countries (BÖHM 2004:64).

Over the last ten years, many industrialized states, including a number of EU countries, have relaxed their immigration regulations for international students and facilitated their entry into the domestic labor market (e. g. SYKES & CHAOIMH 2011; OECD 2013:155-159; EUROPEAN COMMISSION 2012:5ff). The market character of the global student mobility has intensified due to the rise of new providers around the globe. With the end of the cold war and the economic growth in developing countries, the landscape of higher education had diversified. Particularly in Asia and in the Pacific new providers such as Australia, New Zealand, Japan, Singapore, China, Malaysia or South Korea have attracted thousands of international students (UNESCO 2013, ADB 2013, OECD 2012).

However, the Russian Federation, Middle-Eastern countries and the European Union also endeavor to become international education hubs (OECD 2013a; UNESCO 2013). As a consequence, the old and traditional providers such as the United States, Germany, the UK, Italy or the Scandinavian countries recognize that they are competing with a growing number of international higher education institutions. While the overall numbers of international students are still on the rise and the absolute numbers of “received” international students are more or less stable in countries such as the U.S. or Germany, the specific market shares are increasingly malleable and are treated with special attention (OECD 2013a).

8 For New Zealand, in 2004 education was the third biggest national export product (GARCIA & VILLARREAL 2014:131), like for Australia, where the export value of higher education was around 18. billion AUD (UNESCO 2013: 10-11). In the U.S., international students contributed nearly 21 billion USD to the economy in 2010, so that the U.S. Department of Commerce supported a delegation of 56 U.S. colleges and universities to recruit international students in 2011 (GARCIA & VILLARREAL 2014:131). And also the UK sees its international education service as a national high profit sector, for 2006 £5 billion is mentioned regarding overseas students (FINLAY 2011:180) and the British Council predicted for his scenario between £12 billion and £8 billion p.a. In 2020 (BÖHM 2004:73). And also for Canada it was estimates that international students contributes CAD 8 billion to the economy in 2010 (OECD 2013a)

The leading providers such as the UK, Australia and the United States perceive a threat to their position: *“The marketplace for international education providers can change rapidly. There are new competitors entering the market and existing ones will seek to operate in different ways”* (BÖHM et al. 2004, p. 64). Indeed, international education has become a competitive market, and for that *pro-active* marketing strategies in attractive source countries become necessary (BÖHM 2004; FINDLAY 2011:181).

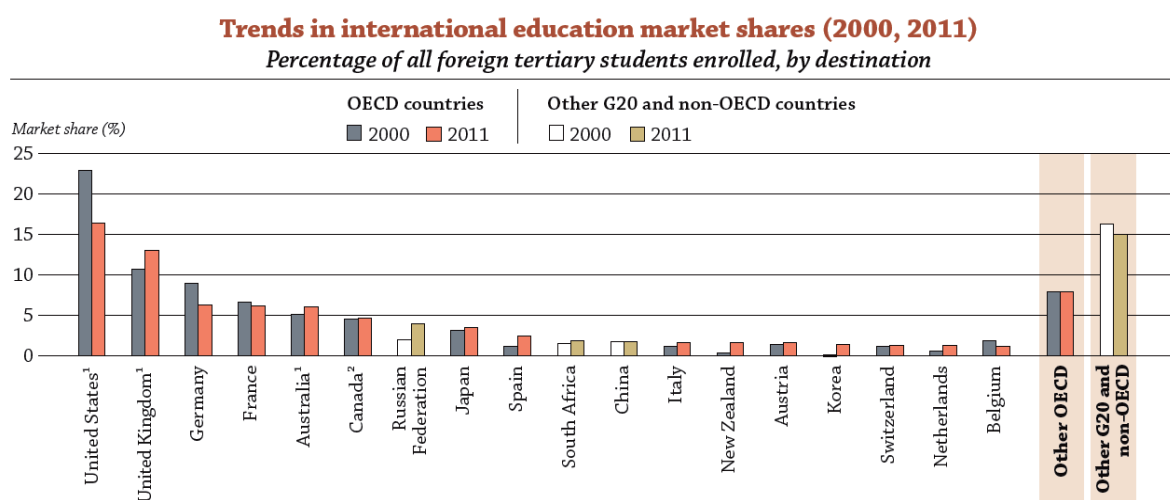


Figure 3. Source: OECD 2013a

From this perspective, Central Asia is currently only significant as a source region of the student flow, and that mainly for the recruitment group of self-funded students, despite Kazakhstan’s ambitions to develop into an education hub (see WILMOTH 2011). By establishing transnational education institutions (TNE), through importing international staff and through programs such as *Bolashak*, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan participate actively in that global international higher education market, even if they have not yet attracted a lot of students from overseas.

4. Production of Human and Cultural Capital – An Impetus for Global Student Mobility

Besides the explanations based on market forces, international student mobility has also been approached through the theories of kinds of social and cultural capital, mainly based

on the work of PIERRE BOURDIEU (1983)(e. g. HOLLOWAY et al. 2012; WATERS 2006; LEUNG 2011). All in all, this approach supports the argument that the market is demand-driven (see FINDLAY 2011). Bourdieu’s theories of capital are based on the idea that other kinds of capital exist besides to economic capital: social relations and contacts (*social capital*), knowledge and behavior (*cultural capital*) and prestige, status and values (*symbolic capital*) are also kinds of capital that are convertible among each other.

For example, economic capital could transform into cultural and symbolic capital and later back into economic capital. The accumulation of cultural and symbolic capitals allows the reproduction and reinforcement of social classes, especially with regard to the elites, because non-economic capital will be transmitted silently from generation to generation, as Bourdieu has demonstrated on the example of the French academia (1988). Therefore, international education generates *embodied* (skills, e. g. language skills) and *institutionalized* (academic degrees) *cultural capital* as well as *symbolic capital* like the prestige of the university or the place (e. g. London, Berlin).

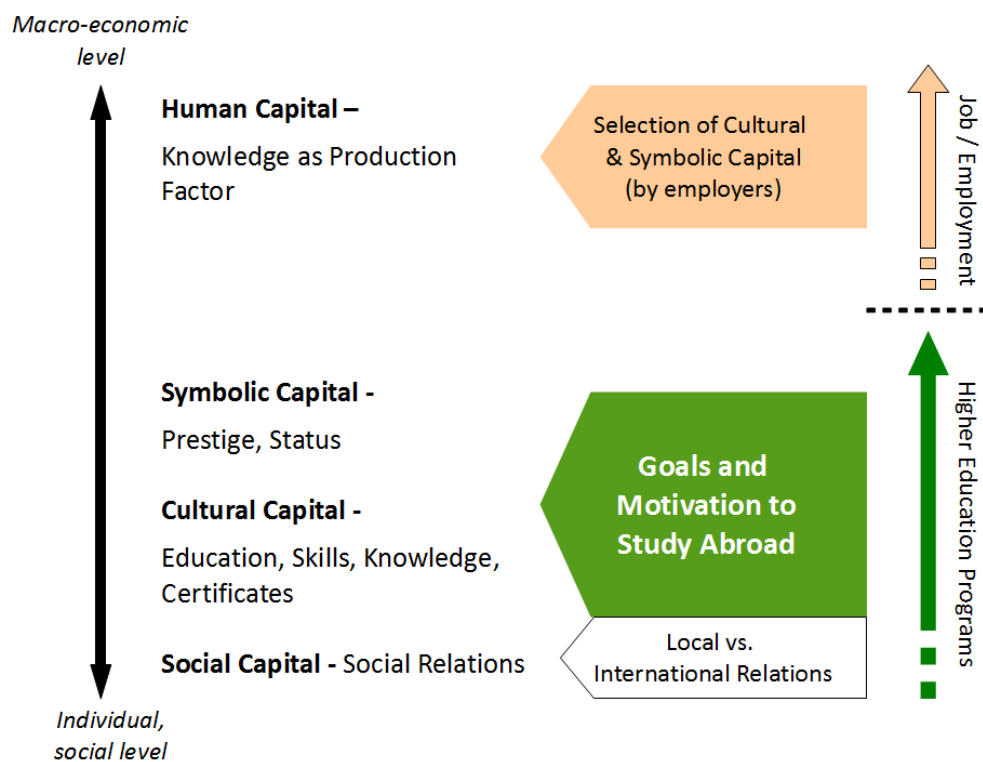


Figure 4. Human capital and kinds of capitals after Pierre Bourdieu regarding international student mobility.

Education, and especially international education and research are seen today as a key channel to gain human, thus social and cultural capital in order to keep up or enhance the social status of the family (see FINDLAY 2011; LEUNG 2013). Indeed, human and cultural

capital are not the same, while the first stems from the macroeconomics and marks personal knowledge as one factor for production, cultural capital covers all relevant education and skills as opportunities for effective social distinction, including useful economic knowledge.

From this perspective, the increase of international students worldwide is caused by the growing middle class in emerging economies and the rising competition within them, like in the case of China and India (FINDLAY 2011, UNESCO 2013, WATERS 2006) as well as Kazakhstan (SULTANOVA 2011:109), where members of the middle class are strongly seeking opportunities to provide themselves and their children with a stable social, cultural and symbolic capital.

There are two underlying logics of competition: on the one hand, as mentioned above, there may be a lack of domestic educational opportunities which will lead to a high competition for each study opportunity, e. g. for opportunities to accumulate useful kinds of capital. By choosing an offer abroad, the risky situation at home can be “*bypassed*” (WATERS 2006). On the other hand, if higher education enrollment rates in a country are rising quickly, domestic higher education credentials may become inflated and lose their relative value. In this case, the choice to study abroad may give an advantage over local graduates (WATERS 2006). This *social distinction* based on the immaterial cultural capital is a key concept in Bourdieu’s studies of class reproduction (1983).

In his research on the world-class factor, ALLAN FINDLAY (2012) has demonstrated how strongly the logic of distinction is still shaping international student flows. The higher the social status and the prestige of the current educational institution, the higher will be the prestige requirements of the next institution, which is enabled and supported by international rankings and established brands, becomes of paramount importance (LABAREE 2006, WATERS 2006, GARCIA & VILLAREAL 2014:129). The emergence and the discourse of a global hierarchy of universities leads to social differences within the international student mobility, so, for example, “*that the majority of international students from the UK are concentrated in a few countries and in elite or specialised institutions*” (FINDLAY 2012:128), while students from Central Asia also accept lower-ranking or un-ranked universities.

Here we have to recognize that the choice of destination depends strongly on the symbolic capital of target institutions (2012:128) and less on concrete skills and knowledge that are demanded by the labor market. While skills and knowledge at the undergraduate and graduate levels today are relatively inclusive and can be attained at many institutions in developed as well as in emerging economies or even online⁹, prestigious credentials and the symbolic capital of world-class institutions will retain their exclusivity.

In other words, while for ordinary students the cultural and human capital, mainly consists

9 This can be also seen in the value decline of “objective cultural capital” like books, technical books or specialist books. Digital data bases and modern libraries allowing more and more access to specialist content.

of hard skills and knowledge, the higher the social status, the more important symbolic capital becomes. In the worst case, it replaces skills and knowledge, and in a better case, it enhances them as the result of and excellent transfer of skills and knowledge. This process of branding by prestige on the international education market is clearly demonstrated by GARCIA & VILLAREAL. In their discussion of *Why the United States?* (as the main destination¹⁰), they suggested that the main asset for international students was “*having earned an American degree and gained American experiences*” (GARCIA & VILLAREAL 2014:130, in reference to Guruz 2011). Furthermore, “*It seems possible that any experience in an American institution – including those institutions that are not considered top-tier – could be valuable.*” (GARCIA & VILLAREAL 2014:130). It does not automatically imply that deciding on high-ranked institutions is wrong, but it does underscore the importance of the symbolic capital for international student mobility.

The importance of prestige, symbolic capital and the resulting global discourse is also supported by OECD statistics from 2013 (OECD 2013a). These statistics demonstrate that low or no tuition fees may seem to increase the attractiveness of a country (as in case of Germany), but it is by no means a guarantee, as it did not lead to huge flows of international students to Scandinavian countries, despite their high-quality higher education systems. At the same time, there is no sign that high tuition fees deter international students (OECD 2013a). In other words, if the prestige is high or if the brand is valuable, there will be enough families who will be willing to invest into a chance to gain this symbolic capital. Naturally, the power of prestige, symbolic capital and international rankings does not mean that tertiary higher institutions with high prestige are only good at marketing themselves, as they also typically provide excellent conditions for studying, research and for ambitious people in general (see LABRAREE 2012).

Overall, higher education institutions, especially those with a unique location, have a strong potential to be exclusive, i.e. to physically exclude most of the potential students. At the same time, the transfer of common university skills and knowledge, in general, is currently widely inclusive, as it can be acquired through HEI as well as through different printed or digital media (see BENDER 2013). In Central Asia, we find both trends of competition with regard to cultural capital. The fast growth of tertiary education providers¹¹, particularly in the “micro-universities” sector, has led to an increase of students, especially in new majors like economy, law or international relations (e. g. for Kazakhstan SULTANOVA 2011:97-98). As a result, there was an inflation of diplomas in these fields. Combined with the growth of corruption, this has led to the loss of worth and reputation of such certificates (HEYNEMAN et al. 2007; HEYNEMAN 2013). To study abroad has become an answer of the

10 The United States constitute the largest single-state share of 17% on the global market of incoming international students (OECD 2012:363)

11 Except Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. In Uzbekistan, the state has maintained a monopoly on tertiary education (TEICHMANN 2008), even though they have issued licenses to the regional representatives of some foreign universities. (Westminster International University Tashkent (WIUT), Management Development Institute of Singapore (MDIS), Moscow National University in Tashkent, Plekhanov Russian University of Economics, University of Oil and Gas Named after Gubkin, Turin Polytechnic University)

upper and middle classes to “bypass” the inflation of higher education at home and to provide their children with stable credentials. In the case of Uzbekistan, the domestic demand for tertiary education is much higher than the state-regulated supply (HUSSNER 2009) despite certain enhancements (TEICHMANN 2008:4). Because of fixed contingents for each study program, Uzbekistan faces a lack of local supply for higher education¹².

Furthermore, like in all CIS states¹³, all states of Central Asia “suffer” from a high demand for nominal diplomas (symbolic capital), as opposed to hard skills or knowledge proper (SIEVERT et al. 2011; KLEIN 2010, TEICHMANN 2008:5; HEYNEMAN2007; LOOS 2009, OSIPIAN 2012, OSIPIAN 2009). Yet at the same time, a serious interest (and demand) in skills and knowledge is still developing in the region. Both logics result in a high demand for foreign universities in these countries (HEYNEMAN et al. 2007) and for local institutions which claim that they function like foreign universities (e. g. KIMEP in Almaty), even if they demand high tuition fees (HUSSNER 2009, TEICHMANN 2008, DAAD ALMATY 2011).

5. The Periphery-Center Structure of the Educational Market

The two previous sections have outlined the flow and shares of international mobility on the one hand, and the models of social, cultural and symbolic capital on the other hand. In both cases, the periphery-center structure of the global student mobility becomes apparent: world-class universities and universities in globally important cities act as centers, and rural regions without economic or political power, such as Central Asian Countries, become their peripheries (see TOMUSK 2011). To a certain extent, such center-periphery-logic is inherent to higher education in general, as people with knowledge and skills tend to look for places with good conditions to work together.

But in the times of globalization and digitalization, every institution will be ranked into the global center-periphery-structure, which is measured by the scientific community (research results), rankings, public discourse and obviously by the demand and flow of mobile students. In this constructed mode, relationships are organized relative to the center, granting it an implicitly higher status, while the “periphery” is ideologically removed to the edges of the constellation. So the flows are moving from less central to more central locations, perhaps using several universities as stations (e.g. secondary school in Schymkent, B.A. in Almaty, M.A. in Germany and PhD in the United States).

12 Depending on the kind of school that the candidate has attended before and on their success in the entry test, the Uzbek higher education system offers the applicant one or even several study places for their specific major. According to state, this system provides a social and merit-based distribution of higher education in the country (TEICHMANN 2008).

13 CIS - Commonwealth of Interdependent States

As it was mentioned in section 4, the more advantageous the social and financial background and the more central the home country, the shorter and closer will the mobility pathway to centered education institutions become. Simultaneously, the competition for entering educational institutions, which are perceived as central, is rising, as it was discussed before.

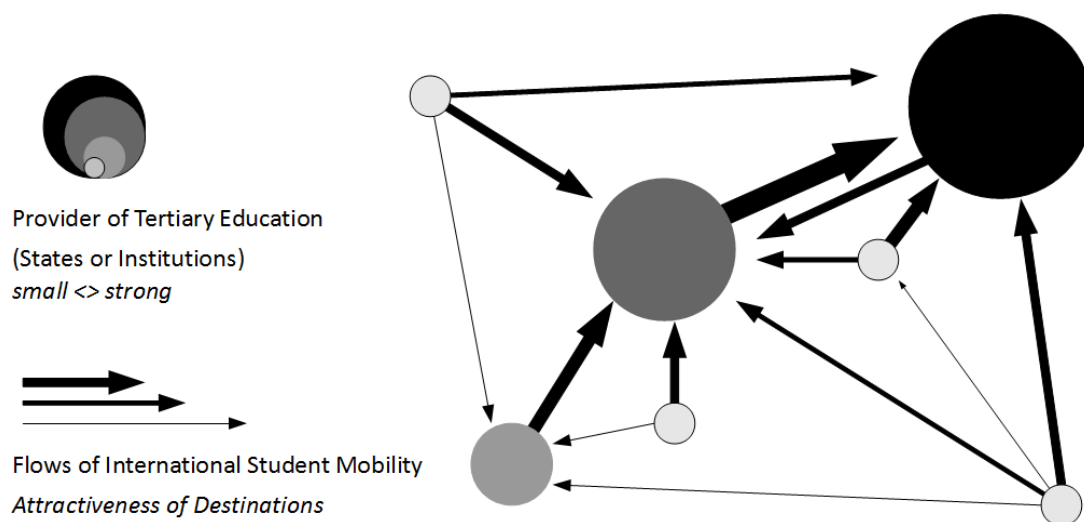


Figure 5. Center-Periphery logic of global student mobility.

Although the internationalization of higher education by the neoliberal philosophy is still continuing, the center-periphery-structure must be seen as a meta-structure, which is constructed every day by its participants, including the wishes and dreams of students and families to become a part of a specific university or city (e. g. London, Berlin, Paris). The center-periphery logic is not completely synonymous with the well-known international rankings of higher education; the ranking system is rather a phenomenon or sign of this center-periphery logic. As the change of market shares indicates, up and down movement is possible, but the competition at the top becomes extremely high. Thus, most movements are carried out in middle section of the list, as the top tier is relative stable, while the changes on the periphery - e.g. improving universities in Schymkent – do not matter globally. Nevertheless, every improvement in tertiary education – whether on the periphery, in the middle or in established centers – is important for the students.

The logic of periphery and center also manifests in student mobility away from the center gravity. While international mobility is praised by politicians as something inherently valuable and useful (see e. g. DAAD 2013, FINDLAY 2011, ADB 2013), other rhetoric is necessary to convince students from central institutions or countries to attend periphery universities. The European Erasmus program, for example, provides generous scholarships,

simplifies educational transfers and reduces opportunity costs to motivate more students to also go to the European periphery, like Eastern European countries or to some relatively unknown cities in Southern Europe. In general, universities and agencies in central countries try to convince their students to study abroad for some time by establishing exchange programs with specific partner institutions. The aspired flow from the center to the periphery is also marketed by emphasizing the potential for adventure and unique intercultural and exotic experiences (BISHOP 2013). It also entails an unspoken promise to get a taste of non-western reality. All in all, these are rather touristic concepts (BISHOP 2013) and according to FINDLAY (2012) it is not surprising that such programs target mainly middle-class students. By implication, the elites do not waste their time on such system-sponsored “exotic” trips, as they are financially free to travel privately to the exotic hotspots of the world.

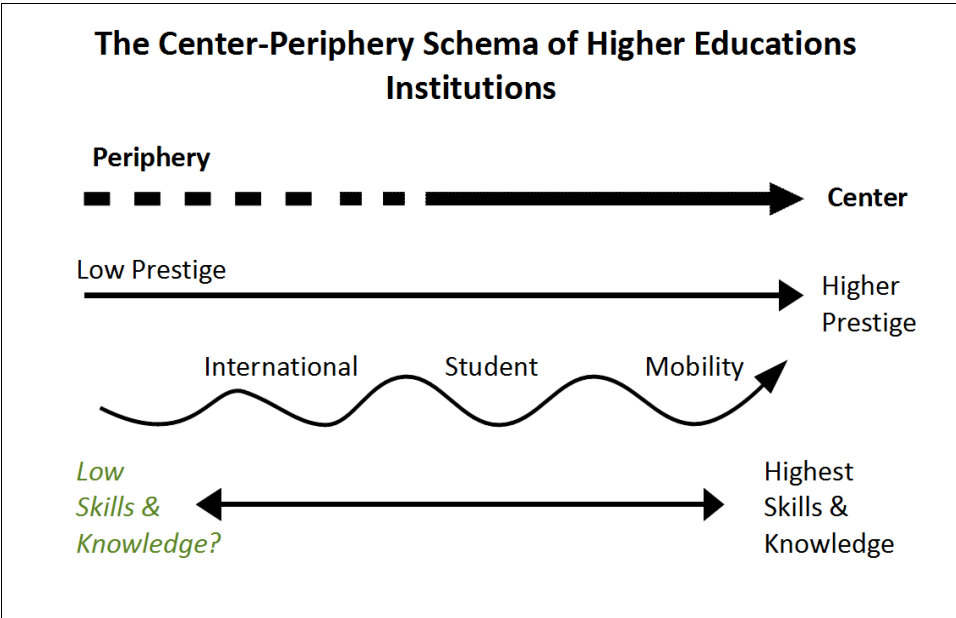


Figure 6. The center-periphery schema of international higher education in conjunction with student mobility and the factor of prestige (Symbolic capital)

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the higher education institutions in Central Asia have regressed from their intermediate positions into the global periphery, while the universities in Russia have lost their central status. Despite several partly successful efforts to improve and modernize their higher education systems (see here NESSIPBAYEVA & DALAYEVA 2013; WILMOTH 2011; ZHAKYPOVA 2013; HEYNEMAN 2013), the states of post-soviet Central Asia are today perceived as educational periphery, despite the announced intentions to build World Class Universities (MINISTRY OF ED. & SCIENCE/KAZAKHSTAN 2013). After the financial crises at the end of the last century, Russia invested in and improved its tertiary education sector (LENZ 2011; TEICHMANN-NADIRASCHWILI 2011) and has started to actively

(re-)establish educational connections with its new-old neighbor states (TAKALA & PIATTOEVA 2010). As a result, the Russian Federation can register a considerable increase of foreign students (OECD 2013a).

But as Malaysia, Singapore or Korea have demonstrated, over decades it is possible to leave the periphery and to become a serious provider of tertiary education and research (UNESCO 2013). In the long run, institutions like the Nazarbayev University in Astana or the Bolashak program can trigger such developments. Yet as long as corruption remains an issue in the region, it will be difficult to attract students, staff or scientists from overseas. The main questions should be how to provide high-quality and useful knowledge in these countries, with or without prestige, because in any case, studying abroad at highly central institutions will bring more prestige and symbolic capital.

6. Multiple Options - The Students' Perspective

Besides the question of whether the global providers or the growing global demand have led to the current educational situation, the huge and dynamic tertiary education market offers virtually unlimited options of education programs for young people who dream of studying abroad or are sent there by their families. Theoretically, almost every student can browse the Internet for offers which fit their requirements, needs and personal goals (KURZMANN 2014). Practically, the socio-economic background still remains a serious quantitative factor for the actual access to tertiary education (see WATERS 2006:1050), as the number of realistic educational options increases depending on skills (languages, certificates) and/or financial resources. The same applies to lucrative jobs later on, as ROBERTS, KAMRUZZAMAN and THOLEN had observed in Central Asia (2009). However, the mass phenomenon of international education today is increasingly fueled by young people from the middle classes. Similarly, considering the availability of digital information and online application processes, students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds today no more pre-excluded from accessing international education facilities.

Today the Internet is probably the most widely used information source in deciding on where and what to study abroad (see BMBF 2013:43-44; LI CHANG 2014). It provides access to an ocean of information and options, beyond the power of individuals. From the perspective of a young individual, the process of educational mobility begins with a dream, a goal or external (mostly parental) pressure to study abroad. All the following steps are parts of the process of *individualization*, including online research, visits to information agencies or international education fairs, the application process, the physical transfer and the experience of the destination and of the new educational environment.

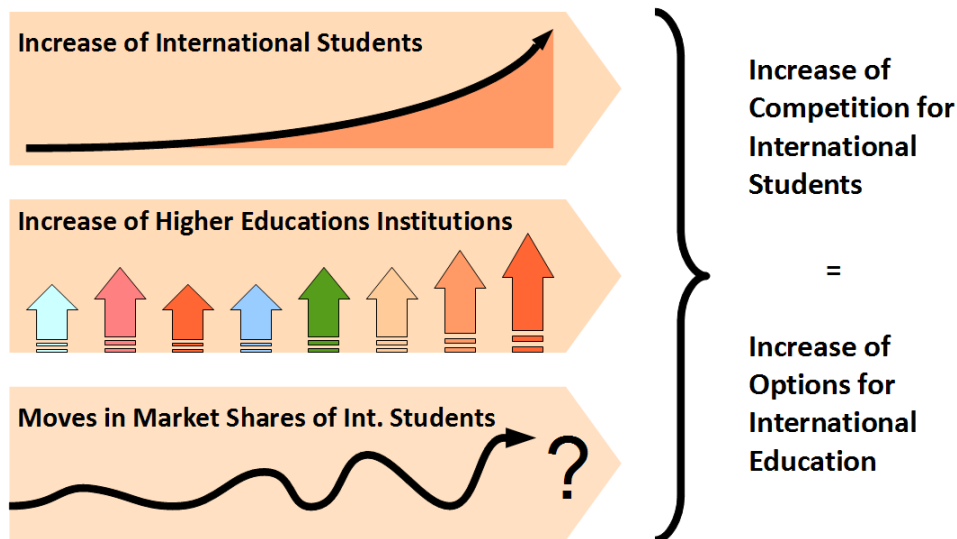


Figure 7. Growth of global student mobility, higher education institutions and options of international tertiary education for young people.

Today individualization is a common term, which is strongly connected with modernization and, on the popular level, with westernization. In its scientific usage, however, individualization denotes social processes through which persons detach themselves from their local and traditional relationships and rules of life and build new relationships into new and distant *social circles* (SIMMEL 1908:529). Similar to Mark Granovetter's concept of strong ties and weak ties, here the strong ties of kinship and locality are often loosened, as the "weaker" ties become more accentuated. The new ties are often interest- and goal oriented. (SIMMEL 1908). In other words, individualization enhances the potential options with whom to share one's time, which goals to strive for and how to shape life in general. All of these aspects are clearly included in the process of international mobility. Yet as GEORG SIMMEL has observed, modern individualization does not only provide a growing space for individual liberty and free development but at the same time individualization also turn is into a kind of race for uniqueness (see SIMMEL 2008:330-331), as competition and performance undermines the freedom of opportunities. Eighty years later ULRICH BECK developed a more critical concept in his "individualization theses": modern institutions and especially the modern welfare state produce individualized biographies by formal processes (administration) and by the expansion of individual rights, so that individuals have to fill the new spaces through their own decisions (see BECK 1993). One example are university exams, where the individual has to prove his uniqueness and worth by formal processes and where some students necessarily have to fail (EBERS 1995:300; see LABAREE 1997/2010). According to BECK, individualization becomes a duty of modernity; all who fail on the labor market, in their private life or in other spheres carry the sole responsibility. At the same

time, rational decisions in the complex modern world are difficult (BECK 1993, BECK 1992), and perhaps even impossible (LUHMANN 1996; also BLOSSFELD et al. 2008:32-37). In times of globalization many personal collapses today are, among other factors, caused by or related to global developments and risks (BECK 1992). Modern collapses, internally or externally generated, such as the political changes in Central Asia after 1991, will be partly also individualized (explosion of thinkable options) . Individualization forces the individual to make more and more decisions, including dilemmas where no definitive answer is possible. Thus, the multi-optional world of modernity (GROSS 1997; GROSS 1994) is very ambivalent: on the one hand, there is the liberty to choose from thousands of options and opportunities; on the other hand, one is held personally responsible for every choice. But to select means to give up other options, so that individualization always comes with a contingency – the permanent awareness that one may have become a different person with a different life.

What does the discussion of modernity and choice have to do with international student mobility flows? As it was mentioned above, the process of mobility and studying abroad mirrors individualization processes, such as the increasing international mobility of academics (LEUNG 2012). The international higher education market is therefore an engine of individualization and the digital media is its catalyst (see KURZMANN 2014). Sociological theories suggest that international mobility and the accumulating of cultural capital should not be seen too euphorically, like the highly aggregated data of the international flows suggest. The huge tertiary education market with its different offers and the different conditions at these destinations is currently extremely complex. Even if the necessary language skills narrow down the choice of regions and countries, the variety of options is enormous. As the students continue their search for options, they will find more and more real offers to choose from, up to the point of refusing a place after a successful application. And it is impossible to determine whether a program in Sweden or Germany will be the better choice or whether an all-English program in Malaysia is a more rational option. There is no clear answer, but the center-periphery logic may reduce the risk of a bad choice – if only by choosing the maximal symbolic capital.

For the bulk of international students, educational mobility will be hard work with a risk of failure. Working in a fast food restaurant or a supermarket, managing the household by themselves and thus having only limited energy left for the actual studies does not seem like a privileged situation, but it is the daily reality for thousands of international students.

Behind the impressive figures of mobile students are also thousands of life stories without the dreamed-up happy ending. For most students, becoming an international graduate overseas is a long and difficult process, and it is often only the good news that are communicated home to family and friends. For example, in Germany over the last decades in category of “Bildungsausländer”¹⁴, i.e. foreign students, around 50% (!) had quit their

14 Literally - students who have received their high-school diploma from a non-German institution; typically

studies (HEUBLEIN et al. 2012:33-34). And Germany, in fact, is considered an attractive destination, whose main disadvantage today is the German language. Why is there so little discussion about the failed or less successful international students, while they also continue to push up the statistics to the current high levels? According to Ulrich Beck, they also become individualized like the successful student, but they feel responsible for their failing (wrong choices). During my own research on migration strategies of students from Central Asia, I have encountered cases of successful international students in Germany, who had realized during their studies what a high personal price they had to pay for choosing this destination. Other students became ill, despite good degrees. International student mobility certainly produces ways and opportunities of individual development and therefore it needs to be welcomed and developed. But current reports and many articles on international student mobility narrate a too clear and optimistic story, mostly from a macro-economic perspective, without considering the flip side of the coin.

7. Conclusion

The article reflects on the global flow of international students with a special focus on Central Asia. From the statistical point of view, the Post-Soviet states of Central Asia are a strong source region of international student mobility (UNESCO 2014a), which is one side of a huge and growing international market for tertiary education, which centers on the so called higher education industry (e. g. F). While the market shares experience changes due to the new providers and education hubs mainly in East Asia, student mobility from Central Asia is currently directed towards Russia as the main destination and towards North America and to western Europe as additional destinations (OECD 2013a; WILMOTH 2001, UNESCO 2014a). China, so far, plays only a marginal role (?).

Capital theories, which are based on the work of PIERRE BOURDIEU, are successfully applied by researchers to explain some aspects of international student mobility (FINDLAY 2012, WATERS 2006; HOLLOWAY et al. 2012; LEUNG 2012). With regard to Central Asia, the opportunity to gain cultural and symbolic or social capital by studying abroad motivates students to attend high-prestige universities in developed countries, with the hope of gaining an advantage over the graduates of domestic higher education institutions. The lack of domestic education opportunities, the distrust of their quality as well as the high competition for education places suggest that the demand may be the main drive of student mobility in Central Asia.

this implies that they come from abroad.

Yet at same time, the increasing global competition among universities on the one hand and among students on the other hand, leads to a *center-periphery* structure, where the more centered institutions are more attractive and exclusive – an important difference. Unfortunately, Central Asia is located on the educational periphery, and, unlike Malaysia and Singapore, which have raised their educational reputation considerably, is not likely to get rid of the periphery label in the near future. Thus, the more central educational destinations increase the symbolic capital significantly, while the actual skills and knowledge (cultural capital) become more and more inclusive and are available also at no-name institutions, e.g. at small and relatively unknown universities of applied science in Germany.

The rational character of international student mobility becomes questionable, if it is considered as a process of individualization, which forces individuals to make long-term decisions, while the extensive global supply of study programs practically cannot be compared in absolute terms. The Internet connects outermost peripheries with the global options and allows more and more young people to access international education (KURZMANN 2014). It is inherent in the individualization process that both success and failure are seen as products of individual responsibility, which can to a certain extent explain why international student mobility is individually and generally narrated as story of success and rational choices.

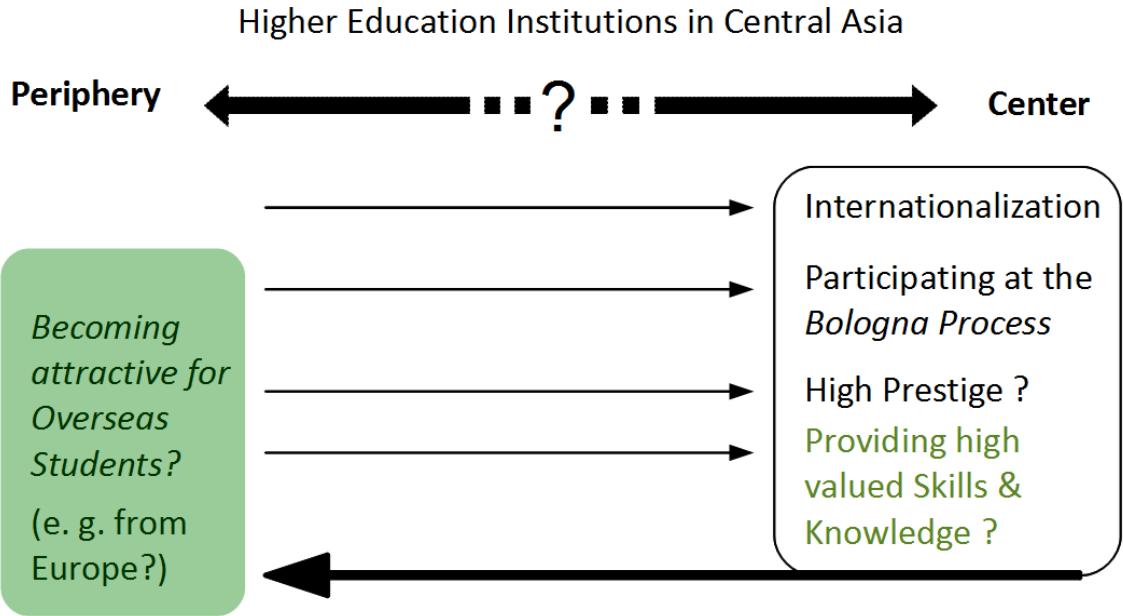


Figure 8. Higher education in Central Asia and the issue of periphery.

There are different forces, logics and motivations that simultaneously influence the global student mobility. Deciding on a destination can only be relatively rational, and the opportunities to accumulate embodied and institutionalized cultural capital are difficult to compare. Consequently, approaches such as the center-periphery logic reduce the complexity of choice by foregrounding the importance of the symbolic capital rather than the actual skills and knowledge. Again, this does not mean that the priority of the symbolic capital is not coupled with high-quality skills and knowledge.

But what connects the flow of individuals that make up the international student mobility – the upper-class students, the ordinary ones, the highly-successful and the struggling ones, the dreamers and the followers of cold rationality? All the different young people who went abroad to become internationally educated? When deciding rationally on a destination is enormously difficult and when hard skills and knowledge become increasingly inclusive? Besides the need for the human capital and the lack of domestic tertiary education facilities, today there exists a strong narrative of international education, which is fueled by participants and institutions of international student mobility alike. It is a global narrative of the modernity, the information channels of which (ARJUN APPADURAI 2003) also reach into the global periphery, where the narrative of the highly valued international education inspires dreams and hopes.

Overview of issues and possible conclusions:

- > Central Asia (CA) participates actively in the international education market.
- > Currently CA is located on the periphery of the market, regardless of corruption issues in its HE.
- > By improving the quality and quantity of the domestic study programs, CA countries will reduce the push-factor and at the same time they will enable more students to participate in ambitious programs abroad (center-periphery-logic).
- > Kazakhstan should try to use its participation in the Bologna process to attract students from “classical” European countries for part time mobility.

- > Malaysia can become a model for Kazakhstan in the meantime: developing into a regional educational hub by an emphasis on a strong export and import of international students.
- > Therefore Kazakhstan should fight against the stereotype of being an exotic Post-Soviet country. It should try to become a serious location of higher education with connections to some fields of research. It also needs to overcome the existing corruption issues.
- > Besides strengthening its ties to the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), Central Asia should not neglect its neighbors in the East and South East.
- > Regarding the current regional focus on prestigious credentials as opposed to skills and knowledge per se, it can be recommendable to strengthen and develop more vocational and practice-oriented offers, including tertiary B programs.

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