

Legacy-Innovation Challenges in Post-Soviet Higher Education: Scholars' Academic Transformation in Cambodia and Kazakhstan

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ABSTRACT

The collapse of the Soviet Union has dramatically impacted the work of scholars across the post-Soviet space. As their higher education systems have been transforming from the Soviet model of higher education, they have had to adapt themselves to maintain their academic work and career. This doctoral project compares the lives of scholars in Cambodia and Kazakhstan who lived as students and scholars under the influence of Soviet imperialism. As guided by the framework of legacy-innovation tensions and theory of accumulative advantage, interviews with nine Cambodian and eight Kazakh scholars were conducted to shed light on how they strategically dealt with transformational challenges to create opportunities for their academic work and career. This study shows that their strategies for pursuing academic careers rely on their achievement during

the Soviet time to grab opportunities. Meanwhile, these strategies were also influenced by local contexts.

Keywords: Cambodia, higher education, Kazakhstan, post-Soviet space

INTRODUCTION

Many former Soviet republics and other affiliated communist states have had to transform their higher education systems to respond to their respective changing political and economic contexts since the collapse of the Soviet Union (Huisman et al., 2018). As their countries have been opened to the outside world since the removal of the Iron Curtain, academic transformations in these countries have also been influenced by Western academic norms to develop their university research capacity to take part in global education space and internationalization process (de Wit, 2002; Silova & Niyozov, 2020). However, they have had to deal with the Soviet legacies such as separating research from universities, emphasizing specialized training for various ministries, and closely controlling academic activities (Johnson, 2008; Kuraev, 2016). The break from these legacies has dramatically impacted the academic work of scholars and students who have lived their lives through this transition period. While previous studies have examined the structural transformation of these countries (Froumin & Leshukov, 2016; Huisman et al., 2018; Silova & Niyozov, 2020), research on scholars' adaptation to tensions that have arisen from the transformation of higher education systems in a comparative lens remains understudied. At the same time, many studies in this context tend to focus on Russia rather than other peripheral societies (Chankseliani, 2017; Oleksiyenko et al., 2018). Thus, this research uses Kazakhstan, a former peripheral Soviet republic, and Cambodia, a former Soviet ally, as a comparative case to shed light on their scholars' strategies to mitigate the academic transformation challenges to maximize their intellectual pursuits and career in their respective societies. This study aimed to answer the following questions:

1. How did the higher education system change in the two countries after the collapse of the Soviet Union?

2. What were the major advantages and disadvantages of transformations over the last 25 years?
3. How have their scholars been coping with these transformations for intellectual pursuits?

WHY CAMBODIA AND KAZAKHSTAN

Cambodia and Kazakhstan are selected for this comparative study for two reasons. First, Cambodia and Kazakhstan were subjected to Soviet hegemony, which influenced the development of higher education and research systems. However, as a former member of the Soviet Union, Kazakhstan established its higher education system to respond to Soviet industrial demands (Froumin et al., 2014). Cambodia was also dragged into Soviet imperialism when the Soviet-backed government was established after the overthrow of the Khmer Rouge after the Cambodian-Vietnamese war in 1979 (Clayton, 2000). Thus, the Soviet Union played a crucial role in rebuilding Cambodian higher education that was destroyed by the Khmer Rouge (Pit & Ford, 2004). Second, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, both countries had to restructure their higher education due to their changing political-economic landscapes and exposure to Western influence (Ahn et al., 2018; Pit & Ford, 2004). The universities also experienced structural changes as they had to include new programs to meet the growing market for higher education, introduce the European three-tier system for internationalization, and embrace globally-shaped research missions (Kuzhabekova & Ruby, 2018; Huisman et al., 2018).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

This study employs two theoretical frameworks. The first is the framework of legacy-innovation tensions. In, this study, legacies refer to inheritances from a previous political-economic system that profoundly impacts a new system, while innovations represent attempts to bring new ideas to a new system or modernize a system. These innovations often create tensions for affected individuals as they must choose whether to hold to the legacies or embrace those innovations to maintain their status quo. Thus, this framework enables me to understand how disruptions that resulted from top-down reforms in education systems affected the works of scholars in the post-Soviet space and what tensions they experienced in the reform process. Second, this study also adopts Merton's (1968, 1988) framework of accumulative advantages that examines how some scientists manage to be more recognized and gain more rewards than others based on their earlier

achievements. This theory has been used to examine how some scholars accumulate more and more resources and recognition due to their earlier achievements than others in science. However, this framework also allows me to investigate how post-Soviet scholars strategically used the advantages they accumulated from their previous system to mitigate reform tensions, thus achieving recognition and earning rewards for the continuity of their intellectual work and career during the transition period.

RESEARCH METHOD

I conducted a qualitative inquiry into the lived experience of the post-Soviet scholars in Cambodia and Kazakhstan during the transition period (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I looked for participants with the academic background in the Soviet system and their employment in the higher education systems in both countries at the time of the interviews by checking their profiles on their university websites, professional social networking sites (such as ResearchGate and LinkedIn), and referrals from my senior colleagues and some interviewed participants themselves. After sending invitations via email and phone calls, I managed to conduct semi-structured interviews with nine Cambodians and eight Kazakhs, who were university students in the 1980s and early 1990s in the Soviet system. These participants were willing to talk about their academic experience in the Soviet system, the critical changes in their universities, and stories of scholarly pursuits and academic careers. Other data sources were collected for data triangulation, including national policy papers, data on national research expenditure from UNESCO Institute of Statistics and research outputs from Web of Science (Patton, 2002). These data sets allowed me to make sense of how the transformation of higher education and the development of university research capacity influenced these participants' work and strategies. Thus, I analyzed all data sets as guided by the framework of legacy-innovation tensions and accumulative advantage. Thematic analysis was used to identify main themes and supporting excerpts from the interview data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

Despite common Soviet influences, Kazakhstan and Cambodia took divergent paths following the fall of the Soviet Union. Kazakhstan experienced a budget deficit in higher education in the 1990s, causing faculty salaries to plummet and forcing many to leave the profession. Meanwhile, the absence of Soviet assistance and the withdrawal of the Soviet faculty members also forced Cambodia

to close some universities temporarily. However, their academic experience during the Soviet era or at the end of it was their advantage for the early transition period when both countries quickly opened their doors to welcome Western assistance in order to transform their higher education system. The Cambodian participants relied on their qualifications in the Soviet system to become the main teaching force for their universities and prioritized professional development. Meanwhile, the Kazakh participants relied on their expertise and research skills to apply for scholarships abroad. However, their overseas professional development served them different purposes and were shaped by their national higher education system conditions. The Kazakh participants in this study went abroad to develop their research capacity in order to continue their scholarly pursuits. This motivation is largely related to their exposure to the academic community they grew up with during the Soviet period (Kuzhabekova et al., 2019). Thus, some of them managed to earn doctoral degrees from Western countries and landed post-doctoral positions. In contrast, Cambodian participants regarded their professional development opportunities to increase their capacity to perform teaching rather than research as they had to shoulder the responsibility of improving teaching quality.

Although both countries have begun to prioritize building university research capacity, Cambodia and Kazakhstan have emphasized different goals. While Kazakhstan is focusing on improving its university's global visibility through university rankings, Cambodia is focusing on improving research for local development. Thus, publication in indexed journals has become a requirement in Kazakhstan, but it has yet to become a priority in Cambodia. The push for global recognition has pushed Kazakhstan to increase funding for research. Therefore, the Kazakh participants have secured funding to do research and collaborate with Western researchers, which increases their publication records and recognition.

Meanwhile, most of the Cambodian participants did not view themselves as researchers to contribute to research capacity building. Instead, they regarded themselves as the producers of qualified students who would later receive training to become researchers abroad. Consequently, they focused on their students' success rather than their scholarly contribution due to the weak sense of academic communities (Oleksiyenko & Ros, 2019; Ros & Oleksiyenko, 2018).

CONTRIBUTION

This comparative study offers insights into the lives of scholars in the post-colonial societies whose academic works are shaped by both local and global contexts. These scholars in this study are not constrained by the post-Soviet transformations in their societies. Instead, they actively develop strategies based on their earlier access to resources and achievement in order to grab opportunities to develop their academic careers. Moreover, the study extends the scope of comparative research to move beyond the generalization of sameness in peripheral contexts.

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