Dispelling Illusions of Homogeneity: Growing Disparities in Higher Education Access in the Post-Soviet Regions

Anatoly Oleksiyenko[a,*]

[a]*University of Hong Kong, China*

Introduction

The Soviet Union benchmarked its achievements by stressing equal access to education. While the regime made significant progress in compulsory K-10 education (in most cases, the republics reported between 90 and 100 percent enrolment at the pre-college level), the tertiary education sector exhibited huge disparities across constituent republics and regions of the Union. Not only was access hierarchized by the types of institutions, but also politicized by the societal dominance of privileged populations located in the constituent republics' capital cities, as well as by elites educated in the oldest national universities and science centres—primarily based in the European parts of the Soviet Union (Karklins 1984; Nesvetailov 1995). The economically-advanced western part of the former empire, governed by a heavily centralized and politicized bureaucracy in the Kremlin, tended to dictate the political, economic, and educational rules and priorities to the underdeveloped and politically repressed East (Luong 2004).

The policies of "Sovietisation", aimed at the Russian language domination and a levelling of religious, linguistic, and cultural differences (see Dostál and Knippenberg 1979), were predisposed to fail given the rich diversity of the vast territory under Soviet control, which stretched from the Far East to Central Europe. The absence of higher education that recognized and served the needs of the constituent national or ethnic cultures was a root cause of the union's collapse. While the repressive regime called for homogeneity, on the ground convergence was limited to regional cohesions. For example, the Baltics, the Caucasus, and Central Asia enjoyed a greater rate of convergence, exchange, and communication among the republics inside rather than across the regions.

While the communist party made deliberate efforts to stimulate wider mobility and economic integration across these regions, the overarching objectives were undermined by national elites working in defence of local interests and cultures inside the regions, and not necessarily across the regions.

The collapse of the Soviet Union opened the way for revitalized national cultures to steer the development of higher education within independent states. Regional dynamics differed significantly; however, key drivers included aspirations for the European Union (EU) accession in the Baltics and Ukraine; authoritarian leadership in Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan; prioritization of natural over intellectual resources in the Russian Federation, and so forth. Over the last twenty years, colleges and universities in the Baltic republics (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania), as well as Eastern Europe (Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova), were able not only to depoliticize their curricula, but also to advance institutional support for new fields of studies (e.g., sociology, cultural studies, gender studies, public administration, etc.), thus promoting local research agendas and debates to global scholarly communities. Within these regions, national cultures and languages have been re-energized and aligned with the interests of newly independent nation-states. Access to higher education improved significantly as private universities and colleges mushroomed and stimulated domestic and regional competition for students and tuition fees. Conversely, the more authoritarian states in Central Asia provoked a variety of closures, including reduced access to higher education and the shunning of liberal studies. Notwithstanding the regional variations in access, the unequal distribution of wealth across most of the post-Soviet realm produced a wide range of inconsistencies with regards to the quality of higher education. The student-led revolutions in

*Corresponding author email: anatoly.oleksiyenko@gmail.com.

Ukraine and the Kyrgyz Republic were in part expressions of the accumulating resentment and resistance of the emerging middle class to the excessive corruption, which is endemic in education in the post-Soviet space.

The comparative perspective on inequities across the post-Soviet regions is currently lacking in studies on higher education. This type of research is imperative given the growing hierarchization of the globally-competing national higher education systems and the prevailing misconception that homogenization is achievable or becomes an unavoidable direction for future development. To counter this notion, this paper illustrates growing regional divergences and dispelling revisionist aspirations for coherent or common higher education space. The paper offers several snapshots of the changing contours of access and equity in higher education by examining the disparate dynamics inside and across the regions. The following paragraphs analyse and compare the 1991 and 2011 access data from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics. The analysis is also informed by insights from higher education experts from the post-Soviet republics and their views on national and regional differences in tertiary enrolment, teaching resources, and geospatial inequalities.

The Disintegrating Post-Soviet Higher Education Space

UNESCO's tertiary enrolment data reveal unequal access rates across the republics and regions at the time of the Soviet Union's collapse (see Appendix). Uzbekistan had the lowest access rate (17 percent) and Belarus had the highest rate (48 percent) in 1991. Disparity existed even within well-to-do regions: for instance, Lithuania (32 percent) surpassed neighbouring Estonia (24 percent) in the economically advanced Baltic region, where GDP per capita was two to six times higher than in other Soviet regions. Following the disintegration of the Soviet Union, most independent states significantly increased access to higher education (except for Uzbekistan, where access dropped from 17 percent in 1991 to nine percent in 2011). The Baltic republics (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania) and Eastern Europe (Belarus and Ukraine) more than doubled their number of college students: from an average of 27 percent to an average of 63 percent in the case of the former, and from 47.5 percent to 83.5 percent in the case of the latter. Meanwhile, university access in most countries of the Caucasus and Central Asia declined despite an expansion of the college-age population. Within these regions, Kazakhstan and Armenia stand out sharply from among their neighbours. Armenia expanded access from 25 percent to 49 percent, while Azerbaijan and Georgia reduced access from 24 percent to 20 percent, and 37 percent to 30 percent, respectively. Similarly to Uzbekistan in Central Asia, the Eastern European state of Moldova provided a lower rate of access despite a growing school population at the tertiary level (see Appendix).

Data suggest that certain countries, including Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan, took deliberate steps to control access to higher education: the number of university places dropped despite a growth in the college-age student population, while the number of teaching staff increased or remained unchanged, thus improving student/teacher ratios. Rashed Aliyev (2011) reports that the Azerbaijani government adopted an elitist approach, while disregarding the needs of large rural populations and restricting the roles of private providers. Other experts argue that low-income families find it difficult not only to get financial support for the increasingly expensive and competitive public education (e.g., minimum interest rate for loans in Azerbaijan was reported to be at 24 percent), but also to pay for increasingly expensive pre-college exam tutorials. Ukraine also reduced the teacher/student ratio, but by radically increasing both the teaching workforce (90 percent) and student access to higher education (82 percent) through private universities and self-financing programs in public universities. The debates about access versus quality and impact on employment opportunities have intensified as well.

Likewise, national elites have displayed contrasting attitudes to stratification and global engagement. Disparity in national responses to the world-class university movement is indicative in that regard. After massification and privatization of higher education, Russia and Kazakhstan undertook forceful policy changes to strati-

fy their systems by introducing high status global research universities and stimulating curriculum development aimed at meeting global standards. In contrast, Ukraine has expanded and diversified its higher education system significantly but has, in large part, simply paid lip-service to global standardization, while remaining wary of external intervention in local policy-making, seeing it as a threat to its fragile national identity and culture. The smaller states of Kyrgyzstan and Moldova, on the other hand, were in no position to join the world-class university movement, given a persisting legacy of peripheral higher education infrastructures lacking demand for higher degrees from large rural populations (Padure 2012; Silova 2011). Meanwhile, Kyrgyzstan and other Central Asian republics engaged in a number of "glonacal" partnership initiatives, melding public and private resources to address the educational needs of isolated geographical areas (Oleksiyenko 2012).

In various ways, the post-Soviet republics eagerly embraced technical assistance and collaborations with the western partners, especially in cases of massive donorship, primarily from the EU and the United States. At the same time, academics emerged as strongly opposed to the idea of global compliance in higher education (e.g., re-orientation of local performance evaluation from teaching to internationally peer-reviewed Web of Science publications) as majority of local professoriate often lacks competency in foreign languages and experience with international journal publications. Moreover, there is marked reluctance among some established academics to lose the remunerative benefits that come from reading the same lecture from year to year, across multiple public and private university jobs. National aspirations to reorient their regional integration (e.g., moving from the post-Soviet to the European Area of Higher Education) confront numerous hurdles at the institutional level (Tomusk 2007).

With the exception of the Baltic republics, which are regulated by EU policies and legal frameworks, most of the higher education systems in post-Soviet states suffer from chronic corruption (Osipian 2009) and have been deliberately or inadvertently spearheading mediocrity over competitiveness in higher education. Meanwhile, the introduction of standardized testing in most contexts has been controversial and stimulated the growth of "shadow education" (Chankseliani 2013; Silova 2011). Increasingly, households and individual students are choosing studies abroad as a means to improve the quality of the educational experience and the competitiveness of the degree awarded. As indicated by a Ukrainian case study, the reorientation of transnational student mobility increasingly disfavours the post-Soviet space and invests more resources in obtaining access to universities and colleges in the EU (Oleksiyenko 2014). However, opportunities for study in the EU are slim for households in the Central Asian countries, where families have lower income and prefer to reach out to more affordable university programs in Belarus, the Russian Federation, Kazakhstan, or Ukraine.

Doing More for Less?

Income disparities have been escalating very rapidly inside the post-Soviet nations and across the regions. Some economies and elites have been more dynamic than their neighbours in implementing economic reforms, embracing global flows, and strategizing higher education positions (the resulting regional differences are apparent in the Appendix). In general, investments in higher education by governments and households are often related to the state of the national economy. However, greater economic progress does not guarantee the automatic prioritization or improvement of higher education. As comparative data show, the post-Soviet states have utilized disparate strategic approaches to resource concentration / distribution for elite versus mass higher education. For example, Ukraine has lagged behind in income growth (GDP per capita grew from USD$PPP 3,000 to 7,208 between 1991 and 2011, i.e., twice as slow as in Belarus), but has had one of the highest enrolment rates (increasing from 47 percent to 82 percent in the same years; on a par with Belarus). Indeed, Ukraine and Belarus appear to be doing equally well in tertiary enrolment under totally opposite regulatory conditions: the former shaped by the influential student movements of the Orange Revolution, and the latter controlled by "Europe's last dictator." Paradoxically, the Ukrainian higher education system outranked all

post-Soviet countries, as well as some EU leaders (e.g., France and Germany) in terms of the resources allocated for higher education (U21, 2012). Meanwhile, Azerbaijan used its oil revenues to successfully raise income rates (from US$1,962 to US$10,061), while its higher education participation rate dropped from 24 percent to 20 percent over the last twenty years.

In general, the cumulative advantages acquired over the course of history seem to have carried over into the present. Higher education access rates in post-Soviet nation-states and regions have followed a predictable trajectory: that is, those that used to have high rates improved them even further; while those with low rates stagnated or declined. The limits of this analysis do not allow for a thorough examination of the socio-political, economic, and cultural predispositions and variations influencing national decision-making with regard to elite versus mass higher education. However, it is obvious that the concept of homogeneity is illusive, both as a window to the past and as a view of the future, despite the enthusiasm of advocates affected by misplaced nostalgia and historical amnesia. The geography of disparities is persistent despite the changing contours of regional spaces and the legacy of centrally-guided policy interventions (Fuchs and Demko 1979). Further cross-regional study (e.g., on changes in local resource schemes, mobility structures, student aspirations, and household behaviours) is important at the sub-national and supranational levels to better understand the nature of heterogeneity as well as the implications of misguided homogenization policies.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Tofig Ahmadov, Igor Chirikov, Magda Kobakhidze, Adrianna Stech, and other colleagues for their helpful suggestions to the initial draft. I certainly took liberty to make interpretations, and all shortcomings and errors are my own.

References

Adamson, Bob, Jon Nixon, and Feng Su. 2013. *The Reorientation of Higher Education: Challenging the East-West Dichotomy*. Dordrecht: Springer.

Aliyev, Rashad. 2011. "Azerbaijan: How Equitable is Access to Higher Education?" *Khazar Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 14(1): 20-36.

Chankseliani, Maia. 2013. "Higher Education Access in Post-Soviet Georgia." In *Fairness in Access to Higher Education in a Global Perspective*, edited by H. D. Meyer, E. P. St. John, M. Chankseliani, and L. Uribe, 171-187. Dordrecht: Springer

Dostál, Petr, and Hans Knippenberg. 1979. "The 'Russification' of Ethnic Minorities in the USSR." *Soviet Geography* 20(4): 197-219.

Fuchs, Roland, and George Demko. 1979. "Geographic Inequality under Socialism." *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 69(2): 304-318.

Karklins, Rasma. 1984. "Ethnic Politics and Access to Higher Education: The Soviet Case." *Comparative Politics* 16(3): 277-294.

Luong, P. J. (Ed.). 2004. *The Transformation of Central Asia: States and Societies From Soviet Rule to Independence*. Itaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Mhamed, A.A.S., and Rita Kaša. 2010. "Comparing Tertiary Graduates With and Without Student Loans in Latvia." *Baltic Journal of Economics* 10(2): 49-62.

Nesvetailov, Gennady. 1995. "Center-periphery relations and transformation of post-Soviet Science." *Knowledge and Policy* 8(2): 53-67.

Oleksiyenko, Anatoly. 2014. "Through The Eye of a Needle? Creating a World Class University in Ukraine." *European Journal of Higher Education* (TBD).

Oleksiyenko, Anatoly. 2012. "Resource Asymmetries and Cumulative Advantages in Regional Knowledge Systems: Exploring a University's Growth/Share Strategy." In *Universities and Regional Development: A Critical Assessment of Tensions and Contradictions*, edited by Romulo Pinheiro, Paul Benneworth, and Glen Jones, 161-178. London and New York: Routledge.

Osipian, A. 2009. "Corruption Hierarchies in Higher Education in the Former Soviet Union." *International Journal of Education Development* 29(3): 321-330.

Padure, L. 2012. The Shifting Roles of Moldovan Universities in Regional Development: A Critical Policy Perspective (pp. 86-102). In *Universities and Regional Development: A Critical Assessment of Tensions and Contradictions*, edited by Romulo Pinheiro, Paul Benneworth, and Glen Jones. London and New York: Routledge.

Silova, Iveta, ed.. 2011. *Globalization on the Margins: Education and Postsocialist Transformations in Central Asia*. IAP – Information Age Publishing, Inc.

Tomusk, V., ed. 2007. *Creating the European Area of Higher Education: Voices from the Periphery*. Dordrecht: Springer.

U21 – Universitas 21. 2012. *U21 Ranking of National Higher Education Systems*. Melbourne: University of Melbourne.

UNESCO. 2013. Customized Tables of the UNESCO Institute of Statistics. Accessed on September 15, 2013 at http://stats.uis.unesco.org.