Four rationales of HE internationalisation: perspectives of UK universities on attracting students from former Soviet countries

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Abstract

In the context marked by increasing competition between nation-states and universities, expanding individualisation, growing influence of non-state actors, and the new reality of Brexit, his study uses narrative and numeric data to explore the rationales of UK higher education internationalisation, specifically motives of attracting students from Eastern Europe, Russia, Caucasus, and Central Asia to the UK. Amongst four main rationales of international student recruitment, economic rationale emerged as the most decisive. Interviewees viewed student mobility from this region as an expression of socio-economic transformation in sending countries as well as political and strategic priorities in the UK. They referred to the economic situation in the region, the development of the HE sector within the source countries, the UK government discourse on migration, and universities’ own strategic planning as four main issues that can influence future trends of student mobility from this region to the UK.

Keywords

Student mobility, HE internationalisation, post-Soviet countries, student recruitment, the United Kingdom

Introduction

Higher education institutions (HEIs) across the world are increasingly defined by internationalisation. As varied and expansive phenomenon, HE internationalisation may be driven by four categories of rationales: political, economic, academic, and socio-cultural (de Wit, 2002; de Wit, Hunter, Howard, & Egron-Polak, 2015; Knight, 2012; Knight & de Wit, 1995). The four rationales adopt different shapes and meanings when applied to the domain of international student mobility in different global contexts. HEIs and nation-states that ‘have designs on them’ (Kerr, 1994, p. 6) may view international students as sources of income, potential labour force, contributors to local economy as consumers, ambassadors for the recipient country, contributors to the recipient country’s innovation capacity, contributors to the improvement of educational and research experiences of local students and staff which increasingly relates to global university rankings.

In the context marked by increasing competition between nation-states and universities, expanding individualisation, and growing influence of non-state actors, and the new reality of Brexit, this study uses narrative and numeric data to explore the rationales of HE internationalisation in the United Kingdom (UK), with a focus on the logic of attracting students from former Soviet countries. The UK is currently the second most popular EU destination for students from Russia, Eastern Europe, Caucasus, and Central Asia, following Germany (UNESCO, 2014). About 4% of the UK-based international students came from former Soviet countries (HESA, 2014, 2015). While there has been an almost twenty-fold increase in the number of degree-mobile students from former Soviet countries to the UK in the last 20 years, there is a considerable variation in the numbers of students enrolling at UK HEIs by sending country. Currently, the largest sending countries are Lithuania, Russia,
Latvia, Kazakhstan, Estonia, Ukraine, and Azerbaijan (Appendix 1). The interest of students from former Soviet countries in studying in the UK may be linked with the high reputation of the UK HE sector / selected institutions, English as the medium of instruction, diaspora links, the appeal of living in the UK, employment opportunities and earning potential after graduation, personal safety, knowledge and awareness of the host country (Chankseliani & Hessel, 2016; Dowle, Vasylyuk, & Lotten, 2015; IU, 2015).

Within the field of international student mobility, research focusing on student mobility from former Soviet countries is scarce. For most of the 20th century, these states constituted the Soviet Union, a country which sent very few students abroad. The dissolution of the Soviet Union disrupted the period of isolation from world markets, with the citizens of former Soviet countries facing fewer constrains on travel and migration (Chankseliani, 2015). As countries developed economically and transformed socially, the volume of migration increased, with more students seeking study abroad opportunities. The present study focuses on the perspectives of UK HE sector to address the following research question: how do UK universities explain their own and make sense of the UK government rationales of HE internationalisation in relation to student mobility from Eastern Europe (Belarus, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Ukraine), Russia, Caucasus (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia), and Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan) to the UK?

Methodological approach

This article draws on semi-structured interviews with a maximum variation systematic sample of UK HEIs and the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) statistics. The data purchased from HESA for the purposes of this study contains the statistics on degree mobile students from 15 former Soviet countries to UK HEIs since 1995 (HESA, 2014). The HESA data was used to establish some general trends and to select the maximum variation systematic sample of interview participants.

Interviewing was employed to explore the views of international / admissions officers working in UK HEIs on student mobility from former Soviet countries, as well as to understand how they make sense of the UK government’s rationales for recruiting students from Russia, Eastern Europe, Caucasus, and Central Asia since the mid-1990s. The study relied on maximum variation sampling by the size of student body from former Soviet countries, location, and quality of UK HEIs (Table 1). To select HEIs that have different size of the student body from former Soviet countries, all UK HEIs were ranked by the total number of students from former Soviet countries enrolled in 2013-14. HEIs were divided into three groups: 20 HEIs that enrolled more than 500 students (Group I), 37 HEIs that enrolled 100-200 students (Group II), and 94 HEIs that enrolled 1-100 students from former Soviet countries (Group III). Every second HEI was selected from Group I (overall ten), every third HEI was selected from Group II (overall 12), and every forth HEI was selected from Group III (overall 20). Of the selected HEIs, 14 agreed to be interviewed – six HEIs from Group I, four HEIs from Group II, and another four HEIs from Group III (Table 1).

[TABLE 1]

Fifteen individuals in charge of international student recruitment were interviewed, that is one individual from each of the 13 institutions, and two individuals from one institution, as the latter had clearly differentiated undergraduate and postgraduate admissions.

Two out of the 14 HEIs were located in Wales, two in Scotland and ten in England. Two of the ten English HEIs were located in London. Key international and / or admissions personnel were interviewed in the selected HEIs.
Russell Group belonging was used as HEI quality criterion. The Russell Group represents 24 research universities in the UK which are considered the finest institutions in the country for their research, teaching and learning experiences. 6 out of 14 HEIs in the sample were Russell Group institutions.

The interview questions related to their interpretations of the student mobility patterns from Russia, Eastern Europe, Caucasus, and Central Asia to the UK, to the rationale of recruiting students from these regions, and to institutional strategies of international student recruitment.

The interviews were conducted in spring 2016.

In this article, numbers in brackets represent numeric identifiers of HEIs interviewed (Table 1).

Rationales

An excerpt from a 1987 paper by John Belcher who was the Director of International Education at Queen Mary College, University of London, reads as follows:

Britain's policy [...] is: 1. Britain welcomes international students for a variety of reasons - educational, political, commercial and developmental; 2. in general their education should not be subsidised by the British tax payer; 3. but in accordance with perceived national priorities, carefully targeted scholarship programmes exist to benefit selected individuals and categories of students. (p. 128)

These three propositions remain relevant after three decades. However, respondents of this study argued that there are differences between and within stakeholder groups - HEIs and government departments - when it comes to the rhetoric and practice behind rationales for student recruitment from Russia, Eastern Europe, Caucasus, and Central Asia. Some of our interviewees suggested that there exist ‘a whole cross-section of views’ in the government (6) and that the three government departments that had the most differing and sometimes opposing views were the Department for Business, Innovation & Skills (BIS),\(^1\) the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), and the Home Office. The general attitude of the government towards international students was perceived to be positive, as one interviewee put it: ‘the government is broadly very positive about attracting international students whether from these countries or otherwise, but it might not appear so because of our border controls’ (6). Our interview partners tended to think that students from Russia, Eastern Europe, Caucasus, and Central Asia are rarely distinguished from other students in terms of government policies and that they were ‘probably lumped in with all other students coming from overseas’ (9).

In our interviews, representatives from almost all institutions referred to the economic rationale as the driver of internationalisation for UK HEIs and for the government. While social, cultural, academic, and political rationales proved to be also quite important for recruiting international students in general and students from former Soviet countries in particular, they did not feature as strongly as the economic rationale. HEI interviewed considered questions about rationales in terms of different kinds of contributions they expected from students originating from this region.

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\(^1\) Following the changes new Prime Minister Theresa May introduced on 14 July 2016, universities are moving from the BIS to the Department for Education (DfE).
Economic

All interviewees demonstrated a strong awareness of the marketisation of the UK HE sector and the revenue that international students generate in the context of the gradually decreasing funding from the government and the business sector:

Unfortunately, international students are seen as absolutely crucial to continued survival and continued funding to what the universities are doing. The more government funding goes down, the more importance is placed on the recruitment of those students to make up for gaps in funding. (1)

The now-obsolete Department for Business, Innovation & Skills (BIS) was regarded by most interviewees as interested in attracting increasing numbers of students from all over the world with a view to strengthening the UK economy. In the perceptions of most interviewed HE representatives, the BIS tended to view international students as ‘a very sustainable source of extra funding for British universities, which they then don’t have to fund themselves’ (2). International students for BIS were ‘major contributors to the economy, both by the research that they do while they’re here which can turn into the next great business, [and as] cash cows or you might somewhat less prejudicial say “substantial contributors to the economy” because they do bring a lot of money with them’ (8). Thus, adopting what the HEIs considered to be the BIS perspective, the UK government is ‘very attracted to overseas students because they contribute to our sector and potentially they contribute to the economy’ (6).

Some respondents talked about ‘spreading the risk’ by diversifying the countries from which they were recruiting, keeping the focus primarily on those countries that had ‘students capable of paying fees. […] As far as the enrolled overseas students are providing funds that cover their cost of study at our university with a good surplus, those students will be a very good target for our university’ (10).

Therefore, a key variable that may explain the difference between the relatively larger and smaller senders of students to the UK is the GDP per capita of the sending country. As seen on Figure 1, countries with higher GDP per capita are amongst the larger senders (Appendix 1).

[FIGURE 1]

When compared to two largest European hosts of students from former Soviet countries – Germany and France – the UK student numbers display the strongest positive correlation with the sending country GDP ($r= .74, p=.01$) (UNESCO, 2014; World Bank, 2013). The correlation between the mobile student numbers from former Soviet countries to France and Germany and the home country GDP per capita is much weaker and not statistically significant. A number of UK HEIs interviewed recognised international students as their main source of income, going so far as arguing that ‘any university that says to the contrary is not telling the truth’ (14).

Three of the top seven largest senders of students from this region - Russia, Kazakhstan, and Azerbaijan - are oil-rich countries that were most frequently mentioned by the interviewees. These three countries operate major government funding schemes for study abroad: Kazakhstan’s Bolashak Scholarships, Russia’s Global Education Program scholarships, and Azerbaijan’s State Program on Education of Azerbaijani Youth Abroad. Interviewees explained how the fluctuations in the availability of such scholarships and/or changes in the conditions attached to them were reflected on the numbers of students they hosted from this region. For example, following the decision of the Kazakhstani government to cease the funding of undergraduate studies via the Bolashak programme (Nurbek et al., 2014), the
number of Kazakhstani students declined by 20% from 2010 to 2014 (Appendix 1). Furthermore, the increase in the number of students from Azerbaijan (Appendix 1) followed the 2007 introduction of the State Program on Education of Azerbaijani Youth Abroad for the Years of 2007-15. The interviewees consistently mentioned the importance of government funding schemes for Kazakhstani and Azerbaijani students.

It appears that presently most scholarships are available at the postgraduate rather than the undergraduate level. The Russian President’s Mobility and Global Education Scholarships, the Kazakh government’s Bolashak Scholarships, and the UK government’s Chevening Scholarships are all postgraduate funding sources. There are very few funding sources in the UK that would contribute to the financing of an undergraduate degree for non-EU students. In this context, 76% of all students from former Soviet countries are pursuing an undergraduate degree in the UK (HESA, 2014) that costs only in tuition between £12,719 and £24,190 per year. Therefore, as explained by an interviewee from a Russell Group HEI: ‘At the undergraduate level for all of these countries they will be socio-economic elite; for postgraduates there will be some who will have managed to bootstrap themselves up’ (8). Going back to the GDP argument, countries that are richer are more likely to have larger numbers of affluent families and also more likely to offer generous government scholarships. Hence, UK HEIs rationale of targeting these countries has a strong economic rationale.

The Baltic States – Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia – are also amongst the top seven largest senders to the UK. The popularity of the UK in these countries is due to the reputation of the UK HE sector as well as the fee status that these EU member states can enjoy, unlike all other former Soviet countries. UK universities do not seem to invest as much effort in recruiting students from the Baltic States as they do from the oil-rich countries.

Most of the interviewees viewed the economic rationale in a very narrow sense of generating immediate income from fees and living expenses, for the institution and/or for the government: ‘International student recruitment is important in terms of raising revenue. Overseas students coming into the UK isn’t a bad thing. This is the main issue why international students should come as far as the UK government is concerned’ (4). Nevertheless, many interviewees regarded the rationales for recruiting international students to be more extensive than the economic rationale as defined by higher revenue.

Social and Cultural

There were three types of social and cultural contributions that students from Russia, Eastern Europe, Caucasus, and Central Asia were seen to make to the interviewed UK HEIs: contributing to the non-academic aspects of university life; increasing diversity on campus, thereby improving the preparation of all students for life and work in a globalised world; and contributing to the development of a more global mind-set in the wider community. Depending on the level of interest in expanding each of the three areas on campus, universities talked about these contributions in greater or lesser detail.

The majority of HEIs interviewed were inclined to think of students from former Soviet countries as ‘very active students socially who arrange all kinds of social events’ that involve students from all countries. Students from this region were recognised as very keen on

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2 This is different for the Baltic States that are part of the EU and are eligible to pay the home fees which range between £1,820 in Scotland and £9000 in England and Wales.
making friends from other countries and as actively contributing to social and cultural aspects of university life. They were described as ‘quite confident students who are happy to integrate and quite excited about integration’ (13), active students who join the Students’ Union Governing Body in order to take on a responsible role in helping to improve the general student life (12).

‘They want to promote [their respective country] culture within the university. So we find that these students tend to be very involved culturally’ (6). One interviewee thought that even those who came to the UK to study technical subjects seemed to be well-versed culturally and socially active:

They’re very culturally aware. All of the mathematicians have read Bulgakov, all of the engineers can tell me about Chekov. Students who come from technical backgrounds will still able to have a great conversation with me about transient Russian literature. I’ve always had that experience with Russian parents who come from technical backgrounds. You see their bookshelves, they’ve got lines of books with great Russian literature. (12)

The exposure to mobile students from this part of the world was generally perceived as enriching the university experience for all students and contributing to students’ preparation for life and work in globalised world: ‘The university certainly believes that if students have a more global classroom it is more representative of the workforce that they are going to join when they graduate’ (2). This was sometimes viewed as a particularly beneficial experience for British students who were not as mobile as students from other parts of Europe and, therefore, often lacked the opportunities of learning a foreign language or studying overseas. Social and cultural exchanges with students from former Soviet countries also offered students from the UK ‘a bit of insight into what it’s like in countries like Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Russia. They wouldn’t necessarily know that if they studied at a university with just home students’ (4). Such interactions, it was argued, encouraged British students to study abroad and develop ‘a different take on life’, allowing them to be more prepared to live and work in the global context (3).

Experiences of exchange and interaction were particularly valued in ‘fairly monocultural’ contexts where some HEIs interviewed were located (11, 13, 9). The presence of international students, it was claimed, opened the eyes and broke down barriers for home students: ‘even getting them to come down the valley this far towards [the city name] is a big thing for some of those students. They are going to have to learn to deal with people from different backgrounds, from different cultures’ (13).

Local communities in which the universities were embedded also benefitted from the exposure to international students:

This university is very conscious of the role that they play in the city. Being able to bring in different voices, different ideas because the city is in the process of trying to regenerate itself. An organisation like a university is critical to that and the more international facing and the global the university, the better that makes it for the city. Because we would arguably be much more internationally faced and global-minded than some of the other organisations in the city. (9)

Thus, the social and cultural rationales highlighted the importance of internationalisation for enhancing the student experience. This rationale was particularly valuable for Scottish HEIs, as unlike English HEIs, ‘the universities in Scotland are generally recruiting overseas students for the experience on campus’ (2). Confrontations with other cultures, it was argued, help us make progress in social learning and personal development.
Academic

Many interviewees considered the students from Russia, Eastern Europe, Caucasus, and Central Asia to be academically very strong, well-motivated, and highly educated: ‘All the former Soviet states they’ve always invested in education, more so than a British family, they continue to educate themselves throughout their lives. I met a lot of people who had two degrees, three degrees’ (7). For students from former Soviet countries the academic challenges, including those related to studying in English, it was argued, were not as extensive as for other international students (13). Students from the region were perceived as ‘more sciency’ than other international students (6). These were some of the reasons why many HEIs interviewed were interested in attracting students from former Soviet countries.

Some Russell Group universities were concerned that many talented students in former Soviet countries were not able to access UK HE: ‘I feel quite confident that there’s an awful lot of talent in these countries that is not coming here. Most of it will be staying at home. Some of it we’d be losing to the United States or other universities’ (8). Despite the fact that neither this specific university nor any other Russell Group institution interviewed had any strategies in place to address the potential loss of talent to competitors, institutions that focused on the social, cultural, and academic benefits of hosting international students operated institutional scholarship schemes, providing full or partial funding to international students. One respondent shared their success story of collaborating with the Ukrainian government to cover not only the stipend and tuition but also a waiver of the application fee for students applying to this university from Ukraine (6).

Although concerned about the competition, Russell Group intuitions interviewed continued to benefit from a large pool of academically excellent applicants from this region and the rest of the world: ‘We have tunnel vision on this. The reason why we admit international students is because they are bright. We really don’t care where you’re from. What we want is the brightest students’ (6). This linked with the idea of a university being a global place that expands the possibilities of thinking big when there are a lot of international students enrolled at the institution:

[University] is not just a local education institution. Any ambitious university wants to be global and that means attracting students from all over and that’s not just a financial question. That’s also about being global. It’s in the nature of a university. You got to think big. (9)

However, increasing diversity on campus was not always viewed as beneficial to learning and teaching, especially so when the international student body contained a disproportionately high number of a specific group of students. For example, China was recognised at the biggest market for the UK HE sector but it was acknowledged that HEIs ‘don’t want a whole classroom full of Chinese students; [they] need a mix’ (7). Universities tried to ensure that there was a mix of students from the Middle East, from the Americas, and Russia and Kazakhstan were also areas of their interest (7). It was also feared that a high proportion of foreign students in the classroom would cause a ‘backlash from home students’ (2), especially in a class where the majority were non-native speakers of English. For some universities it was a challenge to achieve ‘a good mix of students from all over the world,’ to avoid the situation of one international student group dominating the campus (14). One interviewee claimed that as soon as the institution would go over 15% of international students on campus, they would start to skew the overall student experience, primarily for home students. ‘The balance in terms of numbers’ was suggested as a key indicator of successful internationalisation (13).

Universities that received more income from research rather than from tuition fees argued that ‘by creating this international community of learners on campus, you’re creating the
opportunity that in the future you have more international partnerships and research collaborations across the world’ (2). This was an important aspect of internationalisation for such universities as ‘in the long-term, you have people connected in a huge alumni network around the world and connected back to the university that we can work with academically and on a research basis’ (2).

**Political**

Educating students from abroad was viewed by the majority of interviewees as an important mechanism for countries to appreciate ‘what makes each other tick’ (11) and to ‘build bridges and create cultural understanding, reducing the likelihood of war and terrorism and just binding people together in ways that are helpful for peace and prosperity’ (8). When it came to students from Russia, Eastern Europe, Caucasus, and Central Asia, this was facilitated by: students’ political activism on campus, alumni that act as ambassadors, and the promotion of British cultural values.

Students from the region were frequently considered to be politically active on campus. Some interviewees mentioned the role of country-focused student societies in raising political consciousness and some activism on campus. These societies were ‘very active in advising government back home. They seem to be quite well-connected politically or they seem to be attempting to get that political connectivity with their home countries’ (6).

Interviewees recognised that students who come to the UK to study develop an affinity with the UK; they are the ‘best ambassadors’ (9) for the UK, ‘for the culture they absorb’ while living here (3). Many alumni, it was noted, had ‘an admiration for the UK and for our values. They retain that admiration and that fondness for the country and in some respects they see it as their alma mater’ (7). Because of being so pro-UK, international students were considered activists that ‘do sell the UK abroad’ (7).

Foreign or the UK government-funded students from abroad, regarded as ‘strategically important’, were most likely to work at public institutions back at home and achieved better outreach to the wider public (10) in promoting British cultural values:

> It’s a UK policy. You can see that in the Chevening Scholarship website. They are very open that they want to provide scholarships for people to come and study in the UK to go back to their home countries and spread British culture and values in priority subject areas, whether that could be in journalism, in human rights law, in business and finance – it is driven by a lot of soft power initiative. (2)

Since 1983, the UK government has been offering highly competitive Chevening Scholarships ‘for students with demonstrable potential to become future leaders, decision-makers and opinion formers’ (GOV.UK, 2016). The government department in charge of these scholarships - the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) - was regarded by most interviewees as interested in attracting increasing numbers of academically excellent students from all over the world not only with a view to strengthening the UK economy but primarily for the purpose of building cultural, political, and diplomatic links with other countries. This ministerial department is supported by 11 agencies and public bodies; amongst them the British Council which undertakes intelligence work on student mobility for the UK HE sector. Many interviewees, in particular non-Russell Group HEIs, recognised the positive role of the British Council in ‘keeping the profile up in these countries’ (9) and providing market intelligence for recruitment from Russia, Central Asia, Eastern Europe, and Caucasus.

Although many interviewees were positive about the influence of inbound and outbound student mobility on promoting British cultural values, it appeared difficult for the
interviewees to pin down what exactly constituted such values: ‘The quality values, the UK good standards, the commitment values, and other positive values related to British culture’ (10).

Despite all the evidence obtained on social, cultural, academic, and political rationales for recruiting international students, when asked a summarising question on how UK HEIs classified students from former Soviet countries - as backdoor migrants, as transient consumers, as innovators, as ambassadors, and as activists - quite a few interviewees indicated that international students, students from former Soviet countries included, were mostly transient consumers, who contributed to the UK economy, ‘to the local […] taxi drivers, to Sainsbury’s, Aldi, all the shopping centres – without students the towns would be quite ghostly’ (7).

The majority of interviewees tended to view students also as ambassadors, but with mostly economic benefits on mind. They talked about the students from this region as ambassadors who would give good feedback about the university to those interested in study abroad back at home. It was reported that alumni often participated in the recruitment events of British HEIs in their home countries. Finally, few HEIs viewed mobile students’ ambassadorial functions very broadly: ‘we would hope that they would be ambassadors for their research, for their country, for their subject, and for the university as well’ (6).

One government department that interviewees did not consider to be aligned with the BIS and FCO rationales of attracting international students was the Home Office that tends to view international students ‘as part of out-of-control or at least much too liberal immigration policy that needs to be reined in’ (8); hence, the existing UK visa regulations.

The UK student visa application process was described as quite costly, complex, and impractical: besides the high visa fees, applicants have to pay for their health surcharge; students on less-than-12-months-long courses are not allowed to bring any dependents; the post-study work visa is very limited; the minimum salary that graduates have to earn to stay is £35,000. All interviewees viewed visa regulations for international students as a serious impediment to student recruitment, as ‘the major obstacle’, ‘instantly a barrier’, ‘too complicated’, ‘very negative’, ‘very subjective and very off-putting to the students’, ‘stringent’, ‘very unwelcoming and negative’. The government ‘rhetoric about visas clearly dampens demand. [Students] perceive that the country is a bit hostile to them. The rhetoric around it clearly hurts; there is a story out there that the UK is not particularly interested in international students’ (8).

Almost all interviewees believed that students from former Soviet countries were highly unlikely to choose to enter the UK HE sector for the purpose of subsequent migration. Interviewees were often under the impression that students from former Soviet countries tended to keep very close links with their home countries while abroad and aspire to go back and contribute to their countries of origin.

UK visa regulations for international students have not affected the former Soviet countries that are part of the EU - Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia – where the UK remains the most popular foreign destination. The steepest overall increase pertains to the number of students from Lithuania, for whom dramatic growth is observable after the country’s accession to the European Union in 2004 (Appendix 2). Brexit may change this picture in near future.
Bridging the present with the future

University admissions/international officers felt that neither HEIs nor the government had one exclusive rationale but a combination of rationales for student recruitment from Russia, Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia. In the hierarchy of rationales the economic rationale seemed to be prevailing amongst both stakeholder groups. Although the academic and socio-cultural rationales of international student recruitment amongst UK HEIs were prominent, these were not confirmed to be quite as strong as in the wider European context (Engel, Sandstrom, Van der Aa, & Glass, 2015).

Interviewees viewed student mobility from this region as an expression of socio-economic transformation in sending countries as well as political and strategic priorities in the UK. They referred to the economic situation in former Soviet countries, the development of the HE sector within the source countries, the UK government discourse on migration, and universities’ own strategic planning as four main aspects that can influence future trends of student mobility from this region to the UK.

In particular, it was argued that fluctuations in oil prices were likely to determine the numbers of students from Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, and Russia. The future trends, some thought, would be determined by the GDP growth in these countries (14). ‘Obviously, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Russia all have fairly healthy funded scholarship schemes although if the situation continues to be economically unsettled and the exchange rate continues to be different to what it was, that may change in itself’ (4).

Following the changes new Prime Minister Theresa May introduced on 14 July 2016, universities are moving from the BIS to the Department for Education (DfE). The government has always viewed the public spending going to the DfE as an expense while the spending going to the BIS used to be viewed as an investment. Being part of the DfE remit, it is less likely that HE and international student flows continue to be perceived as an export industry as well as a tool for exercising British soft power. The possibility of taking international students out of net migration counts seems even less likely.

‘Universities are, by nature of their commitment to advancing universal knowledge, essentially international institutions, but they have been living, increasingly, in a world of nation-states that have designs on them’; after more than two decades, these words of Clark Kerr (1994, p. 6) remain applicable to the UK reality where universities experiment with introducing special schemes to mitigate the impact of government policies. For example, one Russell Group university initiated ‘a year in employment’ for their third year undergraduates to ensure that all undergraduates get work experience. Moreover, some HEIs started to provide two-year master’s degrees with a project or work component in the second year. This was proving to be useful in attracting students who were interested in gaining some work experience before returning to their home countries.

The idea that international students can contribute economically to the UK as potential labour force did not emerge in any interview. Neither did any interviewee choose to expand on the role of the students from this region, or international students more broadly, in contributing to the UK’s innovation capacity/economic competitiveness.

Will Brexit have any influence on the rationales of HE internationalisation in the UK where the economic rationale seems to be the driving force of HE internationalisation? Although some argue that ‘insularity is not the way forward’ (Husbands, McCormac, Arthur, & Finn, 2016), Brexit is Brexit and it will most likely result into further isolation of the UK from Europe and a decrease in the number of EU students studying in this country. When the UK leaves the EU, EU students will most likely not be eligible for undergraduate loans in the UK.
to cover their tuition fees. At the same time, the Prime Minister decaled in her ‘Global Britain speech’ that the UK ‘will continue to attract the brightest and the best to work or study in Britain – indeed openness to international talent must remain one of this country’s most distinctive assets’ (Prime Minister, 2017). With the new reality of Brexit will HEIs in Global Britain be more inclined to look at Russia, Eastern Europe, Caucasus, and Central Asia as expanding recruitment markets more closely?

In the last two decades, Eastern Europe, Caucasus, Russia, and Central Asia have been developing economically and becoming more outward-looking. The case of former Soviet countries confirms that as nation-states grow economically and transform socially, the volume of migration often increases, with more students seeking study abroad opportunities. It emerged from the interviews that the region is often overlooked by UK universities’ international recruitment teams as a potential target, often due to their lack of knowledge about these countries. Nevertheless, some interviewees noted that markets in Russia, Eastern Europe, Caucasus, and Central Asia ‘have become more attractive and we’re probably doing ourselves no favour by ignoring the markets’ (11).

All HEIs interviewed were aware of the rapidly expanding competition for international students from this region as well as other parts of the world and were concerned about losing out on the brightest minds to other European and/or English-speaking destination countries. At the same time, the majority of the HEIs indicated that they did not have a clearly formulated strategy for recruiting students from this region or more broadly. The interview data collected for this study, therefore, confirmed the argument put forward by de Wit (2015) that internationalisation is a fragmented process that rarely follows a comprehensive strategy. A commonly held view among our respondents, however, was that the status quo of having no explicit recruitment strategy would need to change as soon as possible since the competition for international students was getting increasingly fierce.

References


### Appendices

#### Appendix 1. Numbers of mobile students from former Soviet countries enrolled at UK HEIs, 1995-96 to 2013-14

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*Source: own calculations based on HESA (2014) data*
Appendix 2. Most popular destinations for mobile students from former Soviet countries

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<th>Destination country III</th>
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<th>Destination country VI</th>
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Source: own calculations based on UNESCO (2014b) data
Tables

Table 1. The sample of UK HEIs by student enrolments from post-Soviet countries, 2013-14

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GROUP II

| 7                            | 160                                                 | England              | Yes           |
| 8                            | 140                                                 | England              | Yes           |
| 9                            | 133                                                 | England              | No            |
| 10                           | 116                                                 | Wales                | No            |

GROUP III

| 11                           | 83                                                  | England              | No            |
| 12                           | 66                                                  | England              | No            |
| 13                           | 55                                                  | Wales                | No            |
| 14                           | 9                                                   | England              | No            |

Figure

Figure 1. Former Soviet countries by GDP per capita (current US$), 2013

**Biographical information**

Maia Chankseliani is Associate Professor of Comparative and International Education at the University of Oxford. The main areas of research include but are not limited to HE internationalisation and student mobility, education marketization, vocational education and apprenticeships. Maia Chankseliani’s geographic areas of expertise are the UK and former Soviet countries of Eastern Europe, Russia, Caucasus, and Central Asia.