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Surviving a Crisis: Transformation, Adaptation, and Resistance in Higher Education

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Abstract

After periods of crisis, it has been assumed that social institutions like higher education will also change radically – and perhaps even fail. In contrast to this expectation, this paper demonstrates that such moments of intense disruption result not only in transformation but are additionally accompanied by significant levels of adaptation and some resistance. Drawing from a larger study of the impact of crisis on higher education, this paper explores some of the ways that higher education responds to major political, economic, and social change at both system and organizational levels. Taking the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 as the moment of crisis, the paper presents findings from a comparative case study of three ex-Soviet countries with new primary source data generated by interviews with experienced faculty members at the frontline of change. Understanding what it takes for higher education to survive a crisis makes an important contribution to comparative higher education studies by showing the variegated ways that higher education institutions and systems respond to crisis and to filling the gap in theory-driven explanations of system and organizational responses to major change.

Keywords: Crisis, transformation, and adaptation, Resistance, change, and continuity, New institutionalism, Collapse of the Soviet Union, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan

Introduction

Higher education never has to look far to find a crisis. Triggers for crises include questions of resourcing – typically who should pay for higher education and how much they should pay – debates over what type of education should be provided, student movements, protests against national politics, outcries against limits on academic freedom, and of course global challenges such as the Covid-19 pandemic that is still unfolding at the time of writing. As has been wryly noted, ‘an independent observer, should such a person be found... might form the idea that higher education was in a virtually constant state of crisis’ (Tight, 1994, p. 363). This is not to undermine the many structural inequalities and ruptures that exist around the world, which continue to put lives at unacceptable risk, and which hinder equitable access to higher education. Rather, what this is intended to highlight is the wide range of ways in which the term ‘crisis’ has been mobilized in studies of higher education and to point to the need for greater conceptual clarity when it comes to how it is operationalized.

In response, the notion of crisis is developed in this paper through the terminology of major institutional change to study the effects of major political, economic, and social change on higher education. It has been assumed that social institutions like higher education will *either* change radically after periods of major institutional change *or* become so paralysed by the event of crisis, or major institutional change, that subsequent change becomes impossible. In contrast to this expectation, this paper shows that such moments of intense disruption result not only in transformation but are additionally accompanied by significant levels of adaptation and some resistance. Understanding what it takes for higher education to survive a crisis makes an important contribution to comparative higher education studies by showing

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the variegated ways that higher education institutions and systems respond to crisis and to filling the gap in theory-driven explanations of system and organizational responses to major change.

In re-examining this common assumption about how higher education responds to change, the paper draws from the author's recently completed doctoral study on higher education's responses to major institutional change in the context of the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. The doctoral study included a three-country comparative case study of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan in Central Asia. It covered both their higher education systems and their higher education institutions (HEIs). The study's primary source of data is 36 in-depth field-based interviews with experienced faculty members, which is supplemented by descriptive statistics, academic literature, and government documents in English and Russian languages.

Not only a compelling choice of setting because of the region's recent heritage as part of the Soviet Union, Central Asia is significant both historically and strategically, 'perhaps both the most important and the most neglected part of the world and its history' (Frank, 1992, p. 44). In spite of this neglect, the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 'brought renewed attention to the region. Central Asia's promising oil and natural gas reserves combined with its strategic geographic location between "East" and "West" put the region back on the map as a central site of the new "Great Game"' (Silova, 2011, p. 5). Furthermore, one of the puzzles that had prompted the larger study was to investigate why, despite a shared recent history, and despite inheriting a very powerful schema for higher education from the Soviet period, the commonalities between the three case study countries do not explain the ways in which higher education across the three countries developed differently and at different paces during the study period. In Kazakhstan, for example, there was a noticeable shift in how higher education changed as early as the late 1990s/turn of the twenty-first century (Heyneman, 2005; Yakavets & Dzhadrina, 2014). A five-year state plan for education and a law on the privatization of some HEIs were both published in 2000 (Ahn et al., 2018), marking a turning point in the scope and scale of higher education reform, whereas in neighbouring Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, this became visible only in the mid-2000s. In both cases this followed significant domestic upheaval: in Tajikistan, largely the result of a civil war¹ that hindered the possibilities for substantive responses to change during the 1990s (DeYoung et al., 2018) and in Kyrgyzstan following a series of events leading to the overthrow of the independent country's first President in 2005 (Shadymanova & Amsler, 2018).

The paper is organized as follows. The next section lays out the definition of crisis as major institutional change and the broader new institutionalist thinking that informs this conceptualization. This is followed by a summary of the larger study's methodological approach. The immediate aftermath of the major institutional change moment in the three case study countries under study is then discussed. Having established the context, key findings on higher education's responses to change at both system and organizational levels are presented, organized by the three main types of responses found in the study: transformation, adaptation, and resistance. From these three parts, the concluding section brings together a discussion of why some areas of higher education were transformed, others adapted, and yet others resisted change. This section also reflects on how the key finding of variation advances knowledge on how higher education responds to major institutional change beyond a simplistic 'all or nothing' binary as well as understanding what it takes for higher education to survive a crisis.

Crisis as Major Institutional Change

The study is grounded in new institutionalism, which offers an array of tools for understanding the relationship between institutions which, at the most fundamental level, refer to 'the rules of the game in a society' (North, 1990, p. 3), organizations and actors, their behaviour and their actions. New institutionalism has been shown to be highly applicable to the study of higher education (Diogo et al., 2015; Meyer & Rowan, 2006). Higher education as an institution can be understood in 'concrete terms as a set of specific and local organizations, roles, interactions, and economic transactions' (Meyer et al., 2007, p. 187). By framing it as an institution, higher education becomes part of a broader institutional

¹ The civil war in Tajikistan was fought on and off between 1992-97, displacing around 700,000 people – almost one in every six citizens – and killing almost 85,000 people.

framework, enabling attention to focus on the ‘cultural scripts and organizational rules built into the wider national and world environments that establish the main features of local situations’ (Maassen & Olsen, 2007; Meyer et al., 2007, p. 188).

More specifically, higher education can be framed as a social institution. This distinguishes it as having the purpose of satisfying the needs of the many and/or the goal of supporting a social system (society) from other forms of institutional order where the institution’s primary function is economic or private (Prisching, 1993; Turner, 1997). As a social institution, higher education is embodied by organizations whose purpose is ‘organised activity that maintains, reproduces, or adapts itself to implement values that have been widely held and firmly structured by society’ (Gumport, 2005, p. 119). These organizations are higher education institutions, or HEIs. In relation to this, I further define higher education systems as dynamic organizational fields that vary across an array of factors that may include: type of higher education system, the variety of organizational types, system size, qualifications awarded, funding models, governance, processes or products, access, and collaboration (Schwartzman et al., 2015).

New institutional theory represents possibilities for explaining and predicting both continuity and change. Nevertheless, studies using this approach have overwhelmingly emphasized continuity rather than change (Hall, 2010; Streeck & Thelen, 2005). This accent on institutional persistence is to some extent inevitable given new institutionalism’s development ‘in the context of relatively stable economic systems’ (Newman, 2000, p. 603). In recognition of criticisms of new institutionalism’s problematic approach to change, there have been ongoing attempts to explain how to (better) account for change processes. In a study published more than 20 years after their original work on neo-institutionalism, March and Olsen (2008) provide a detailed account of how change occurs within institutions and in institutional frameworks, arguing that ‘rules, routines, norms, and identities are both instruments of stability and arenas of change’ and that ‘change is a constant feature of institutions’ (p.11).

While new institutionalism has developed approaches to explain institutional change, studies using this framing both generally and in higher education studies more specifically have been dominated by notions of incremental change. In higher education, the ‘neo-institutional perspective tends to emphasize the stability of organizations and the barriers to change that exist within organizations’ (Gornitzka & Maassen, 2000, p. 87). Though some have argued that in higher education, both continuity and change are ‘heavily interwoven’ (Stensaker, 2015, p. 104), the potential of higher education both to effect and to transmit change in dramatically changing contexts accompanying periods of major institutional change has not received sufficient attention (Brennan et al., 2004; Oketch et al., 2014; Polyzoi & Dneprov, 2010), particularly outside of Western, often North American, contexts (Newman, 2000; Pearce & Branyiczki, 1993).

Where higher education studies do account for the responses of organizations in radically altered institutional environments, the main tendency has been to assume that the result of major institutional change is similarly radical change within institutions and organizations because ‘major transformations take place at moments of exogenous shocks’ (Gornitzka & Maassen, 2014, p. 22). This has been termed the ‘crisis argument’ (ibid.) and assumes that if the rules of the game are transformed, organizational adaptation to the new rules – indeed, to the new game – is a necessary condition for survival and success. A smaller school of thought that stems from studies of other organizational/institutional forms but has relevance to higher education posits the opposite, finding that too much institutional upheaval actually inhibits organizational responses to change. It does so by hampering organizations’ ability to learn because ‘the schemas that facilitate interpretation and meaning are no longer relevant’ (Newman, 2000, p. 606).

Taken together, these arguments present a binary explanation for higher education’s responses to major institutional change that are grounded either in radical transformation or frozen stagnation. In fact, as this study demonstrates, the period following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 was significantly more nuanced, leading to transformation but additionally to adaptation and resistance. In this paper, transformation (major change) is explored in the context of the dramatic expansion of the three higher

education systems and the HEIs within them, fuelled for the most part by privatization. Adaptation (incremental change) was evident in institutional upgrading and the growth of domestic branch campuses. Finally, resistance (continuity) was found in the organization of the curriculum and the resilience of organizational culture.

Furthermore, this pairing of transformation or stagnation has been inferred from responses that occur in stable environments, rather than the state of crisis or instability – that is, major institutional change – generated by events such as the collapse of the Soviet Union. Even less attention has been paid to the application of major institutional change to studies of higher education. In response, drawing from the more general new institutionalist literature as well as other studies of the collapse of the Soviet Union, major institutional change is defined in the context of this study as a radical or transformational shift in the institutional environment, accompanied by extreme economic shifts and leading to political regime change (Beissinger, 2002; Koning, 2016; Newman, 2000; Suarez & Oliva, 2005). These moments may be some years in the making, but ultimately can be pinpointed to a particular moment in time. Major institutional change, in other words, completely changes the rules of the game in which higher education operates. When major institutional change does take place, it is like an avalanche: infrequent but when it occurs, it is high amplitude, extremely fast moving, and far-reaching in scope (Suarez & Oliva, 2005).

Methodological Approach

The larger doctoral study informing this paper was a three-country comparative case study of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan covering the period 1985 to 2005, that is, shortly before, during, and after the major institutional change moment. The primary source of data is in-depth interviews undertaken during in-country field research in 2017. In total, 36 faculty members were interviewed, all of whom have considerable experience of working in higher education in Central Asia. 32 of the 36 respondents chose to do the interview in Russian. The remaining interviews were undertaken in English (two interviews) or a mix of English and Russian (two interviews).² The respondents were selected based on their experience of working either at Soviet-era HEIs, i.e., universities, institutes or the Academy of Sciences that were created during the Soviet period, and/or because they had experience of working at a post-1991 HEI, i.e., an organization founded in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union. 13 respondents were interviewed in Kazakhstan, 10 in Kyrgyzstan, and 13 in Tajikistan. Two thirds of the respondents were female. The interviews focussed on faculty members' understanding of developments at the HEIs they had worked at, beginning in the mid/late 1980s and progressing through to the current day. Respondents also discussed developments at the level of the organizational field of higher education in their country. This primary data was triangulated with descriptive statistics on quantifiable measures as well as document analysis of academic literature and policy documents published in English and Russian. This paper focusses on respondents' testimony and literature relating to the group of 77 HEIs that were established in the three case study countries during the Soviet period. Selected quotes from informants who worked or still work at those HEIs are used to illustrate the key findings.³ Quotes originally in Russian have been translated by the author.

The Avalanche Begins

By the end of 1991, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics was no more. After over 70 years of existence, the Soviet Union dissolved: 'the Union that was supposed to be unbreakable fell apart overnight like a house of cards blown away by a light breeze' (Segizbaev, 2003, p. 5). More than three decades on, the significance of this historic event has begun to be forgotten despite the momentous shifts that ensued. Yet as Eliæson et al. remind us, 'social conditions that had come to seem part of just "how the world is" were transformed almost overnight and the course of history changed' (2016, p. xi). From

² The widespread and continuing use of Russian in Central Asian academia is the result of the twentieth century shared Soviet legacy and the close economic ties that still link the former Soviet space. English is growing as an alternative language of publication and academic communication, but even with greater integration into English speaking academic communities, it remains the case that the Russian language retains legitimacy as a working language among academics in and of the former Soviet space.

³ Respondents who agreed to be part of the study did so under the conditions laid out by the author's institutional ethics board, which provided that quotes could be included but should be anonymized. As such, they are attributed in the text with a number and country name, but without additional identifiers.

the rubble of the collapsed Soviet Union, 15 independent states were created or re-emerged. With no previous history of statehood in their current geopolitical configurations, the former Soviet republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan in Central Asia thus became independent for the first time in 1991.

The breakdown of the Soviet Union unleashed even deeper economic crises for Central Asia than had already been experienced in the late Soviet period. Even in resource rich Kazakhstan, GDP dropped by 39% between 1991 and 1996 and only began to recover at the end of that decade (Ahn et al., 2018). All three countries suffered from hyperinflation, which peaked in Kazakhstan between 1991 and 1994 (Yakavets, 2014). The effect of the crisis was prolonged in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, where GDP per capita dropped by 44% and 64% and real wages decreased by 50% and 87% respectively between 1989 and 1999 (Shagdar, 2006). Not only dealing with economic shock and, in the case of Tajikistan, civil war, the three newly sovereign states also had to grapple with processes of nation-building and state-building. The delegitimized communist ideology was no longer an option as it ‘represented the Soviet past and did not correspond to the new geopolitical reality’ (Mullojanov, 2019, p. 121). Nation-building efforts meant reviving and re-imagining the states’ pre-Soviet heritages and simultaneously dealing with the inherited Soviet legacy of formal institutions – and doing all of this in an increasingly globalized environment in which privatized markets were in the ascendant (Grzymala-Busse & Jones Luong, 2002; Kotkin & Beissinger, 2014).

One such inherited formal institution was education, which during the twentieth century had become institutionalized throughout Central Asia according to the Soviet model. Education was a pivotal tool for achieving the state’s communist project (Smolentseva et al., 2018) and was used in Central Asia to ‘construct, develop and reproduce Soviet political, cultural, economic and social institutions’ (Akyildiz, 2013, p. 14). The goal of higher education was ‘to train a professional workforce for the needs of the state’ (Kuraev, 2016, p. 184) and as such, the higher education system was closely connected to the economy. Higher education was highly centralized and organized with very little variation between Soviet republics (Kuraev, 2016). The higher education system was thus grounded in the communist ideology, fully state funded, and open in principle to all those who were qualified.

By 1991 the Central Asian republics were part of a network of almost 1,000 HEIs with an age cohort participation rate of around 15 to 20% (Platonova, 2018). The vast majority (90%) of HEIs were institutes that focussed on teaching a small number of specialized areas. Multi-faculty teaching-centred universities made up around 7% of the total number of HEIs and research mostly took place in the Academy of Sciences. Upon obtaining independence in 1991, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan inherited a total of 77 HEIs from the Soviet period, broken down by country and organizational type in Table 1. By 2005, the end point of the larger study, almost all of this group of Soviet-era HEIs remained operational. Yet, as the subsequent three sections demonstrate, within this 15-year period, this elite group of 77 had become part of greatly enlarged higher education systems, had dramatically expanded the number of faculties and course offerings, changed organizational status, and reformed their curricula. However, courses continued to be organized much in the way they had been during the Soviet era, and the organizational culture in the group of 77 was still highly recognizable from the previous era. This contrast between continuity in curriculum arrangements, organizational culture and massive system growth neatly illustrates the difficulties of attempting to delineate responses to major institutional change, even when the attempt is more nuanced than in previous studies.

Table 1. Distribution of HEIs in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, 1990

Republic	Universities	Institutes	Academy of Sciences	Total
Kazakhstan	2	53	1	56
Kyrgyzstan	1	8	1	10
Tajikistan	1	9	1	11
Total	4	70	3	77

Transformation

Expansion, mainly driven by privatization, has significantly changed higher education across the three countries (and indeed the entire former Soviet space). As one respondent observed: “a major change has been the quantitative growth [in the number of HEIs]” (Respondent 36, Kyrgyzstan).

The number of HEIs had been static in the late Soviet period, but expansion in the number of HEIs is evident in the early 1990s across all three settings, stabilizing earlier in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan than in Kazakhstan, where the government began to take more hands-on measures to control the emergence of new institutions from the 2000s. In Kazakhstan, there was a sharp growth in the total number of HEIs from the base of 56 in 1990 to a peak of 185 in 2002. From a much smaller base, Kyrgyzstan’s higher education system grew exponentially by nearly five times to 51 HEIs in 2005. Growth in Tajikistan, from 11 to 36 HEIs by 2005, was steadier than in the other two countries, continuing to increase incrementally in the first half of the 2000s after growth had tailed off in the other two countries. By 2005, the elite group of 77 had been joined by nearly 200 new entrants, with a total of 268 HEIs across the three systems (Table 2).

Table 2. Number of HEIs in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, 1990 and 2005

Country	1990	2005
Kazakhstan	56	181
Kyrgyzstan	10	51
Tajikistan	11	36
Total	77	268

The peak expansion period for all three countries was the first half of the 1990s, when the proportion of HEIs increased by 84% (Kazakhstan), 85% (Tajikistan) and all the way up to 167% in Kyrgyzstan. Growth rates dropped in all three settings in the second half of the 1990s and are more similar in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan (52% and 41% growth respectively) than in Tajikistan where the number of HEIs grew by 25% despite the shadow of civil war. In the first half of the 2000s, growth declined again in Kazakhstan to a very modest 6%, as by this time the government had begun to reassert control over the sector. In Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan growth was also more modest at 13% and 20% respectively. Yet over the course of the first 14 years of independence, the overall proportion of growth in the system is dramatic: nearly 200% in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, and over 300% in Kyrgyzstan (Table 3).

Table 3. Proportion of growth in the number of HEIs over time, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan

Country	1991-1995	1995-2000	2000-2005	1991-2005
Kazakhstan	84%	52%	6%	197%
Kyrgyzstan	167%	41%	13%	325%
Tajikistan	85%	25%	20%	177%

Following the adoption of new laws on education permitting private forms of higher education, the rapid emergence of private HEIs from 1992/93 onwards explains much of the growth in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. In Kazakhstan, the number of private HEIs outnumbered the quantity of state-run institutions as early as 1996. As Kwiek (2013) found in Poland, the consensus was that rapid expansion was driven above all by a scarcity of resources: “People just wanted to make money. The quality [of provision] was ludicrous” (Respondent 26, Kazakhstan). Private HEIs in Kyrgyzstan also quickly became a feature of the higher education field, with 10 such HEIs already in existence by the time records begin to be available for 1995/96; by 2005, a third of the total number of HEIs were private.

Whereas privatization is perhaps the most compelling reason for system growth, expansion in the state (publicly funded) sector was also remarkable, particularly given economic constraints. In Kyrgyzstan, respondents discussed a government policy to use higher education as a social control, a buffer against youth unemployment and unrest. As one respondent recalled, the policy was “There are no jobs, everything is collapsing. Young people should be educated, even if they are unemployed” (Respondent 20, Kyrgyzstan). This example also speaks to the way that the government perceived higher education

as an instrument that could help resolve broader socio-economic challenges, and the close connections between higher education and the state as a legacy from the communist period. While private HEIs emerged in Tajikistan, the system has effectively been renationalized by a government that has been systematically consolidating authority and power since the late 1990s. As one respondent noted, despite collaborative relations between academics and policymakers in the early period of independence, these have since dissolved: “That way of working and those discussions don’t happen anymore (Respondent 13, Tajikistan). In this way, almost all of the system expansion in Tajikistan has been in the public sector, bucking global trends for this time period.

If at the system level a key transformation was significant expansion, this trend was mirrored at organizational level in the group of 77 Soviet-era HEIs by the creation of multiple new faculties and courses. The emergence of new faculties and courses, primarily geared at fee-paying students, is part of the privatization of higher education that took place after 1991 and has significantly changed higher education across the three countries (and indeed, across the entire former Soviet space). This has been a major change because tuition fees did not exist in the Soviet Union, but when they were legalized in all three countries in 1992/1993, Soviet-era HEIs rapidly adjusted their structures in line with this new environment. The impact has been to expand the size of these HEIs, with the corollary that organizational structures have also had to shift and expand.

The “new faculties and degree specializations began to appear with the changes in the economy” (Respondent 1, Kyrgyzstan); changes were particularly prevalent in areas related to business and management. For example, one respondent who worked at a technical university explained that: “An Institute of Commercial Business and Management was opened at the start of the 1990s. It was wild then, everyone started to study law and marketing, and this one [department] was business.” (Respondent 3, Kyrgyzstan). Whereas some respondents were disparaging about fee-paying students who were seen to have literally bought their way in rather than earned their place by merit, others pointed to the prevailing economic conditions as a reason for growth. As one noted, “In order to support state HEIs, they were allowed to offer private services and they recruited commercial [fee-paying] groups... At that time [1990s] it was survival... and holding on to what was left of the education system” (Respondent 35, Kazakhstan).

By introducing new courses and programmes that were based on HEIs’ perceptions of what would appeal to students, there has also been a major shift from the previous mode by which courses and programmes were allocated centrally by Moscow based on labour market requirements. The subsequent skew across Central Asia away from science and engineering and towards social sciences subjects is a consequence of the shift from education to supply the economy to education based on student demand. In Kyrgyzstan for example, 67% of all students were enrolled in social sciences by 2001, compared to 7% in humanities subjects and 24% in natural and hard sciences (UIS Statistics, 2018).⁴ In Tajikistan, expansion was driven not only by the introduction of new courses but also by the creation of special streams for part-time students who, by 2005, made up 30% of the total student population (Statistics Agency under the President of the Republic of Tajikistan, n.d.). Part-time students, almost always fee-paying, were typically seen as less well-prepared, as one respondent observed in stark terms: “They don’t know how to write [an essay]” (Respondent 10, Tajikistan).

Thus, the transformation of higher education that was witnessed across the three countries was in large part accompanied by different forms of privatization. This brought with it multiple effects that included the expansion of the size of the national systems, the legalization of tuition fees, a skew towards social sciences courses, and a growth in the number of part-time students. As one respondent noted, “destroying something can be done quickly” (Respondent 25, Kazakhstan). Privatization was a significant departure from the preceding Soviet era of statism and communist ideology and arguably may have facilitated transformation in higher education by creating a *tabula rasa* for change.

⁴ No data for this period is available for Kazakhstan or Tajikistan.

Adaptation

Other shifts seen in the group of 77 HEIs and at system level in the three countries have changed higher education but did not bring about the same substantive transformation in the function of higher education or the organization of HEIs. Two key adaptive changes were institutional upgrading and the growth of domestic branch campuses.

The process of institutional upgrading occurred when pre-existing upper secondary organizations were upgraded to become higher education institutions, and of those that already were HEIs, most took on university status. The phenomenon of institutional upgrading is also common across the former Soviet space and may be seen at least in part as a response to the lifting of tightly controlled caps on the quantity of universities during the Soviet period. Institutional upgrading has also occurred in universities and the Academy of Sciences. New organizational forms such as ‘national university’ were created in all three countries and the three main state universities from the Soviet period – Kazakh State, Kyrgyz State and Tajik State – were transformed into national universities in 1993 (Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan) and 1997 (Tajikistan) to reflect their flagship status in the national system. The Academy of Sciences was also upgraded to become the National Academy of Sciences.⁵ This followed a reputational logic, as shown in the Presidential decree in Kyrgyzstan that gave the aim of its reform as raising the prestige of the Academy to that of ‘the highest state research institution’ (Government of the Kyrgyz Republic, 1993).

Institutional upgrading fulfilled not only reputational but also academic and financial functions. One respondent, formerly a Rector (Vice-Chancellor), recalled: “When the Soviet Union collapsed, we converted from a polytechnic institute to a technical university at my initiative. A university has a wider scope, and you can offer a wider range of programmes at different levels” (Respondent 7, Tajikistan). The ability to provide multi-faculty education also broke away from the Soviet model of highly specialised institutes. The reputational and financial rationales for institutional upgrading often collided: institutional leaders “started running around, going to the capital city, asking them to be turned into HEIs... There’s a difference between being the director of a technical school and the director of a university. There are more students, more fees, and greater status... There’s definitely a difference in image” (Respondent 36, Kyrgyzstan).

The breaking away of constituent parts of Soviet-era HEIs and the creation of domestic branch campuses was referred to by one respondent as “division and multiplication” (Respondent 4, Kyrgyzstan) and helps explain at least part of the growth seen in the state higher education sector. However, not all the bids for growth or independence were successful. Having created two domestic branch campuses of the Kyrgyz State Technical University (KSTU) in the towns of Kyzyl-Köl and Karaköl, these campuses became independent HEIs but have since returned to KSTU’s umbrella. The university’s official history does not assess these independence attempts favourably: ‘During these years [1990s], some regional branches began to turn into independent HEIs. However, time showed that such “transformations” were inappropriate and, as is said, everything has returned “back to its place”’ (Kyrgyz State Technical University, 2014). In addition, a Mining Institute that had been formed from the university’s Faculty of Mining has also been reintegrated into the central structure, leading one respondent to comment dryly that “they never learned to swim by themselves” (Respondent 3, Kyrgyzstan).

These division and multiplication patterns align with developments in Kazakhstan, but these trends came much later in Tajikistan, into the mid-2010s and therefore after the end of the study’s timeframe (1985-2005). While the spread of higher education to parts of the countries that did not previously have HEIs has been a meaningful shift that has implications for access to higher education, the overall effect of ‘division and multiplication’ has been incremental rather than major. It has changed the number and location of HEIs, but in a way that replicated existing organizations, and not always with lasting impact as the KSTU example demonstrated. While government policy led to some of these adaptations in higher

⁵ Since 2003, the Kazakhstani government has taken steps that essentially abolish the Academy of Sciences as a separate structure and merge its branches into existing state universities. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have retained their Academies with more or less the same structure.

education, for the most part, these were responses led by HEIs and their leaders which aimed at enhancing the status of individual organizations and expanding their operating scope so that they could incorporate a wider array of subjects and students (and therefore income from fees). This suggests that adaptive change may be more likely from the bottom up – that is, led by institutional leaders – whereas transformations were typically initiated by government, for example through policy change. Nevertheless, the study also found this happening in the other direction: adaptation from above and transformation led from below, thus painting a more nuanced picture of the overall situation.

Resistance

Whereas outright opposition to change was less evident from the findings, the persistence of previous ways of working and being organized in higher education speak to the notion of continuity as a form of implicit resistance to change. This was seen in the organization of the curriculum and the resilience of organizational culture, findings that indicated both opposition to reform directions as well as continuity with the pre-1991 Soviet higher education model.

Across the three countries, the higher education curriculum in state funded HEIs continued to be organized on a Soviet-era four-block model. The block model incorporates compulsory courses that all students take regardless of their degree and some mix of compulsory and optional courses relating to the degree. The effect was to continue a centralized archetype – although the centre was now national rather than Soviet-wide. In this model, students had limited options to shape their course of study. As one respondent recalled, “As the Head of Department, if I tell you you’re going to take X or Y course, then it doesn’t matter if the student needs it or not – that was how it was in the Soviet time and that is how it is now” (Respondent 9, Tajikistan). Even today in Tajikistan, the basic building blocks of the curriculum have remained strikingly similar to their Soviet orientation.

The content of what is taught, however, has had to change, in part due to the overnight withdrawal of centrally planned education: “Previously, the curriculum had come down from Moscow and you basically followed that plan” (Respondent 35, Kazakhstan). Curriculum change followed with the “ideological recoding” (Respondent 33, Kazakhstan) that came after the collapse of communism. The formerly compulsory block of so-called ‘ideological subjects’ (e.g., Marxist-Leninist Philosophy, History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union) was replaced by national histories, languages and so on. Yet even this revised content remained centralized with government input and/or sign-off on the subjects to be offered: “It’s still the case that the Ministry sends us curricula which they have approved. We can’t introduce any changes” (Respondent 15, Tajikistan). On the one hand, this could suggest that the model inherited from the Soviet period continues to provide a sound prototype for the organization of higher learning. On the other hand, this points to continuity based on a lack of fundamental revision or rethinking of the structure of higher education. This may have arisen from minimal interest in or funding for higher education reform, or due to policy attention being focused on other social sectors.

Within organizations that were rapidly changing as part of transforming higher education systems, another effect of crisis was a shift in the value of the academic profession. This has generally been in a negative direction: “[While] the prestige of higher education remains high, the prestige of academic work has dramatically dropped” (Respondent 23, Kazakhstan). Nevertheless, despite this perception of reputational damage and the extreme economic difficulties in the early years of independence that led to a major outflow from the profession, academic staff in many Soviet-era HEIs have generally remained working at the same organization through the course of their career. This continues a practice from the Soviet period when great value was placed on working up through the system. This step-by-step progression valorised experience and promoted a deep understanding of the institutional culture and the work of the HEI. One respondent, an active emeritus professor at the same institution at the time of our meeting in 2017, recounted with some pride that “I’ve worked here since 1956... I was a student and a group leader, then an Assistant, a postgraduate student [in Moscow], Senior Lecturer, Professor, Dean, Pro-Rector for Science and then I became the Rector – that is to say, I’ve passed through all the stages” (Respondent 7, Tajikistan).

Regulations also supported a gradual career path during the Soviet period: senior lecturers could only be appointed with a minimum of five years' teaching experience; professors had to have at least five years' teaching experience after earning their Candidate of Sciences, although it was rare to be appointed to a professorship without having the higher level Doctor of Sciences (Japarova, 2004). Long-term service to the profession combined with a strong sense of loyalty to the same institution is one factor underpinning the resistance to change in the organizational culture. That is to say, with the same people working at the same institutions, the opportunity to significantly change the culture was diminished. As one respondent noted: "the old contingent is still there. That means that old ways of thinking, old forms of relationships and old perceptions haven't left" (Respondent 22, Kyrgyzstan). Resistance to change was also connected to the notion of tradition: "In principle we've retained the traditions of academic science... Of course, there is a deviation from this... but for all that we still practice basic science." (Respondent 6, Tajikistan). In this way, the stability of past Soviet practices had perhaps paradoxically become more deeply legitimized with the collapse of the regime in which these practices had been introduced.

Conclusion

By 2005, higher education in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan had experienced some major transformations, in other areas had been adjusted incrementally at the margins, and in other respects resisted change, continuing to be organized and structured as it had been in the pre-1991 Soviet era.

The legalization of tuition fees in 1992/93 led to the most radical shift of all in the group of 77 Soviet-era HEIs. This group of HEIs expanded new faculties and new courses to accommodate fee-paying students, and in the course of doing so, diversified their income sources. The purpose of income diversification was to reduce reliance on the state, which had traditionally provided full funding for higher education but which, in light of economic crisis in the early 1990s, had reduced funding allocations to HEIs. The impact of creating new faculties and courses was to expand the size not only of individual HEIs but of the higher education systems in each country.

Expansion was furthered by additional changes made by Soviet-era HEIs to their organizational structures. The process of institutional upgrading saw upper secondary organizations seeking to convert to tertiary organizations, and specialized institutions upgrading to become universities. This was also supported by new forms of organizational type created by government policy, such as the 'national' statuses bestowed on some universities and the Academies of Science. Soviet-era HEIs also deployed a 'division and multiplication' strategy, with some departments and faculties breaking off to form separate organizations and domestic branch campuses being created. Not all survived: over time, some of these offshoots closed or returned to the main campus.

Despite the scale of change, in 2005, the Soviet-era HEIs would largely have been recognizable to an observer of twenty or even more years previously. Jostling among a now much larger marketplace of HEIs, the group of 77 had what the newer entrants did not: history, a newfound sense of being the bearers of tradition, and faculty members whose loyalty to the organizations as well as to the idea of higher education compensated for low salaries and diminished (but not destroyed) prestige in society. This implicit resistance to change was also compounded by government policies in areas such as curriculum organization that effectively carried forward the previous organizing schema for higher education, particularly in Tajikistan.

As such, the findings both of the larger study and the elements discussed in this paper are significant in that they do not fully confirm the common proposition in the new institutional literature that major transformations only occur in times of external upheaval (Gornitzka & Maassen, 2014), but neither is there clear support for arguments that the extent of major institutional change inhibited organizational change (Newman, 2000). This discovery of variation is an important theoretical finding that serves to highlight the importance of comparative work. It is an important contribution to comparative higher education studies and to filling the gap in theory-driven explanations of system and organizational responses to major change. The discovery is also significant because of what these divergences tell us about pre- and post-1991 schemas for higher education, about the similarities and differences between

the three cases, and about the perceived value and purpose of higher education in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. Transformation, adaptation, and resistance were not mutually exclusive as responses to major institutional change. As the example of course offerings showed, while there have been changes to the curriculum content, the basic organization of the curriculum in the group of 77 Soviet-era HEIs remained largely the same by the end of the study period. Thus, in attempting to better understand *what* it takes for higher education to survive a crisis, it is also important to ask *why* these differential and sometimes overlapping responses were identified.

As has been alluded to through the three cases, accounting for specific contexts (temporal, political, geographic, and so on) is essential to this process. Despite a shared recent history, and despite inheriting a very powerful schema for higher education, these commonalities did not explain the ways in which higher education across the three countries developed differently during the study period. Even though communism had been politically and economically delegitimized with the collapse of the Soviet Union, remnants of the previous system remain visible in higher education, particularly in Tajikistan. Furthermore, no new or distinct ideology emerged to replace communism, as a result of which it became possible for several different templates for organizing higher education to develop in the aftermath of 1991. One template rests heavily on a return to the pre-1991 equilibrium, as seen in Tajikistan; another – evident in Kyrgyzstan – is a blend of Soviet and non-Soviet structures and norms; and a third – the Kazakh model – draws quite heavily from outside systems in an effort to create a different type of higher education.

As indicated at the start of this paper, instances of crisis, or major institutional change, are relatively rare, and as such they are perhaps less well understood than the study of organizational change and continuity in more typical stable or incrementally changing environments. This remains an under-explored area that would benefit from additional research. One logical extension through which to continue to study higher education's responses to crisis would be to apply the concepts from this study to other parts of the former Soviet space. As Kotkin and Beissinger (2014) have suggested, 'one would expect the magnitude of the rupture [in this case, the fall of the Soviet Union]... to vary considerably across geographic, policy, and behavioural spheres and to exercise an independent effect on the degree to which old regime practices and beliefs might endure' (p. 10). Extending the countries researched would also help clarify the extent to which the themes arising in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are in keeping with the types of responses seen in other former Soviet republics. Beyond the Soviet collapse, another important historical case of rupture occurring at a similar time and that could also move forward theorizing is the end of apartheid in South Africa in 1994. There is also ample scope to refine the definition of major institutional change, for example by considering the impact of more recent conflicts. This could provide frameworks for understanding higher education's responses to other types of wide-ranging crises such as climate change, institutional racism, and pandemics that bear 'avalanche' characteristics, but which build up and play out over a longer period of time.

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