



Four Rationales of HE Internationalization: Perspectives of U.K. 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 individualization, growing influence of nonstate actors, and the new reality of Brexit, this study uses narrative and numeric data to explore the rationales of U.K. higher education (HE) internationalization, specifically motives of attracting students from Eastern Europe, Russia, Caucasus, and Central Asia to the United Kingdom. Among four main rationales of international student recruitment, economic rationale emerged as the most decisive. Interviewed international/admissions officers viewed student mobility from this region as an expression of socioeconomic transformation in sending countries as well as political and strategic priorities in the United Kingdom. They referred to the economic situation in the region, the development of the HE sector within the source countries, the U.K. 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 United Kingdom.

Keywords

student mobility, internationalization of higher education, strategic institutional management of internationalization, post-Soviet countries, the United Kingdom

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Introduction

Higher education institutions (HEIs) across the world are increasingly defined by internationalization. As varied and expansive phenomenon, higher education (HE) internationalization may be driven by four categories of rationales: political, economic, academic, and sociocultural (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 labor 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 individualization, growing influence of nonstate actors, and the new reality of Brexit, this study uses narrative and numeric data to explore the rationales of HE internationalization in the United Kingdom, with a focus on the logic of attracting students from former Soviet countries. The United Kingdom is currently the second most popular EU destination for students from Russia, Eastern Europe, Caucasus, and Central Asia, following Germany (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2014). About 4% of the U.K.-based international students came from former Soviet countries (Higher Education Statistics Agency [HESA], 2014, 2015). While there has been an almost 20-fold increase in the number of degree-mobile students from former Soviet countries to the United Kingdom in the last 20 years, there is a considerable variation in the numbers of students enrolling at U.K. HEIs by sending country. Currently, the largest sending countries are Lithuania, Russia, Latvia, Kazakhstan, Estonia, Ukraine, and Azerbaijan (Appendix A). The interest of students from former Soviet countries in studying in the United Kingdom may be linked with the high reputation of the U.K. HE sector/selected institutions, English as the medium of instruction, diaspora links, the appeal of living in the United Kingdom, employment opportunities and earning potential after graduation, personal safety, knowledge, and awareness of the host country (Chankseliani & Hessel, 2016; Dowe, Vasylyuk, & Lotten, 2015; International Unit, 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 constraints 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 U.K. HE sector to address the following research question:

How do U.K. universities explain their own and make sense of the U.K. government rationales of HE internationalization 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 United Kingdom?

Methodological Approach

This article draws on semistructured interviews with a maximum variation systematic sample of U.K. HEIs and the HESA statistics. The data purchased from HESA (2014) for the purposes of this study contain the statistics on degree-mobile students from 15 former Soviet countries to U.K. HEIs since 1995. The HESA data were used to establish some general trends and to select the maximum variation systematic sample of interview participants.

Interviewing was used to explore the views of international/admissions officers working in U.K. HEIs on student mobility from former Soviet countries, as well as to understand how they make sense of the U.K. 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 U.K. HEIs (Table 1). To select HEIs that have different size of the student body from former Soviet countries, all U.K. HEIs were ranked by the total number of students from former Soviet countries enrolled in 2013-2014. HEIs were divided into three groups: 20 HEIs that enrolled more than 500 students (Group I), 37 HEIs that enrolled 100 to 200 students (Group II), and 94 HEIs that enrolled 1 to 100 students from former Soviet countries (Group III). Every second HEI was selected from Group I (overall 10), every third HEI was selected from Group II (overall 12), and every fourth 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).

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 post-graduate admissions.

Two out of the 14 HEIs were located in Wales, two in Scotland, and 10 in England. Two of the 10 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 United Kingdom which are considered the finest institutions in the country for their research, teaching, and learning experiences. Six 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 United Kingdom; 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).

Table 1. The Sample of the U.K. HEIs by Number of Student Enrollments in 2013-2014.

Numeric identifier of the HEI	N of enrolled students from the countries of interest	Nation	Russell group
Group I			
1	510	Scotland	No
2	442	Scotland	Yes
3	371	England (London)	No
4	273	England	Yes
5	258	England (London)	Yes
6	201	England	Yes
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	53	Wales	No
14	9	England	No

Note. HEI = Higher education institutions.

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 toward 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 internationalization for U.K. 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.

Economic

All interviewees demonstrated a strong awareness of the marketization of the U.K. 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 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 U.K. 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 U.K. 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 United Kingdom is the GDP per capita of

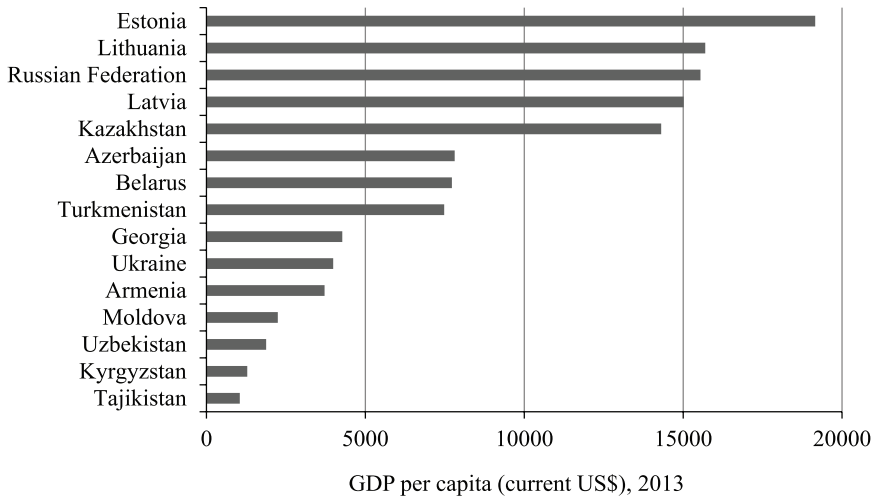


Figure 1. Former Soviet countries by GDP per capita (current US\$), 2013.

Source: World Bank (2013).

the sending country. As seen on Figure 1, countries with higher GDP per capita are among the larger senders (Appendix A).

When compared with two largest European hosts of students from former Soviet countries - Germany and France -the U.K. 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 U.K. HEIs interviewed recognized 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 A). Furthermore, the increase in the number of students from Azerbaijan (Appendix A) followed the 2007 introduction of the State Program on

Education of Azerbaijani Youth Abroad for the Years of 2007-2015. 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 U.K. government's Chevening Scholarships are all postgraduate funding sources. There are very few funding sources in the United Kingdom 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 United Kingdom (HESA, 2014) that costs only in tuition between £12,719 and £24,190 per year.² Therefore, as explained by an interviewee from a Russell Group HEI, "At the undergraduate level for all of these countries they will be socioeconomic elite; for post-graduates 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, U.K. HEIs rationale of targeting these countries has a strong economic rationale.

The Baltic States—Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia—are also among the top seven largest senders to the United Kingdom. The popularity of the United Kingdom in these countries is due to the reputation of the U.K. HE sector as well as the fee status that these EU member states can enjoy, unlike all other former Soviet countries. U.K. 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 U.K. HEIs: contributing to the nonacademic aspects of university life; increasing diversity on campus, thereby improving the preparation of all students for life and work in a globalized 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 recognized as very keen on 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 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 United Kingdom 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 be 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 globalized 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 United Kingdom “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 mono-cultural” 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 benefited 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 organization 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 organizations in the city. (9)

Thus, the social and cultural rationales highlighted the importance of internationalization 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 U.K. 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 recognized at the biggest market for the U.K. 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 and 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 nonnative 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 internationalization (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 internationalization 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 recognized that students who come to the United Kingdom to study develop an affinity with the United Kingdom; they are the “best ambassadors” (9) for the United Kingdom, “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 U.K. 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 U.K. 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 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 U.K. 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; among them, the British Council undertakes intelligence work on student mobility for the U.K. HE sector. Many interviewees, in particular, non-Russell Group HEIs, recognized 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 summarizing question on how U.K. 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 U.K. economy, “to the local . . . taxi drivers, to Sainsbury’s, Aldi, all the shopping centers—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 U.K. visa regulations.

The U.K. 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, “the major obstacle,” “instantly a barrier,” “too complicated,” “very negative,” “very subjective and very off-putting to the students,” “stringent,” and “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 U.K. 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.

U.K. visa regulations for international students have not affected the former Soviet countries that are part of the EU—Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia—where the United Kingdom 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 B). 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 among both stakeholder groups. Although the academic and sociocultural rationales of international student recruitment among U.K. 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 United Kingdom. They referred to the economic situation in former Soviet countries, the development of the HE sector within the source countries, the U.K. 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 United Kingdom.

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 July 14, 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 U.K. 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 2-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 United Kingdom as potential labor 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 U.K.'s innovation capacity/economic competitiveness.

Will Brexit have any influence on the rationales of HE internationalization in the United Kingdom where the economic rationale seems to be the driving force of HE internationalization? 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 United Kingdom from Europe and a decrease in the number of EU students studying in this country. When the United Kingdom leaves the EU, EU students will most likely not be eligible for undergraduate loans in the United Kingdom to cover their tuition fees. At the same time, the Prime Minister (2017) decaled in her “Global Britain speech” that the United Kingdom “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.” 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 U.K. 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 favor 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 internationalization 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 as the competition for international students was getting increasingly fierce.

Appendix A

Numbers of Mobile Students From Former Soviet Countries Enrolled at U.K. HEIs, 1995-1996 to 2013-2014.

Country of origin	1995/1996	1996/1997	1997/1998	1998/1999	1999/2000	2000/2001	2001/2002	2002/2003	2003/2004	2004/2005	2005/2006	2006/2007	2007/2008	2008/2009	2009/2010	2010/2011	2011/2012	2012/2013	2013/2014
Lithuania	37	51	59	61	73	83	108	113	142	310	857	1,384	1,905	2,341	2,842	3,808	4,838	4,962	4,807
Russia	420	536	709	800	1,002	1,237	1,416	1,562	1,695	1,769	1,897	2,223	2,446	2,696	2,930	2,983	3,268	3,359	3,676
Latvia	46	50	58	66	80	98	120	134	167	229	485	821	1,102	1,334	1,601	1,979	2,201	2,061	1,814
Kazakhstan	51	63	73	105	131	132	174	231	250	292	373	806	1,068	1,443	1,909	1,999	1,847	1,623	1,486
Estonia	39	43	53	58	60	73	97	95	83	160	330	465	640	799	926	1,037	1,206	1,140	1,149
Ukraine	87	153	174	219	274	304	355	424	421	440	416	419	451	480	571	612	763	852	975
Azerbaijan	11	14	28	35	45	47	58	68	74	73	105	144	161	198	274	390	542	608	748
Georgia	25	37	36	45	45	46	50	61	65	69	100	119	149	150	234	242	229	209	203
Belarus	10	27	27	48	79	55	59	72	80	92	94	124	135	139	142	147	161	185	162
Armenia	10	14	22	24	34	26	34	37	29	32	45	65	51	63	70	86	90	131	137
Uzbekistan	20	23	67	116	186	179	135	142	121	134	110	100	108	138	158	132	112	96	130
Moldova	5	7	17	21	21	21	46	53	61	57	62	76	70	81	103	106	106	86	92
Kyrgyzstan	4	3	10	14	20	25	24	35	61	61	64	76	63	79	61	63	55	66	78
Turkmenistan	1	1	4	7	8	12	15	13	23	19	26	36	40	42	51	56	56	60	76
Tajikistan	1	3	5	12	10	11	15	25	32	32	40	45	47	55	51	38	35	29	22
	767	1,025	1,342	1,631	2,068	2,357	2,698	3,065	3,304	3,769	5,004	6,903	8,436	10,038	11,923	13,678	15,509	15,467	15,555

Note. HEI = Higher education institutions.

Source. Own calculations based on Higher Education Statistics Agency (2014) data.

Appendix B

Most Popular Destinations for Mobile Students From Former Soviet Countries.

Country of origin	Outbound mobility ratio	Destination country I	Destination country II	Destination country III	Destination country IV	Destination country V	Destination country VI	Destination country VII	Destination country VIII
Moldova	14.2	Romania (7,432)	Russia (4,902)	Italy (2,001)	Ukraine (1,703)	France (825)	Germany (597)	Bulgaria (466)	The United States (363)
Azerbaijan	9.1	Russia (10,530)	Ukraine (7,599)	Turkey (6,989)	Georgia (860)	The United Kingdom (638)	Germany (580)	The United States (371)	Belarus (293)
Georgia	8.8	Kazakhstan (6,639)	Canada (2,655)	Germany (1,852)	Ukraine (1,517)	Armenia (1,256)	Russia (1,143)	Australia (580)	The United States (436)
Uzbekistan	8.4	Russia (10,211)	Kazakhstan (5,588)	Ukraine (2,072)	Kyrgyzstan (1,219)	Germany (789)	The United States (426)	Korea (411)	Malaysia (379)
Lithuania	7.5	The United Kingdom (5,041)	Denmark (1,716)	Poland (950)	Germany (865)	Netherlands (496)	Russia (457)	The United States (272)	France (260)
Latvia	6.7	The United Kingdom (2,084)	Denmark (823)	Germany (672)	Russia (658)	Netherlands (398)	The United States (282)	France (168)	Finland (125)
Belarus	6.4	Russia (26,434)	Poland (3,413)	Lithuania (1,894)	Germany (1,173)	Czech Republic (577)	Italy (502)	Ukraine (461)	France (351)
Estonia	6.4	The United Kingdom (1,152)	Finland (538)	Germany (489)	Denmark (450)	Russia (388)	The United States (209)	Netherlands (138)	Sweden (133)
Kazakhstan	6.3	Russia (35,106)	Kyrgyzstan (4,357)	The United States (1,884)	The United Kingdom (1,725)	Czech Republic (1,174)	Malaysia (1,089)	Germany (695)	Poland (401)
Armenia	5.6	Russia (3,602)	France (824)	Ukraine (604)	Germany (418)	The United States (330)	Greece (214)	The United Kingdom (145)	Italy (119)
Tajikistan	5.0	Russia (6,458)	Kyrgyzstan (885)	Kazakhstan (476)	Ukraine (422)	Saudi Arabia (385)	Turkey (364)	The United States (299)	Egypt (215)
Kyrgyzstan	2.1	Russia (3,215)	Kazakhstan (963)	Germany (494)	Saudi Arabia (361)	The United States (250)	Tajikistan (162)	Egypt (109)	France (89)
Ukraine	1.8	Russia (9,586)	Poland (9,485)	Germany (5,444)	Italy (1,903)	Czech Republic (1,876)	The United States (1,426)	Hungary (1,269)	France (1,128)
Russia	0.7	Germany (9,480)	The United States (4,688)	France (3,643)	The United Kingdom (3,604)	Czech Republic (3,455)	Ukraine (2,930)	Finland (2,206)	Belarus (2,128)
Turkmenistan	No data	Ukraine (14,053)	Russia (10,128)	Belarus (8,153)	Turkey (5,887)	Kazakhstan (1,090)	Kyrgyzstan (369)	Azerbaijan (177)	The United States (170)

Source: Own calculations based on United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (2014) data.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank the interviewees for the time they have taken to participate in this study. The author thanks Dr Gianna Hessel for her support in the data collection process.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This study was supported by the University of Oxford Department of Education grant number EP000051307.

Notes

1. Following the changes new Prime Minister Theresa May introduced on July 14, 2016, universities are moving from the Department for *Business, Innovation & Skills* (BIS) to the Department for Education (DfE).
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.

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