



## RESEARCH

# Going Beyond the Local: Exploring the Role of Transnational Higher Education in Shaping Students' Life Trajectories in Uzbekistan

Andre Celeti, Rano Nurmanova and Nora Gavalyan

Westminster International University in Tashkent, UZ

Corresponding author: Andre Celeti ([aceleti@wiut.uz](mailto:aceleti@wiut.uz))

---

To enhance access and improve the quality of Higher Education in Uzbekistan, seven international campuses have been established since 1998, with two additional ones during 2018. These are part of a more recent trend in the internationalization of higher education: Transnational Higher Education (TNE). Though the growing literature on TNE has investigated an array of issues, very few studies have focused on students' perception and experience, its socio-cultural value and impact and its long-term implications for employment and individual life courses. To address this gap, the following study explores the way in which TNE influences Uzbek students' life courses by shaping their individual life projects. In-depth qualitative interviews were conducted with 21 final year students from four different degree courses taken at a British institute. Findings reveal that most students' life projects were internationally oriented and set in contraposition to their perception of local-traditional parameters for life projects. This juxtaposition was accompanied by respondents' representation of themselves as those suitable for international spheres of action compared to 'others' that fit local/traditional ones. However, many of their plans were perceived to be threatened by the same local traditions which they sought to overcome. These findings can be interpreted as tensions resulting from modernizing forces which shift the locus of life projects away from the local-traditional to the global-modern and by the way life projects are coloured by respondents' positioning (in Bourdieu's sense) shaping their representations of self and others.

---

**Keywords:** Transnational Higher Education; internationalization; modernity; life course; Uzbekistan

---

## Background

Since the demise of the Soviet Union, the Higher Education system of Uzbekistan has faced the challenging demands of a transition economy and the greater need of access for a growing population with an improved per capita income (Majidov et al., 2010; Ruziev and Rustamov, 2016; World Bank, 2014). While the number of Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) and of students attending them has grown, this expansion has not been able to match demographic

changes (Ruziev and Rustamov, 2016). The gross enrollment rate for 2017 was at 9.093% compared to, Kazakhstan's 46.26%, Kyrgyzstan's 46.9%, Tajikistan's 28.89%, and middle-income countries' average of 33.27% (UNESCO Institute of Statistics, 2018). Up until 2016 there were 78 Higher Education institutes in the country, which included: Generic Universities, Specialized Universities, Academies, Institutes and branches of foreign Universities. The Generic Universities (11 in total) offer education in a broad range of fields and specializations, the Specialized Universities (10) offer a narrower set of fields and specializations, while Academies (2) offer even more specific programs according to specific fields of knowledge, and Institutes (35) offer specialized courses for professional training within a limited area of knowledge. The number of available vacancies per subject area for these institutes is determined yearly by government decrees, while students may apply to only one public university per year, undergoing a national entry test. This limited offer of seats and possibility for choice, coupled with high demands, increases the competition for access and creates high stakes examinations for potential students.

Moreover, keeping pace with the rapidly changing market conditions and providing skills that are relevant for the shifting labour market has been a challenge (World Bank, 2014) as has the need to address issues regarding quality of teaching, learning and research (Brunner and Tillet, 2007). Some important reforms needed in this direction have been: structural changes to free the system from specific sectors, introduction of new subject disciplines and curriculum, modernizing teaching and management, improving faculty salaries and strengthening professional licensing bodies (Heyneman 2010, Ruziev and Rustamov 2016). While many reforms have already been implemented, in many cases, they have been, according to Silova (2011), more of an attempt to improve inherited Soviet practices and traditions instead of completely overhauling the system. However, intensive reform processes are underway through the government's *Comprehensive Development Programme of the Higher Education System for 2017–2021* in order to tackle these issues and bolster the quality of Higher Education.

A growing and important component of these reforms is internationalization. The Higher Educational Strategic plan for 2017–2021 envisions various forms of international cooperation through academic mobility programs, student exchange programs and double degree programs (Presidential Decree N# PP2909, 20/04/2017). While some of these forms of international cooperation are already present, one that has been growing is the establishment of International Universities as public-private partnerships. Seven such institutions were established between 1998 and 2014. These included three Russian, one Italian, one Korean, one British and one Singaporean University. As of 2018, the government of Uzbekistan has allowed more International Universities to establish campuses or offer academic programs in the country (Resolution of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2018, r.10) with one American university beginning to offer MA courses in partnership with a local university and one Korean university opening a new campus.

These institutes are part of a more recent and growing trend within the internationalization of Higher Education: Trans-National Education (TNE). This is understood as the cross-border movement of education providers or academic programs – from a foreign 'sender' country to a 'host' country – accomplished either collaboratively or independently, and organized through various arrangements (joint degree programs, co-founded universities, branch campuses, franchise universities etc.) (Knight, 2016). This phenomenon has stemmed from demands on universities to increase/diversify sources of revenues and to raise their own global prestige coupled with host countries' needs to increase access to HE, cost-effectively boost the quality of HE systems, provide Western-based education, and develop expertise (Francois, 2016; Larsen, 2016; Rumbley and Altbach, 2016). The expansion of TNEs is further

underpinned by the transformation of Higher Education into a marketable global commodity serving a global middle class for a global knowledge economy/society (Francois, 2016; Rumbley and Altbach, 2016). As a result, TNE often provides something novel compared to what exists within local HE systems in terms of teaching and learning approaches, educational experiences and academic programs, and is often perceived as being of greater quality (Lane 2011).

Though TNE is present and growing in Uzbekistan, very little knowledge is available on its impact, particularly on students' lives. Students' rationales for entering these universities, educational experiences and future expectations are unknown; likewise the implications for their professional future, social biography and identity. The limited knowledge on these issues reflects a general gap in research, as very few studies have focused on students' perception and experience of TNE, how it is contextually valued, its broader social and cultural impact (McNamara and Knight, 2014; Leung and Waters, 2013; Waters and Leung, 2012, 2013, 2014; Wilkins and Balakrishnan, 2013; Wilkins et al., 2012), and the long term implications for employment and individual life courses (Hoare 2011; Kosmutzky and Putty, 2016).

Some of these studies have highlighted the new opportunities TNE provides, the aspirations of students who chose these institutions and possible outcomes for their futures. The impact study undertaken by DAAD and the British Council (McNamara and Knight, 2014) across 10 countries suggests that students enter into TNE institutions primarily for their career enhancement, based on the perceived prestige of universities and the status afforded by an international/multicultural experience. In a similar vein Moufahim and Lim (2015) argued that TNE is believed to be a gatekeeper for careers, global mobility and status. In a more nuanced study, Chapman and Pyvis (2006, 2007) argued that students seek to construct their identities either by emphasizing career enhancement (positional investment) or becoming an international person (transformative investment). Sidhu and Christie (2014) also highlighted how students perceived TNE as an enabler for new identities through better chances for employment and access to additional transnational opportunities.

However, studies have also hinted at the interrelated way in which government policy, the purpose and arrangement of TNE delivery and the broader socio-cultural context, shape access to these new educational routes and qualify their potential impact. Sidhu and Christie (2014) and Sin et al. (2019), have highlighted how ethno-national policies favoring ethnic Malays in local HE institutions and government jobs have created non-ethnic Malay demand for TNE. Students however perceived these institutions as having less value than local HE; however, these perceptions also fluctuated according to different arrangements (branch campuses, franchise, top-up etc.) (Sin et al., 2019). Similarly, Fang and Wang (2014) found that, due to its lower social status, Chinese students perceived TNE rather as an opportunity to access a local partnering university or a gateway to transfer abroad. Waters and Leung (2012, 2013, 2014) have suggested that the Hong Kong government aimed to provide students from lower socio-economic backgrounds the opportunity to acquire degrees and improve career prospects through TNE (in the form of top-up degrees) without having to increase access to prestigious national universities. These new opportunities had a limited impact on graduates' lives given their inability to develop social and institutional capital at the TNEs, employers' perception of their degrees and general labour market conditions. This has led Waters and Leung (2017) to suggest that TNE in Hong Kong became hierarchically integrated into the local HE system and socio-cultural context and did not translate into a gateway for international opportunities.

On a more positive note, Hoare (2012) noted that a TNE bachelor program for mature students in Singapore, enabled them to find new jobs, get promotions, experience 'transformative' learning and to increase their credibility and confidence as professionals.

However, they still faced prejudice regarding the quality of their degree. Arunasalm (2016) likewise noted that top-up degrees for working nurses at British and Australian universities in collaboration with Malaysian Public Universities, led to changes in self-perception and increased status and agency. Nevertheless, these were also constricted by cultural perceptions of the nursing profession and cultural rules of practice.

While TNE appears to increase access for individuals and provide opportunities for them to enhance their careers and transform their identities, the broader impact of TNE depends on how it is contextually established and perceived. As Sin et al. (2019), note, the value TNE may have for students is intricately tied to its social recognition and acceptance; this in turn varies according to arrangements of delivery within various contexts, a point which likely holds true for Uzbekistan. Finally, how TNE institutions enable the transformation of identities is not yet clear from the literature.

## **Conceptual Framework and Methodology**

### ***Assumptions and Conceptual Framework***

Building on these considerations, this article addresses the lack of knowledge of TNE's impact on students' lives in Uzbekistan by exploring how TNE can influence students' future trajectories by shaping their life projects. This line of questioning is based on assumptions of the life-course approach: individual lives take on patterned trajectories through structured transitions – accessing Higher Education or entering the labour market – and agents' future projections based on their aspirations and perception of possibilities (Evans, 2009). These are in turn, rooted in agents' detailed understanding of their social position and what they can achieve (Shanahan and Macmillan, 2008). In fact, TNE can be understood as a structural opportunity which influences individual students' life trajectories in a similar manner while also shaping their dispositions, understanding of social reality, and perception of possible futures. Through this approach, issues identified by the literature regarding students' aspirations, the contextual structuring of TNE and its perceived value are taken account of. Moreover, in the context of Uzbekistan, this structuring role of TNE and its shaping of agency can be further explored through Anthony Giddens' (1991, 1994) and Ulrich Beck's (1992) understanding of modernity, and Bourdieu's (1991) analysis of the representation of self and others. By shedding light on how modernity and an individual's social positioning influence social identities, aspirations and plans, these concepts provide a better understanding of how TNE influences life projects of Uzbek students.

A fundamental characteristic of Giddens' (1991, 1994) and Beck's (1992) understanding of modernity is their emphasis on how institutions have the power to shift an individual's framework for action away from tradition and place him at the centre of constructing his own social identity. It is this conceptualization of the transformative force of modern global institutions that is particularly relevant to this study. In fact, the displacement of individuals from one frame of action to the other occurs as modern institutions – particularly the labour market (Beck, 1992) – spread across the globe and permeate all spheres of individuals' lives. Through this permeation, agents are left with little or no choice but to engage with these institutions, which at the same time weaken their traditional networks of support (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1994). Moreover, the future orientation of these institutions and their reflexive organization – the constant observation of practices and their ensuing transformation in light of these observations – percolates down to the individual. Facing a great array of opportunities, risks and constant changes, individuals must be reflexive and forward-looking to choose the lifestyle they wish to have and continuously (re)plan their lives (Giddens, 1991). This constant need for life-planning further weakens the role of tradition as an organizing force and establishes the individual as responsible for organizing his life. Through this displacement,

individuals become, as Beck (1992) notes, the producers of their own biography, instead of having these socially prescribed.

Beck (1992) further suggests that a particularly important moment for an individual to become the author of his own social biography is extended education. In fact, extended education requires individuals to plan an educational life trajectory and trace out future labour opportunities while they develop key dispositions for life planning: self-reflection and the use of reflexive knowledge. At the same time, extended education reinforces the process of displacing tradition since universalistic forms of knowledge and language challenge traditional dispositions, ways of thinking and lifestyles (Beck, 1992). As a result, agents become increasingly 'individualized', placed as the authors of their biography, and forced to choose their future pathways.

Both scholars assumed these processes had taken place and characterized their Western contexts, which were relatively wealthy, with strong social welfare (Beck, 1992) and as highly individualistic (Hofstede, 1984). At the same time, it appears implicit in their understanding of modernity as intimately linked to globalization that similar transformations would take place across the globe. Institutions such as the global labour market and extended education, particularly Western-based education, would have the potential to transform individuals into authors of their own biography in differing contexts. However, in the context of Uzbekistan, these institutions interact with a more collectivistic society (Hofstede, 1984), where extended family networks are highly valued and traditions are considered central to one's identity. This entails that while TNE might be a social force that encourages individuals to become the authors of their own biography, contextual social forces probably push in the direction of 'prescribed' roles.

Moreover, though modernity sets agents at the centre of establishing life-plans, these are highly conditioned by their social positioning, which according to Bourdieu (1991) determines not only their dispositions and habits, but also their representations of self, others, and the social world they wish to (re)create. Bourdieu argues that, based on the distribution of various forms of capital (economic, social, cultural) within various fields, agents are positioned in relation to one another, either in closer proximity or at a distance. Agents positioned in close proximity to one another are under similar conditions (distribution of capital) which shape their dispositions, practices and representations in a similar manner. Having affinities in tastes, preferences, choices, etc., these are more likely to group together and to further reinforce these similarities. By understanding their own conditions and similarity/differences to others, agents comprehend at a practical level their position in the social world and what they can potentially achieve. In turn, their representation of the social world aims to create a world where they either maintain their position or try to modify it. According to Bourdieu (1991), while agents at a micro level do not have power to impose these views of the social world on others, they attempt to do so by the way they represent themselves and others – the relative positions each should inhabit.

The relevance of these concepts for our study can therefore be surmised along these lines: TNE is a form of extended education which may, in the context of Uzbekistan, encourage students' individualization, or to become the sole authors' of their own social biography. This however is bound to create tensions with opposing social forces. At the same time, access to TNE entails the possession of certain forms of capital, while providing access to others. Moreover, students at a TNE will have life projects that are shaped by what they believe is achievable given their social position – which includes the cultural capital they acquire through university. These life projects also entail a representation that students will have of themselves, of 'others' and of which opportunities both groups are legitimated to have within the social world.

## Methodology

Given the lack of knowledge on TNE in Uzbekistan, the researchers have opted for an exploratory and generic inductive (Creswell, 2009) strategy to investigate how TNE might shape students' life trajectories. The researchers investigated how students interpreted their entrance and studies at an International University in Tashkent, and how they projected their future based on this experience. The team conducted lightly structured qualitative interviews (Wengraf 2001) with 21 final year students of the second TNE university established in Uzbekistan. Existing since 2002 as a partnership between a British university and the Uzbek government, this university is seen as one of the most prestigious in the country. Currently about three thousand undergraduate students are enrolled in Business Administration, Economics, Business Information Systems and Commercial Law courses. The university was chosen for this study as it has had an extensive presence in the country producing many cohorts of graduates, has a strong academic reputation, is seen as one of the most prestigious universities in the country and provides a fully Western-based curriculum in English. Following a maximum variation sampling logic, which aims for the greatest breadth of views (Patton, 2002), respondents were selected based on course of study, gender, geographical background and ethnicity. The team assumed that these were key demographic features of students most likely to generate the broadest spectrum of views.

Final year students, some of whom were former students of the researchers were contacted and given information regarding the purpose of the study. These students also contacted peers who fit the sampling criteria, informing them of the study and asking if they were also willing to participate. Only those students who gave their consent to participate in the study were invited for the interviews. Prior to the interview, interviewees were informed about the confidentiality of the collected data, their right to withdraw from the study if they wished to and their right not to answer any question they felt uncomfortable about. Of the 21 respondents, there were 10 females and 11 males; 13 originally from Tashkent city and 8 from the regions; 9 Business Administration, 5 Business Information Systems, 4 Commercial Law, and 3 Economics students. The majority self-identified as Uzbeks (17) and a minority (4) as Russians, while other ethnicities were harder to identify or were unwilling to participate. Finally, though not part of the sampling criteria, most, if not all respondents, came from what could be considered the middle-class.<sup>1</sup> The majority of parents were either entrepreneurs working in banks or in companies, doctors or university teachers. Of the 21, seven respondents had mothers who were housewives.

All three researchers collected the data, during the fall of 2017, and analyzed it independently. Nvivo was used primarily for coding and data management, while a cross sectional analysis was undertaken by using a common system of conceptual categorization across the data. This permitted the generation of common themes and possible typologies from the whole data set. The team discussed the findings that emerged to check for common interpretations and subsequently analyzed them through the analytical framework discussed above.

## Findings

Respondents were asked to reflect primarily on their life trajectory in terms of how they came to study at the TNE and where they believed this would take them. With regards to the latter, they were asked to not only consider their ideal life projects, but also their least desired future and what they could consider a realistically achievable future. They were also invited

---

<sup>1</sup> The 2012 fees of 1,845 USD for students from public institutions were considered by the World Bank (2014) as likely to favour access to those better-off financially. The average tuition fees for the International Universities were at least twice as much.



to explore broader constraints, as well as TNE's role in enabling or limiting the enactment of these life projects. The findings for both are summarized below.

### **Why TNE?**

Many respondents enrolled in the university due to its prestige, the language of instruction and the belief that it would boost their own 'reputation' providing them with access to more prestigious and internationally oriented employment or educational opportunities abroad. However, of particular importance for the majority, was the perception that it provided a 'novel' or 'different' experience compared to other local institutes. This was based on the information they received from teachers, parents and acquaintances who attended these institutes. The latter group were important not only because they provided specific information regarding the universities but because they were seen to exemplify the differences between both types of options.

More specifically, at least half of the respondents were influenced by discourses regarding the relative simplicity of admittance compared to local institutes, as noted by the respondent below. This included the belief that less time is needed to prepare for entrance exams – which included only maths and English; the need to achieve only the minimum score for acceptance; and the transparency of the process. Entering the TNE institute seemed to depend solely on an individual's efforts and was accessible to all. On the other hand, securing access to local universities was believed to be (and experienced by some as so) extremely difficult. This was due to the greater amount of content that needed to be studied for extremely competitive admittance standards (given the limited seats) and scholarships. Moreover, the process had been perceived by some respondents as being less transparent than at the TNE:

Saida<sup>2</sup> (Tashkent) – 'I had a lot of friends who suggested I enter here, because there is a lot of possibility to enter. In our state university it is very hard, very difficult to enter. But here any student can have an opportunity to study'.

Secondly, most respondents were also drawn to the TNE primarily by the novelty (regarding what they heard and observed) either in terms of learner autonomy, individual freedom or the mentality students appeared to demonstrate. The need to undertake only modules relevant to their degrees and electives they could choose from, coupled to the role of autonomous learning, were seen by many as something quite different to their previous educational experiences or to what they expected from local institutes, as highlighted by the quotes below. The social atmosphere, the greater freedom (not having to wear uniforms, for example) and the opportunity to manage their time were also seen as highly attractive.

Jamshid (Tashkent) – 'Self-study comes first in this university. You have to do some research in order to learn something ... in other universities – the local – they give all the information and just ask you to answer from the information which was given. I thought that if I study in local universities I cannot improve myself. So I chose this university.'

Aziz (Region) – 'When thinking of going to University, my cousin had applied for this university and he enrolled successfully. He explained how it was to study here, and I totally fell in love with everything, especially independent study. I have many

---

<sup>2</sup> All names are fictional.

cousins that study in different universities and everything is totally different there. What I mean is that there you are not independent. You have to study as the university requires.'

As transpires from the quotes above, local institutes were contrastingly perceived as being rigid, lacking freedom, and imposing an education with limited learning. Students who studied at local universities were also perceived, by some, as being less motivated, aspirational and open-minded. The last point also had a gendered slant regarding marriage. Though highlighted by only one respondent (an ethnic Uzbek one should note) when discussing access to the university, this was also flagged by many other female respondents at later stages in the interviews (also all ethnic Uzbeks):

Shaxnoza (Tashkent) – 'There (at the local universities) is an atmosphere of Uzbek people. I needed something higher than just Uzbek (mentality). In this kind of university girls, they study just for getting married, you know. But here girls, student girls they have a higher worldwide view. They don't block themselves with just 'I will get married, and I need a diploma just for getting married'. I cannot study with such kind of people whose only aim in life is to get married.'

Finally, it is worth mentioning that respondents' decisions were often negotiated within their families. Some parents supported respondents from the start, considering TNE as a good opportunity for their children to have an international education without having to send them abroad. However, some respondents noted that their parents were often reluctant and would have preferred if they had entered prestigious local universities. This was based on their parents' belief that local universities were a more secure route to employment in the public sector.

### ***Where to? Going beyond the local?***

When interpreting how students projected their lives and interpreted possible futures, we identified the following themes regarding the main advantages provided by the university: autonomy and independence as learners, the opportunity for and emphasis on self-development, the broadening of their outlook and the shaping of their ambitions. These points were often related and tied to students' social lives and relationships with peers. Fellow students were described as a source to learn from, an encouragement for further self-development and shapers of ambitions. They displayed 'higher' goals for their future, seemed to have a broader outlook on life, and appeared more open and flexible to change and accept new ideas compared to peers who studied elsewhere (local institutes). For many, these interactions shaped their own ambitions and plans: to 'aim bigger' than what would be expected elsewhere, as exemplified by the quote below.

Khasan (Region) – 'Because most of the things that made me dream of the things I am dreaming now, happened in this University. The people I have met, experiences they shared, and all those things wouldn't have happened without them. If I had been studying law at a local university I would have been limited to our local practice. I could have never dreamt of something like this that I am dreaming now ... (My friend) is still one of the guys I look to if I want to be better. I admit he is better than me in the way he does all things. He also made me think differently: to believe in myself; to dream big; to get big. Your environment is one of the core things that shape you, your future, your behaviour, how you shape yourself, and your character.'



In fact, respondents believed that if they had gone to local institutes not only would they have a less developed perspective on reality but would also settle for less ambitious opportunities. They would not aim for positions with greater responsibilities, freedom and access to the international, nor envision opening their own businesses (see first quote below). This would also entail, particularly for male respondents from the regions, their acquiescence to parents' wishes that they seek stable jobs instead of developing their own plans. Moreover, almost all female respondents suggested that if they had attended local institutes they would be satisfied with becoming a stay-at-home-wife instead of investing in their further development (see second quote below):

Jakhongir (Region) – 'I would work for someone else. I am sure I would not think of opening my own company in IT. My goals wouldn't be big but small: getting really good grades, getting a really good diploma and getting a really good job. I would work for someone else, buy a house and buy a car. That would be it, I think.'

Guzal (Region) – 'I would probably already be married, and maybe I would have a baby also ... The atmosphere there is, when we look to the local universities, the mind of level 5 and 6 level girls, they're only thinking about getting married. I have friends from other universities and they already got married. They have so many problems with studying. They already got rid of their dreams, they don't thinking about studying, they don't think about their careers. They're only thinking about the careers of their husbands. Their main issue is making their mother-in-law happy. That's the problem.'

Instead, most respondents, in the long run, wanted to either open their own business or work in international companies, while two of them aspired to work at the university itself (also perceived as international). Only three respondents wanted to move abroad indefinitely with no plans of returning and one desired to work for the government. In order to achieve these goals, most of them wanted to continue their education – at least half of them abroad, by either enrolling in an MA, a second bachelor degree or shorter specialization courses. A couple of respondents wanted to continue studies locally at the university, while one considered getting another degree at a local university. Overall, though, respondents' life plans could be categorized into three main typologies (though these often overlapped): the individual engaged in an international arena; the individual working in freedom; and the individual bringing changes and novelties to Uzbekistan. All of these were in turn linked to the broader theme of going beyond the 'local' or 'traditional' way of thinking and doing things.

Firstly, for many respondents, continued access to and engagement within an international environment was seen as paramount for their life projects. Most of them projected their future as employees within multinationals or opening businesses oriented towards international companies/clients. These were perceived as arenas where they would be enabled to travel abroad, experience cultural diversity and relate to 'international' individuals with 'higher' views of things. This was seen as an essential means to continuously promote their self-development and to expand their outlook beyond the 'local', as expressed below:

Bakhodir (Region) – 'There the atmosphere is international. The people speak English and Russian. You talk with many customers and cooperate with people from abroad. That is what I like ... We are like citizens of Uzbekistan and know how the tradition works here: the kind of mentality we have. To try the other, to not limit ourselves with one way, I want to change. It widens the horizon people have. In this way I want to work with international people, to see how they think. Get advice and learn how they think.'

Another important factor for respondents' life projects was the degree of freedom and opportunities for self-expression they desired to have. Those aspiring to open their own business believed that to work 'under' others entailed being controlled, giving up 'higher' ambitions and losing the opportunity of doing 'greater' things. Likewise, those planning careers in international companies highlighted the importance of not working 'under' others. Instead they believed they would be able to work in higher managerial positions or be part of an environment where they could interact with peers, be creative, solve problems and have the freedom to express themselves. These conditions were not seen as possible within 'local' employment opportunities and even in international companies for those wishing to start their own businesses. Respondents characterized these settings as being filled with boundaries and control, requiring simple obedience to authority and providing little room for self-expression, meaningful contribution, exploration of new ideas and the opportunity to grow – as can be seen from the quote below. At the same time, some of them – either explicitly or implicitly – hinted that students of local institutes were, in a sense, a better fit for these types of employment.

Shaxnoza (Tashkent) – 'I don't see myself in Uzbek organizations. You know, the structure in Uzbek organizations is a bit different – it fits more Uzbek mentality ... In Uzbek mentality, you know, there is high power distance: there is one authority and you should do everything he says. But in some international organizations you have a chance to speak for yourself, to give something new, to try yourself. But in a lot of Uzbek companies you do just as you are told to do, you cannot have new ideas, or bring new ideas ... But I personally need a place where I can show myself, bring something new for this company, not just typical routine work.'

Finally, in trying to move beyond the 'local', many respondents wishing to open their own businesses, and the sole respondent willing to work in a government post, were motivated by the desire to implement new ideas in order to further develop the country. They aimed to do so by gaining knowledge and experience abroad before returning to improve things locally. This aspiration was further strengthened by their previous experiences of living abroad, and by their knowledge of alumni who have already introduced innovative services in the country.

Sherzod (Tashkent) – 'Of course in the future I want some experience in the United States, like in Silicon Valley, and San Francisco. But I do not want to stay there. Only one or two years to do some research and improve my skills before coming back. Then I want to open my own IT company ... to do some interesting things in our Uzbekistan ... because in our country it has poor systems. In our country IT is not very popular, but now it is developing.'

Though respondents were highly aspirational and confident their life projects would pan out, they were also aware of many barriers they could potentially face. These included the relevance of the university to the local context, their knowledge being embedded in English and lack of linguistic competency in Russian and Uzbek, difficulties related to starting their own business, etc. However, the greatest barrier perceived and already experienced – by female respondents – was that of social/cultural norms and family expectations, particularly with regards to marriage. Male respondents were faced with parents' wishes such as finding stable employment near them, assisting in carrying the financial load of the family, or even taking over the family business. Moreover, a few male respondents also sensed an increased expectation to marry and provide additional help for domestic life. This would make their goals of gaining experience abroad or opening their own business untenable, at least in the in the

short run. A couple of respondents even confided that they had not yet fully disclosed their plans to their parents but would do so gradually as they enacted them.

However, beliefs and norms presented a much greater barrier for female respondents. Some of them had already experienced limitations while studying: they were not allowed by parents to work or study abroad, whether for a short summer program or a more extended period. This was primarily tied to the perception that single women living abroad may tarnish their reputation. More importantly, marriage was perceived as the greatest threat to their future aspirations. The possibility of pursuing their life plans was seen as contingent on (future) spouses and their families' beliefs regarding women in the workplace and role in the family. As one respondent noted, there is a risk of being 'stuck' in marriage where 'life is over': no working, studying, traveling and self-development. The problem, according to many, is the expectation that married women immediately have and raise children, and the unacceptability for traditional families of their daughters working with men, especially in international offices. This reality had already been experienced by a couple of already married respondents, who saw some of their aspirations dwindle. In most of these cases, some form of a consensus had been reached with the family – for example opening or running a family business.

In summary, the key themes that we discovered from the findings were: the perceived novelty of the TNE University compared to other local HE institutions, and the importance for students of autonomy, freedom, self-development and having high ambitions. These in turn appear to be mirrored in the three typologies (often overlapping) that emerged from future projects: having meaningful employment characterized by freedom, working in an international arena and bringing novelties and changes to Uzbekistan, particularly by opening one's own company. Moreover, two overarching themes also transpired from life projects: the tension to go beyond the local-traditional and the representation of 'others' as fit for the local-traditional.

## Discussion

Unlike other cases where TNE institutes were perceived as having lower social status (Waters and Leung, 2012, 2013, 2014; Fang and Weng, 2014) the university explored in this study is perceived as quite reputable and prestigious. More importantly, students' views support findings by Chapman and Pyvis (2006, 2007), Sidhu and Christie (2014), and Moufahim and Lim (2015) that TNE opportunities are perceived as a gateway to the global and that they shape students identity construction in terms of career choices and in becoming internationally oriented individuals. More specifically, TNE appears to influence their life trajectory through the way it shapes their life projects including their self-representation and the representation of the 'other'.

The way respondents of the study have come to project their lives can be interpreted as an attempt to produce their own social biography in light of their experiences at the TNE university. As pinpointed earlier, under conditions of modernity (Giddens, 1991; Beck, 1992; Beck et al., 1994), individuals become responsible for their social biographies instead of having these prescribed. Extended education is particularly important as it is the starting point for projecting one's life trajectory, challenges traditional dispositions, ways of thinking and lifestyles and provides knowledge and skills for reflexive life planning. Respondents in fact valued the autonomy and freedom which placed them at the centre of managing their studies and trajectory within the university. They appear to have planned their future in terms of the self-identity they wish to preserve/pursue: an individual who is internationally oriented, continuously develops themselves, is free from constrictions and contributes meaningfully. They also believed that 'local' or traditional patterns of thoughts and actions are contrary to this and to be avoided or overcome. Respondents placed themselves as the authors of their

own biographies, not wanting to organize these in (full) accordance to prescriptions or social expectations. This was particularly strong for female respondents and those who came from the provincial regions of the country, namely those who likely felt or experienced most the pressure of the 'traditional'. In fact, while TNE provided this impetus for shifting the frame of action from tradition to the individual students themselves, the broader socio-cultural context presented itself as a force in the opposing direction. Tradition and family expectations were perceived as strong enough to displace students from the centre of their life biography, even forcing some (females) to rework their biography in light of forced circumstances. Therefore, while TNE may contribute to placing individuals as the producers of their own social biography, a full displacement from tradition and traditional support networks seems unlikely once they transition out of studies. Instead, the tensions between these opposing forces appeared to be negotiated by individuals as they sought to balance their projects with broader socio-cultural demand.

At the same time most life plans had similar traits or patterns and appeared to be coloured by the representation students have of themselves and of students from other institutes. As highlighted earlier, students from the TNE perceived themselves as more ambitious, open minded and less bound by the 'local' or traditional. As a result, they also perceived themselves as those who will be internationally oriented, engaged in higher positions, experience greater freedom etc. Meanwhile, there was a sense in which the future they did not wish for themselves would be a fit for those who studied at local institutes. While this was made explicit by only a few respondents, most believed that if they had studied locally, their future would be characterized in much the same way as how they characterized students from local institutes. It is therefore likely that respondents are also attempting – whether consciously or not – to maintain or improve their positions by creating a vision of the social world based on differences of social position.

In accessing the university, we can suppose that respondents share similar conditions: the different forms of capital they have access to placing them in proximity to one another in terms of dispositions, practices and representations. These have likely been reinforced by the proximity, as respondents have highlighted, the importance of peers in terms of shaping and strengthening their choices, goals, ambitions and life plans. Moreover, as Bourdieu (1991) suggests, respondents understand their social position, what they are likely to achieve from this position, and where other agents are placed in relation to this position. While respondents cannot impose their view of the social world, they can represent themselves and others to correspond to this view. Hence the tendency to represent themselves as open, international, ambitious and suitable for types of opportunity that entail greater freedom, meaningful achievement, and access to the international while representing 'others' as closed, traditional, unambitious and suitable for local opportunities.

While TNE can become a gateway for internationally oriented opportunities, this is likely due – in part – to the way it shapes agents' life projects. In experiencing international education, respondents not only project their future as authors of their own social biography but do so in contrast to the local and traditional. The international is seen as the sphere of expression and fulfillment of the self and its projects. Moreover, the envisioned social biographies are coloured by similar self-representations and representations of the 'other' which have been developed in light of their experiences at the TNE.

## Conclusion

In exploring students' experience at a TNE institute in Tashkent and their future projects, this study has underlined the role such experiences have in influencing their life trajectories. It has highlighted that TNE, in providing a different route for students, shapes their life

projects. As authors of their own social biography, students have oriented themselves towards the 'international' or novel, against the local and traditional. This is also built upon a representation of the self and the 'other' which confirms the plausibility and desirability of their plans. To what extent these representations are true, if their life plans will succeed and if they will be able to pursue them, considering pressures from family or tradition, is another issue. What can be concluded is that TNE has enabled the development of a self-identity, a life project that considers itself different than the local/traditional. This however raises an important issue for TNE institutes to consider: the potential tensions graduates will face due to the life projects they develop because of their educational experience and the extent to which these are realizable due to the local context in which TNEs are established.

Though this study focused on only one TNE institute in Uzbekistan, other TNE institutes are also likely to shape their students' life projects to some degree or other. However, to what extent these will have similar patterns needs to be investigated. Moreover, students' perceptions and projections are likely to change over time as they graduate and enter the labour market or pursue further education. In fact, the need to continuously and reflexively re-work one's life plans is part and parcel of modernity, as defined earlier. Finally, parents' rationale for investing in TNE and their expectations for their children warrants more attention; particularly for females. Therefore, future research should further explore the field by looking at how other TNEs shape students' life projects, how TNE graduates have transitioned into the next phases of adult life (work, marriage etc.) and how parents and students negotiate life projects.

### Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

### References

- Arunasalam, Nirmala Devi. 2016. "Impact of UK and Australian Transnational Higher Education in Malaysia." *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 20(3): 242–259. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315315616680>
- Beck, Ulrich. 1992. *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*. London: Sage.
- Beck, Ulrich, et al. 1994. (ed.) *Reflexive Modernization: Politics, Tradition and Aesthetics in the Modern Social Order*, 56–109. Stanford University Press.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1991. *Language and Symbolic Power*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Brunner, J. Joaquin, and Anthony Tillett. 2007. "Higher Education in Central Asia: The Challenges of Modernization." Washington, DC: World Bank.
- Chapman, Anne, and David Pyvis. 2006. "Quality, Identity and Practice in Offshore University Programmes: Issues in the Internationalization of Australian Higher Education." *Teaching in Higher Education*, 11(2): 233–245. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562510500527818>
- Creswell, W. John. 2009. *Research Designs: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*. London: Sage Publications.
- Evans, Karen. 2009. *Learning, Work and Social Responsibility: Challenges for Lifelong Learning in a Global Age*, Vol. 13. Springer Science and Business Media.
- Fang, Wenhong, and Shen Wang. 2014. "Chinese Students' Choice of Transnational Higher Education in a Globalized Higher Education Market: A Case Study of W University." *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 18(5): 475–494. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315314523989>
- Francois, J. Emmanuel. 2016. "What is Transnational Education?" In *Perspectives in Transnational Higher Education*, edited by Emmanuel J. Francois, Mejai B. M. Avoseh, and Wendy

- Griswold, 3–22. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-6300-420-6>
- Giddens, Anthony. 1991. *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Giddens, Anthony. 1994. "Living in a Post-traditional Society." In *Reflexive Modernization: Politics, Tradition and Aesthetics in the Modern Social Order*, edited by Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens, and Scott Lash, 56–109. Stanford University Press.
- Heyneman, P. Stephen. 2010. "A Comment on the Changes in Higher Education in the Former Soviet Union". *European Education*, 42(1): 76–87. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2753/EUE1056-4934420104>
- Hoare, Lynnel. 2012. "Transnational Student Voices: Reflections on a Second Chance." *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 16(3): 271–286. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315311398045>
- Hofstede, Geert. 1984. *Culture's Consequences: International Differences in Work-Related Values*, Vol. 5. London: Sage.
- Knight, Jane. 2016. "Transnational Education Remodeled: Toward a common TNE Framework and Definitions." *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 20(1): 34–47. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315315602927>
- Kosmützky, Anna, and Rahul Putty. 2016. "Transcending Borders and Traversing Boundaries: A Systematic Review of the Literature on Transnational, Offshore, Cross-border, and Borderless Higher Education." *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 20(1): 8–33. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315315604719>
- Lane, E. Jason. 2011. "Global Expansion of International Branch Campuses: Managerial and Leadership Challenges." *New Directions for Higher Education*, 2011(155): 5–17. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1002/he.440>
- Larsen, A. Marianne. 2016. *Internationalization of Higher Education. An Analysis through Spatial, Network, and Mobilities Theories*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Leung, Maggi, and Johanna L. Waters. 2013. "British Degrees Made in Hong Kong: An Enquiry into the Role of Space and Place in Transnational Education." *Asia Pacific Education Review* 14(1): 43–53. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12564-013-9250-4>
- Majidov, Ghosh, and Kobil Ruziev. 2010. "Keeping up with Revolutions: Evolution of Higher Education in Uzbekistan." *Economic Change and Restructuring*, 43(1): 45–63. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10644-009-9077-5>
- McNamara, John, and Jane Knight. 2014. *Impacts of Transnational Education on Host Countries: Academic, Cultural, Economic and Skills Impacts and Implications of Programme and Provider Mobility*. London: British Council and DAAD.
- Moufahim, Mona, and Lim Ming. 2015. "The Other Voices of International Higher Education: An Empirical Study of Students' Perceptions of British University Education in China." *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, 13(4): 437–454. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14767724.2014.959476>
- Patton, Q. Michael. 2002. *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Presidential Decree No. PP-2909 of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan of 20.04.2017 "On measures for the further development of higher education". Available from: <http://www.lex.uz/docs/3171587>.
- Pyvis, David, and Anne Chapman. 2007. "Why University Students Choose an International Education: A Case Study in Malaysia." *International Journal of Educational Development*, 27(2): 235–246. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2006.07.008>



- Resolution of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan. 2018. "On additional measures to improve the quality of education in higher educational institutions and ensure their active participation in the large-scale reforms being carried out in the country". Available from: [https://www.norma.uz/raznoe/postanovlenie\\_prezidenta\\_respubliki\\_uzbekistan64](https://www.norma.uz/raznoe/postanovlenie_prezidenta_respubliki_uzbekistan64).
- Rumbley, E. Laura, and Philip G. Altbach. 2016. "The Local and the Global in Higher Education Internationalization: A Crucial Nexus." In *Global and Local Internationalization*, edited by Elspeth Jones, et al., 7–13. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers. DOI: [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-6300-301-8\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-6300-301-8_2)
- Ruziev, Kobil, and Davron Rustamov. 2016. "Higher Education in Uzbekistan: Reforms and the Changing Landscape since Independence." *Economics Working Paper Series*, 1604: 1–27.
- Shanahan, J. Michael, and Ross Macmillan. 2008. *Biography and the Sociological Imagination*. New York: W. Norton.
- Sidhu, Ravinder, and Pam Christie. 2014. "Making Space for an International Branch Campus: Monash University Malaysia." *Asia Pacific Viewpoint*, 55(2): 82–195. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/apv.12052>
- Silova, Iveta. 2011. Higher Education Reforms and global Geopolitics: Shifting Cores and Peripheries in Russia, the Baltics, and Central Asia. *Russian Analytical Digest*, 97(30): 9–12.
- Sin, I. Lin, Maggi Leung, and Johanna Waters. 2019. Degrees of Value: Comparing the Contextual Complexities of UK Transnational Education in Malaysia and Hong Kong. *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, 49(1): 132–148. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057925.2017.1390663>
- UNESCO Institute of Statistics. 2018. Uzbekistan. Available at: <http://uis.unesco.org/en/country/uz?theme=education-and-literacy>.
- Waters, Johanna, and Maggi Leung. 2012. "Young People and the Reproduction of Disadvantage Through Transnational Higher Education in Hong Kong." *Sociological Research Online*, 17(3): 1–8. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5153/sro.2499>
- Waters, Johanna, and Maggi Leung. 2013. "A Colourful University Life? Transnational Higher Education and the Spatial Dimensions of Institutional Social Capital in Hong Kong." *Population, Space and Place*, 19(2): 155–167. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1002/psp.1748>
- Waters, Johanna, and Maggi Leung. 2014. "These Are Not the Best Students': Continuing Education, Transnationalisation and Hong Kong's Young Adult 'Educational Non-Elite.'" *Children's Geographies*, 12(1): 56–69. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14733285.2013.850851>
- Waters, Johanna, and Maggi Leung. 2017. "Domesticating Transnational Education: Discourses of Social Value, Self-Worth and the Institutionalisation of Failure in 'Meritocratic' Hong Kong." *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 42(2): 233–245. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/tran.12163>
- Wengraf, Tom. 2001. *Qualitative Research Interviewing: Biographic Narratives and Semi-Structured Methods*. London: Sage. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781849209717>
- Wilkins, Stephens, and Melodena S. Balakrishnan. 2013. "Assessing Student Satisfaction in Transnational Higher Education." *International Journal of Educational Management*, 27(2): 143–156. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1108/09513541311297568>
- Wilkins, Stephens, Melodena S. Balakrishnan, and Jeroen Huisman. 2012. "Student Choice in Higher Education: Motivations for Choosing to Study at an International Branch Campus". *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 16(5): 413–433. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315311429002>
- World Bank. 2014. Uzbekistan: Modernizing Tertiary Education. Report NO 88606-UZ. Washington, DC: World Bank.

**How to cite this article:** Celeti, Andre, Rano Nurmanova, and Nora Gavalyan. 2019. "Going Beyond the Local: Exploring the Role of Transnational Higher Education in Shaping Students' Life Trajectories in Uzbekistan." *Silk Road: A Journal of Eurasian Development* 1(1): 23–38. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16997/srjed.3>

**Submitted:** 06 January 2019    **Accepted:** 26 September 2019    **Published:** 16 December 2019

**Copyright:** © 2019 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.



*Silk Road: A Journal of Eurasian Development* is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by University of Westminster Press.

**OPEN ACCESS** The Open Access icon, which is a stylized padlock with an open keyhole.