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Studying of international students in Ukraine: Cross-cultural challenges and geopolitical facets

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Abstract

The article attempts to comprehend the state of the art and challenges inherent in the system of international students studying in Ukraine. A non-traditional approach is applied in the research, namely the influence of geopolitics on the construction of the educational landscape and cross-cultural adaptation possibilities for international students, and, accordingly, the competitiveness of educational institutions in the global arena. Dialectical and structural-functional methods were applied for the research. Content analysis was utilized as the main tool. The principle of historical and logical relationships between politics, economics, culture, and education lies at the basis of the study. The latency and simultaneously harmful nature of geopolitical influence in higher education is demonstrated. The study revealed the core drawbacks of Ukrainian higher education institutions and regulators' vision of the necessity of interweaving geopolitical concerns into the higher education fabric. The study outlines implications and challenges of international student mobility within a complicating geopolitical landscape and provides some vectors for possible strategies to cope with them.

Keywords: China, Competitiveness, Geopolitics, HEIs, Institutional policies, International students, Ukraine.

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1. Introduction

Student mobility has contributed to the globalization of higher education over the last 50 years. The number of students studying abroad has gradually increased since the 1970s. Among the many types of migrants, foreign students have experienced the greatest relative growth [1]. Student mobility is becoming an increasingly important policy and practice issue in higher education.

In 2021, there were approximately 6.4 million overseas students worldwide, up from 2 million in 2000 [2]. According to available statistics, five out of every seven international students were enrolled in educational programs in high-income nations [2]. Moreover, half of the 6.4 million foreign students resided in 10 countries: the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, Germany, Canada, France, Turkey, China, the Netherlands, and the Republic of Korea [3].

In recent decades, Ukraine has made significant efforts to become a full-fledged member of the European and global higher education landscape, particularly in attracting foreign students. Meanwhile, according to 2017 data, the majority of international students in Ukraine were from the following countries; see Figure 1.

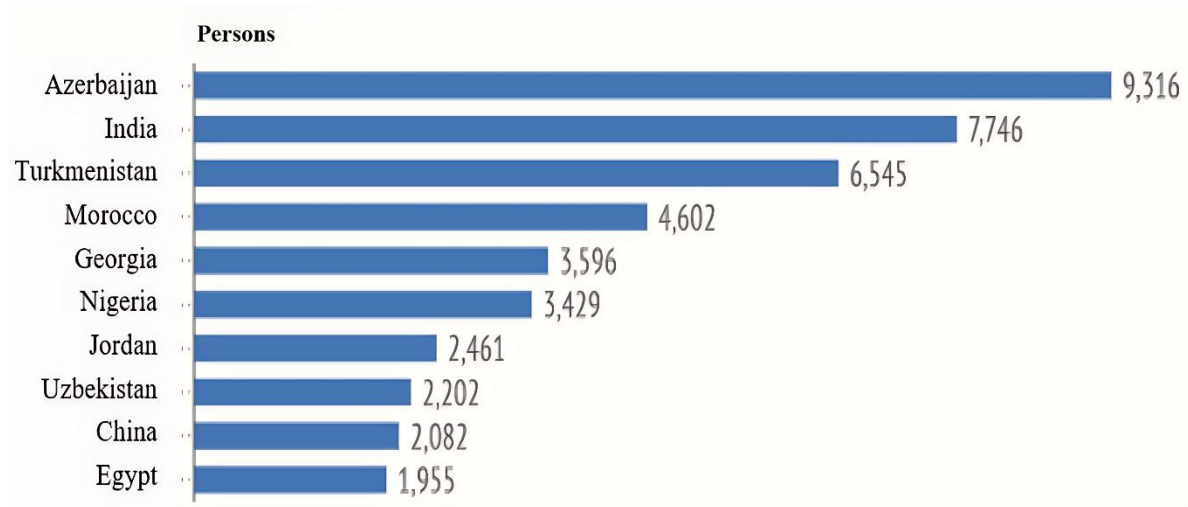


Figure 1.
International students in Ukraine, countries breakdown, 2017.
Source: Among foreign students in Ukraine [4].

These ten countries account for 68.5% of all foreign students in Ukraine [4]. In later years, the list of countries of origin of international students in Ukraine somewhat changed, but the essence of this list comprising of third-world countries (except China) was not modified see Figure 2.

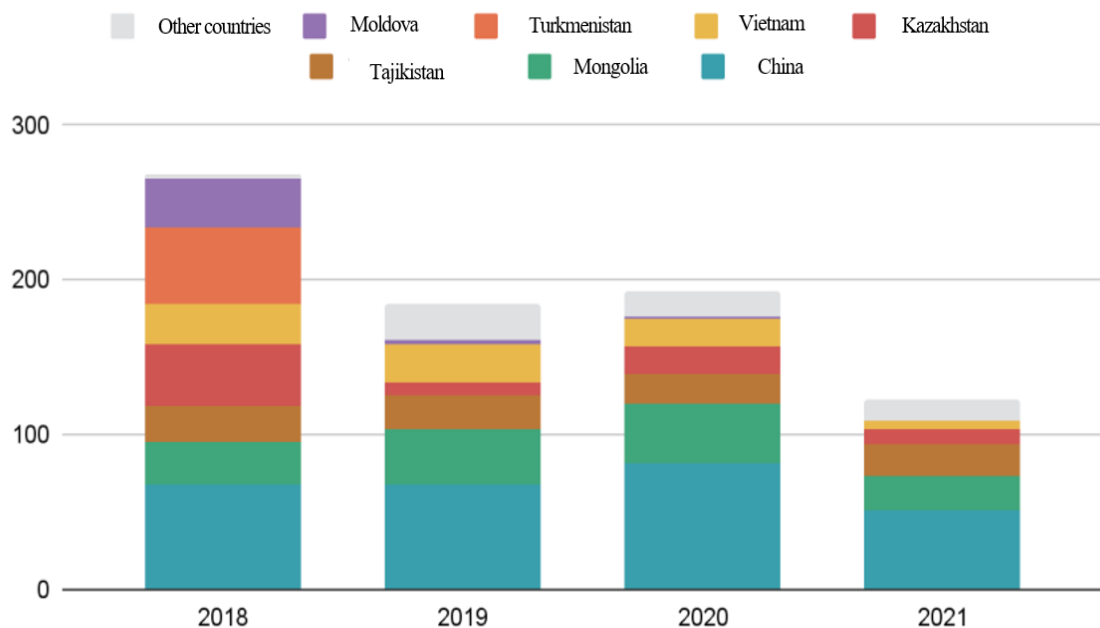


Figure 2.
Foreign female students enrolled in studies based on international agreements, 2018-2021.
Source: Lazarenko and Slobodian [5].

Eleven Ukrainian universities were named in the 2024 QS World Rankings, but none higher than #700 [6]. Even Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv, the best of the 11 Ukrainian universities in the 2024 QS World Rankings, was ranked below #700, according to the list released in June 2024. Britain's Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) ranked over 1,500 global universities by examining 17 million scientific papers, 1.9 million reviews from academics, and 660,000 reviews from employers. None of the other 10 Ukrainian institutions finished higher than Shevchenko University's 701-710 ranking (QS rates institutions grouping from the 600th position, claiming the difference in points becomes statistically unimportant) [6]. In particular, Ivan Franko National University of Lviv holds the 1201-1400 place, while Kharkiv Polytechnic Institute National Technical University is ranked 1001-1200. The QS ranking is based on the assessment of universities regarding teaching quality and research work quality, the share of foreign students, and the employment of graduates. Sustainable

development, which is highly regarded by the environmentally concerned generation of young people searching for a university to attend, was included in the poll's list of eight factors in 2024.

For comparison, in Kazakhstan, Al-Farabi Kazakh National University ranks 230th, and two other universities rank 355th and 481st, respectively. In Uzbekistan, Tashkent Institute of Irrigation and Agricultural Mechanization Engineers holds the 547th place, which is also much higher than allegedly the best HEI in Ukraine, Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv.

Interestingly, five universities in China occupy places higher than 50, with Peking University at 14th place, and the countries of origin of foreign students studying in China include even the United States and Japan [7].

The fact that authoritarian countries and countries with developing democracies surpass Ukraine, which is in the process of EU integration, in the international competitiveness of their HEIs is evidently alarming and requires serious attention from researchers, regulators, and HEI leadership.

The worst thing in this context is the absence of concern within Ukrainian governmental regulatory bodies and universities themselves. Moreover, the fact of inclusion in the ranking is represented in national mass media as an achievement – a bright example is the heading of the publication on the VisitUkraine portal: “17 Ukrainian universities are included in the prestigious Times Higher Education World University Rankings 2025.”

The war in Ukraine has further aggravated the existing problems in the international competitiveness of Ukrainian higher education and led to the emergence of a new facet for Ukrainian HE – geopolitical. Moreover, as Ukrainian researcher Myhovykh [8] rightly claimed, “recent political developments and global events have led some to question whether international students will continue to view foreign countries in the same way” [8]. One should understand that hostilities are not the main reason for the decline of Ukrainian HE attractiveness among foreign students, especially considering that the central and, especially, western parts of the country are not affected by hostilities, and universities located there have all the opportunities to develop and implement strategies for raising competitiveness. At the same time, cross-cultural and geopolitical challenges are among the crucial factors to be addressed in analyzing the challenges faced by international students studying in Ukraine, especially based on the experience of other countries that have encountered the dangerous overlap of cross-cultural education efforts and geopolitical challenges.

2. Methodology

The main methods used in writing this work include dialectics as a universal method of cognition, comparative-historical method, system method, structural-functional method, civilizational approach. The dialectical method in this work was used, firstly, to identify the features of modern processes in global education and the influence of the dynamics of the geopolitical landscape on the policy of universities and regulators in the field of education regarding the training of foreign students. The appeal to the system method allowed us to present the object under study as a developing open system of knowledge about cross-cultural and geopolitical processes, which enables identifying the connections and dependencies in which the components of the system are located. The structural-functional method was used in the analysis of the main components of the paradigm of teaching foreign students, using the example of Ukraine and China. The principle of historical and logical in the relationship between politics, economics, culture, and education is important in the study.

The tool for filling the research information base is content analysis. The overwhelming majority of analyzed sources are articles in specialized scientific periodicals, as well as monographic publications. However, expert opinions and journalistic materials have also become important sources for deepening the understanding of the research problem. The general philosophical basis of the research is constructivism, which allows reliance not only on statistical data and other ‘surface’ evidence but also on latent processes, interweavings, and connections.

3. Results and Discussion

In the circles of Ukrainian higher education experts, one can now often hear that the outflow of foreign students due to the war has led to material and personnel losses for Ukrainian universities. In particular, the head of the subcommittee on higher education in the Verkhovna Rada Committee on Education, Science and Innovations, Yulia Hryshyna, stated that the country has now lost about 30% of students from abroad, and “if we convert this only into financial losses, the amount will reach more than 300 million dollars per year” [9]. Unfortunately, the potential of online and hybrid education for international students is still not fully understood in the Ukrainian higher education system. Moreover, as mentioned above, the central and western regions of Ukraine do not experience hostilities and have a sufficient level of safety to develop higher education. In our opinion, the reason for the low attention and poor efforts within the area of raising the international real competitiveness of Ukrainian higher education lies in the lack of comprehension of the potential multiple benefits of economic, social, security-related, and geopolitical nature.

According to Myhovykh [8], Ukraine's needs for globalization and European integration have long been ambiguous. This reality has affected HE's internationalization efforts, which the state's educational strategy has never considered a top priority. Formal rules pertaining to the establishment of the credit system and two-level training in Ukrainian higher education were implemented as part of the Joint Declaration of the European Ministers of Education (the Bologna Declaration). However, there has not been a noticeable rise in academic mobility in Ukraine over the decade, despite the fact that in European nations, such adoption is thought to be a tool for guaranteeing widespread student mobility. The national policy for the development of Ukrainian HE did not adequately include the demands of globalization and euro integration. Even though the Law “On Higher Education” (2014) states that one of the fundamental tenets of state educational policy is the international integration of Ukrainian higher education, the concepts of international collaboration, international integration, and internationalization are not listed among the fundamental words.

The Ukrainian higher education system's internationalization difficulties have received little attention, which has caused the process to develop slowly and has definitely become one of the key factors contributing to the low positions of Ukrainian higher education institutions in international rankings. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic and the full-scale invasion of Russia have naturally worsened the situation. However, the country's Euro integration advancement and, to no lesser extent today, geopolitical challenges necessitate a sound revision of national policy, strategies, and tactics within the domain of attracting international students and creating a proper cross-cultural environment within the higher education system.

It should be mentioned in this regard that developed nations are very interested in luring international students for many reasons. First, international students are a significant source of funding for academic institutions. Higher education institutions in several OECD nations deal with unfavorable domestic demographic trends regarding the number of prospective students. They loosen the demographic-binding restrictions associated with the domestic market by drawing in international students, for example, from populous nations [10]. Furthermore, in certain countries, overseas students pay greater fees than native students [11]. This permits public organizations to avoid some of the legal limits associated with registration criteria, such as fees. Second, colonial governments have long preferred the migration of students from former colonies as part of a worldwide package of foreign aid. Higher education for foreign students is an essential route for host nations to spread cultural, economic, and political norms internationally. For example, [Spilimbergo \[12\]](#) demonstrates that overseas education supports democracy in the students' home countries, mainly when education is obtained in democratic countries.

The literature has proposed two primary explanations for why students migrate between nations or regions: first, from the standpoint of human capital, migration is seen as an investment, and the decision to relocate is made in order to take advantage of better employment opportunities and/or to increase future expected income; second, migration can also be seen as a consumption choice, in which case people move for non-financial reasons. Students consider the context in which they will study in addition to the future returns of higher education [13].

International student mobility (ISM) is widely described using push-pull theory, consumer decision-making models, and rational choice theory. Despite its benefits, people often ignore the reasons behind their decision to study abroad. Based on two motivation theories, expectancy-value theory (EVT) and self-determination theory (SDT), [Yue and Lu \[14\]](#) study investigates whether students' intention to study abroad stems from their own motivations or is influenced by social pressure, as well as how external factors defined in push-pull theory interact with these motivations to influence their decision-making processes. A quantitative study was conducted in China using a sample of 736 international students. The findings show that the decision to study abroad is a highly subjective and inwardly driven action, with the most essential component being self-worth or fulfilling one's life purpose.

Regardless of the cause, cross-cultural barriers are one of the most important issues the institution should face. [Yassin, et al. \[15\]](#) underline the importance of the interaction between intercultural adaptation and learning sustainability, arguing that intercultural obstacles may prevent foreign students from achieving sustainable learning. International students migrate across boundaries to increase their knowledge and abilities, and the prospects for them to participate in sustainable development (SD) are considerable since they may be decision-makers, and they might participate in the education of future generations in their nations. This perspective emphasizes the importance of higher education institutions (HEIs) not only providing a high-quality learning experience for international students, but also assisting them in overcoming intercultural learning challenges that may stand in the way of achieving sustainable learning. This is also connected to intercultural education, which demands the adaptation of international students to the host culture as well as mastery of numerous factors such as language skills and academic accomplishments [16].

Tests of language ability may not always be helpful in facilitating successful and seamless communication between learners and native speakers. Despite studying English in their native countries, foreign students may still find it difficult to use the language in authentic communication contexts [17, 18]. Researchers also noted that Chinese students struggle to interact with their instructors and other students because of problems with intonation and speech rate, despite coming to study in the United States after achieving good scores on the TOEFL and GRE [19].

Misunderstandings of the traditional cultural conventions, idioms, and terminology used in specific host settings are additional variables contributing to language difficulties for overseas students [20]. This implies that cultural disparities impede international students' integration into the host culture and create a gulf between them and their professors. For instance, in certain cultural circumstances, a student may be able to raise questions in class even if they are accustomed to doing so [21]. Furthermore, [Mehdizadeh and Scott \[22\]](#) contended that while communicating with people in the host culture, international students face difficulties in effectively interpreting nonverbal cultural codes [23]. As a result, their ability to adapt to various cultures is impacted, raising concerns about the long-term viability of international students' learning at host HEIs.

Although conceptually obvious, overseas students' welfare demands are incredibly complicated. Numerous studies have been conducted on this cohort, using their distinct cohort dynamics to investigate transnational and transcultural ideas, including acculturative stress, culture shock, and culture learning theory. Only recent studies really started to look into the needs, pressures, and coping strategies that influence this demographic in order to provide resources to help these students. This is in contrast to previous studies that looked at the wellness and positive mental health of this cohort. With the rapid rise of globalization made possible by innovative technical breakthroughs, the necessity for such research has grown over the past several decades [24]. The advent of social media, the internet, and the World Wide Web has undoubtedly impacted transitional experiences and may have changed the character of foreign student stays. For instance, identifying the most prevalent and severe stressors and offering coping mechanisms that allow international students to manage their stress have traditionally been the top priorities for academics, researchers, educators, and mental health specialists interested in the topic of international student wellbeing [25]. In this quest, research has shown that, in addition to academic pressures (such as

completing assignments on time, maintaining good grades, and graduating on time), international students frequently experience disproportionately high levels of stress in three main areas: life, social, and transitional stress. The debate that follows, however, methodically examines how economic, technological, and geopolitical developments affect the well-being of foreign students in each of these areas.

One group is clearly identified as being especially vulnerable to adverse impacts as one starts to thoroughly examine the connections between geopolitical events and persons' well-being: international students [26]. Let us note that "well-being" refers to a person's psychological state of wellness, or positive mental health. The idea that members of this group are frequently the primary victims of political unrest is supported by the bulk of research on foreign students across generations, regions, and demographics [24]. Given the sizeable number of foreign students - a number that is only anticipated to increase - it is becoming more and more important to recognize the welfare issues facing this group. Given that almost half of all globally mobile students reside in the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada combined UNESCO [27] the politics both inside and outside of these four "major destinations" are quite concerning. Additionally, the 'international students economies' of these popular locations are now unstable owing to recent geopolitical changes.

Dennis [28] correctly asserts that geopolitical tensions have affected the politics and economy of nations all over the world, even before Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Global geopolitical conflicts and changes have also had an influence on the international higher education sector for many years. Changes in national realignments have influenced faculty research, branch campus partnerships, college and university cooperation, and international student mobility.

For instance, some scholars have demonstrated how geopolitical influences affect both individual higher education institutions and national HE sectors [29]. This is largely due to the fact that these institutions are "deeply embedded in the social fabric of individual states" while simultaneously playing important roles on a global scale, which makes them especially vulnerable to shifting geopolitical dynamics [30]. Higher education sectors may be directly and immediately impacted by nation-states' shifting geopolitical orientations.

Recognizing that HEIs may actively participate in geopolitical processes is also crucial. For instance, studies have demonstrated how national governments have utilized them to impact geopolitics [31]. When it comes to soft power, this is especially evident.

According to Altbach and De Wit [32] nation states are increasingly using international education as a strategy to enhance and exert their soft power. International education programs are supported by a variety of goals, including public diplomacy, geopolitical objectives, cultural enhancement, commercialization, international collaboration, assistance and developmental support, and reciprocal learning [33].

In particular, in an effort to raise the quality of its higher education, China has recently implemented a number of reforms and bilateral partnerships with other institutions, making it a desirable choice for students from other countries. For example, China has developed extensive regional linkages in Asia and beyond with its One Belt, One Road plan. Almost 50% of international students studying in China come from nations along the Belt and Road, whose economies are expanding remarkably quickly [34]. On the international scene, it is no longer possible to ignore the investment in R&D financing, the creation of scientific literature, the growing legitimacy of its institutions, and the overwhelming strength of the economic prospects that underpin higher education in modern-day China.

The economic and educational cooperation between China and other nations is the reason for the rise in the number of foreign students. Specifically, granting work permits is becoming a more crucial tactic for nations hoping to draw in more overseas students. After obtaining a permission, foreign students are permitted to work in China. Guangzhou, Beijing, and Shanghai have released information on work permit applications. In order to concentrate on the immigration of overseas students, the Chinese government has made the decision to establish a "New Immigration Bureau" [35]. The economic and educational cooperation between China and other nations is the reason for the rise in foreign students. With the aim to promote economic and educational collaboration between Asian and African nations as well as with some European nations, China started the "Belt and Road Initiative" in 2013. More than 60% of international students studying in China in 2017 originated from "Belt and Road Initiative" countries, which China will rely significantly on for new students in the next years, according to data given by the Ministry of Education [35].

These initiatives of China may seem as a highly progressive policy of education internationalization, and as a sample for benchmarking. However, there is geopolitical underpinning – latent, but bringing China the results which it pursues. China's foreign political influence activities under Xi Jinping are called by Western political experts a 'magic weapon' [36].

When Xi Jinping spoke about the significance of unified front work and political influence actions back in September 2014, he referred to them as one of the CCP's (Chinese Communist Party) 'magic weapons.' Under Xi, the Chinese government has increased its efforts to exert influence abroad. The sovereignty and integrity of the targeted governments' political systems might be threatened by China's foreign influence operations (Brady [37]), which are most notably carried out in the field of education.

Applications from international students to Chinese colleges have increased dramatically during the last 20 years, based on the data that is currently accessible. International student enrollment nearly tripled between 2000 and 2017 as China's higher education system improved [38]. China is expanding universities worldwide and offering generous scholarships to international students in an effort to gain influence and further its own interests. Through the Silk Road Scholarship program, the Chinese government offers over 10,000 scholarships to students from nations interested in studying in China in an effort to draw in as many international students as possible. The majority of these scholarships - roughly 65 percent - are awarded to nations affected by the Belt Road. In this sense, however, Europe is not left behind [39]. The Chinese Ambassador Scholarship program for Romanian students was just introduced by the Chinese government.

Many of China's recent unified front initiatives seem to have been tested in New Zealand. The CCP leadership wants to set an example for Australia, the tiny island countries of the South Pacific, and other Western states, and sees its relationship with Wellington as a model that can be duplicated elsewhere. The PRC has now reached a key stage in its political influence efforts in New Zealand. China is interested in New Zealand for a number of reasons. The idea of weakening New Zealand's connections with its longstanding Anglophone allies is perhaps appealing from a geopolitical standpoint. Meanwhile, China benefits from New Zealand as a soft underbelly that provides access to Five Eyes information [37]. The higher education field is one of the most "convenient" domains for reaching these goals.

Ukraine appeared today at the very epicenter of geopolitical tensions, and definitely, there is a need for awareness about the potential efforts of geopolitical players to use the sphere of HE in pursuing political goals and implementing 'aggressive soft power'. At the same time, reasonable balance is needed to avoid excessive 'closeness' and prevent the lack of an effective cross-cultural landscape in Ukrainian HEIs. Only reasonable policy, based on the synergy of various vectors, can lead to raising the international competence of Ukrainian HE.

Meanwhile, one should bear in mind that emerging powers, changing regional and international interactions, and rising populism and nationalism are all features of the contemporary political epoch. The intensive globalization of higher education that characterized the late 20th and early 21st centuries seems to be at odds with contemporary political tendencies in this changed global setting.

Among nation states, this impact is evident. The following extremely brief overview of only four cases illustrates the dynamics that arise when politics clashes with policy and practice in international higher education. International higher education in Canada has been directly impacted by political tensions with Saudi Arabia, as seen by the removal of student scholarships [40]. A new legislation on foreign branch campuses went into effect in 2019, forcing the Central European University to relocate from Hungary to Austria [40]. Political reasons have been used to deny admittance to students who have been accepted to American institutions [41]. Turkish universities are finding it difficult to strike a balance between the increasing demand for higher education from thousands of Syrian refugees and fierce competition from local students [Do Amaral and Thompson \[41\]](#).

[Otto \[42\]](#) examines how recent, macro-level changes in transatlantic relations have affected US and EU higher education institutions' (HEIs') capacity to use international collaborations to fulfill their long-standing missions of service, research, and teaching. The link between geopolitics and HEI international cooperation is clarified by utilizing literature to place international education within the greater context of transatlantic ties from the post-World War II era to the present. The significance of HEI international relationships in achieving international education results consistent with traditional HEI missions is then demonstrated using comprehensive internationalization theory. Following the establishment of the connection between transatlantic relations, internationalization in higher education, HEI international partnerships, and overall HEI performance, recent advancements in transatlantic relations are examined directly in relation to HEI international partnerships, emphasizing the effects on their capacity to operate. The study provides implications for policy makers and HEI administrators, finding that regressive transatlantic ties lead to the reverse effect and progressive transatlantic connections increase performance results for US and EU HEIs through HEI international collaborations.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 caused another change in the global landscape. An international outcry over the invasion shattered transnational intellectual cooperation. Universities throughout the world have denounced the invasion of Ukraine and imposed sanctions on Russian organizations and persons [43]. But not only intellectual leadership and research collaboration carried out in a politicized context today, but designing curricula and teaching strategies, including for international students. The overall discourse of teaching, learning, and beyond-curricula activities in some HEIs in Ukraine is also politicized, which is not always adopted by foreign students, aggravating their "cultural shock".

In 2021, [Oleksiyenko and Shchepetylnykova \[44\]](#). Ukrainian scholars, highlighted that the country's political, social, and economic transformations brought about by the conflict have prepared the way for the reworking of institutional policies pertaining to the internationalization of Ukraine's higher education[44]. Conflict factors are now much more pronounced, which might have a detrimental impact on Ukrainian HEIs' ability to draw in international students. [Baldacchino \[45\]](#) called this phenomenon "shifting sands" and warned about its significant danger.

In this landscape, acquiring a kind of entropy nature, it is expedient to turn to the world's best practices. In particular, Kazakhstan's approach to increasing the international competitiveness of national higher education is of interest. As noted above, Al-Farabi University ranks twice as high in the international rankings as Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv. One of the reasons for this is a well-designed marketing approach and business thinking. In particular, Kazakh Humanitarian Law University (M.S. Narikbayev KAZGUU University) is a joint-stock company. Established only in 1994 (that is, much later than most Ukrainian universities), the educational institution underwent state re-registration in 2015 and became the Joint-Stock Company "KazGUU University." Already in 2016, KazGUU University passed the international accreditation of FIBAA (Foundation for International Business Administration Accreditation). In April 2017, the Higher School of Economics received accreditation under the ICAEW (Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales) certification program. It was the only and first case in Kazakhstan when a university received ACA ICAEW accreditation for seven modules: Accounting, Assurance, Business and Finance, Law, Management Information, Principles of Taxation, and Financial Management.

In general, university marketing in Kazakhstan is characterized as "a social and managerial process, during which strategies and tactics of customer-oriented relationships between subjects of the educational services market, educational institutions, consumer organizations, and students who produce, sell, buy and consume educational products are studied and formed" [46]. Successful recruitment of applicants to educational programs largely depends on customer focus. Based on Porter's competitive strategies, we can say that universities in Kazakhstan use a cost leadership strategy, as well as elements

of a focusing strategy, which brings obvious results. Well-known universities of the “Global North” use a differentiation strategy, having the necessary background and resources for this, which developing countries cannot afford. However, the other two strategies are no less effective and, as practice shows, can bring excellent results in a very short time. In 2022, Al-Farabi Kazakh National University entered the top 150 best universities in the world. In one year, the university improved its performance and moved up 25 positions from 175th place. Of course, cross-cultural elements, understanding of each segment of the “target audience”, its characteristics and needs are the most important elements of these strategies.

South Korea applies another strategy. In 2023, South Korea’s higher education system was in upheaval. President Yoon Suk-Yeol’s government recently launched a nationwide blueprint to restructure the higher education sector. This concept, appropriately titled RISE (Regional Innovation System and Education), is a strategic project aimed at decentralizing the higher education system, allowing local governments to stimulate innovation at universities and colleges within their boundaries [47]. This effort, which will formally debut in 2025 after a two-year experimental period, revolves around the ‘Glocal University Project’. This project will pick 30 institutions from regional locations around South Korea for further help. These picked institutes will get 100 billion South Korean won (about \$76 million) over five years. This assistance will aid in their transition and strengthen their ability to compete on a global scale while still meeting local demands. In 2004, the South Korean government was in the second year of its “300K project”, which intends to expand the number of foreign students at local colleges to 300,000 by 2027, up from around 170,000 in 2022 [48].

Since the early 1990s, Korea has taken the lead in government-led internationalization reforms [49]. Korean universities adopted drastic and extensive Anglicization reforms more aggressively than other nations in the region that started with internationalization earlier (like Japan), despite their ethnic parochialism and linguistic resistance, in an attempt to draw in foreign scholars and students. As part of a larger globalization strategy, the Korean government invested heavily in recruiting foreign students to Korean universities through ambitious programs like Study Korea, which aimed to bridge the gap between developed and developing countries by providing scholarships and marketing a foreigner-friendly image of Korea [49]. As a result, the number of international students skyrocketed (see) Figure 3.

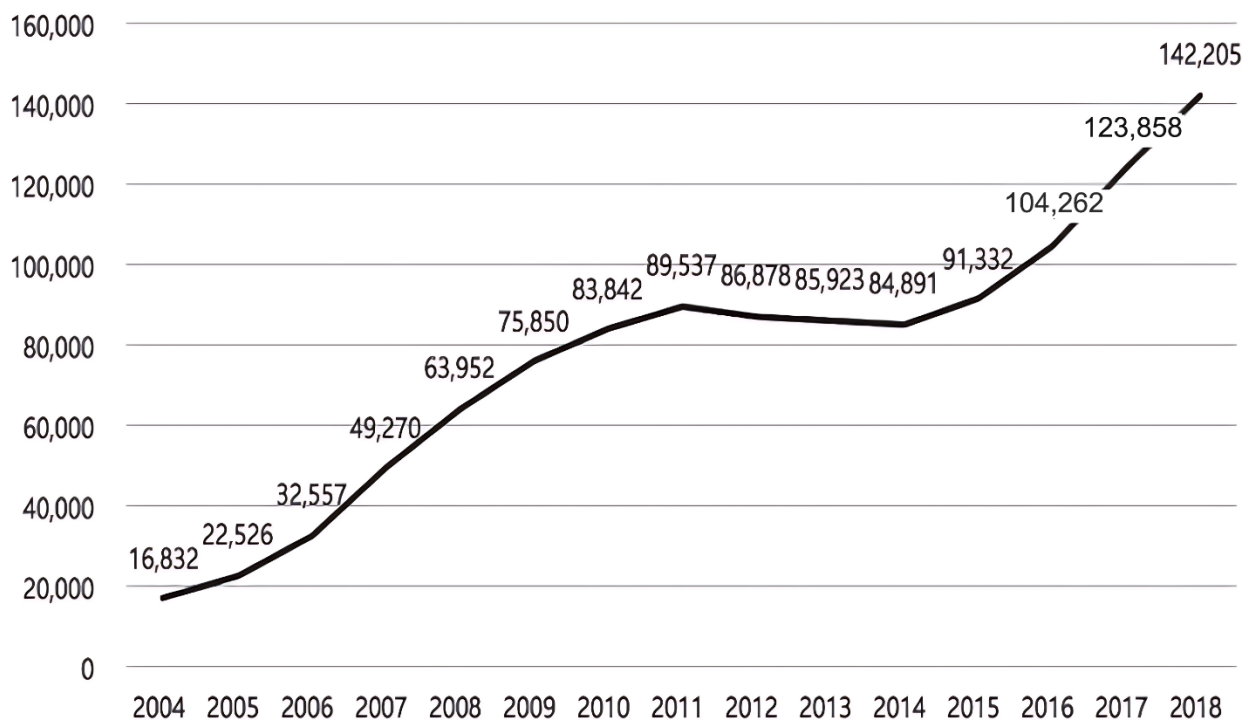


Figure 3.
Changes in the number of international students in South Korea.
Source: Sabloff [46].

The European periphery has been impacted by the tsunami of internationalization that has swept throughout the continent during the past 30 years. Conversely, the globalization of higher education has been a prominent political problem for Western Balkan nations. The justifications for internationalization in this area, however, emphasize distinct goals from those found elsewhere. Internationalization in the Western Balkans primarily refers to assisting national reforms and institutional capacity building, whereas in developed nations, it is seen as a means of boosting the competitiveness of their economies and higher education institutions (often including a significant source of import revenue). Several international organizations, particularly the EU’s initiatives like CARDS, TEMPUS, Framework initiatives, and others, have provided financial assistance for the majority of the region’s internationalization efforts. As a result, the area frequently views the globalization of higher education as a transfer of policies. The terms “internationalization,” “harmonization,” and “modernization” of higher education have frequently been used interchangeably. The most often supported initiatives fall under the category of “structural measures” and are designed to address several facets of practice and policy reforms in the

research and higher education sectors. These initiatives are often carried out through international collaboration with partners from EU member states [49].

Thus, the approaches of the considered countries in attracting foreign students can be described, in fact, as New Public Management and New Public Governance in the higher education sphere, each of which yields profound results. For Ukraine, however, particularly taking into account geopolitical realities and the state of war, a combination, or, better said, the synergy of these two paradigms seems appropriate. One of the crucial results of this synergy should be value co-creation (in the sense that the participants of this co-creation are the state, universities, and foreign students, and the value created is a customized cross-cultural educational product/service and a protective 'shield' against geopolitical challenges).

The geopolitical landscape today is changing with unprecedented speed, and these changes are often unpredictable. Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) should have resilience sufficient to withstand ever-new challenges without detrimental effects on the quality of providing international students with educational services and an effective system of smooth cross-cultural adaptation. The creation of this resilience should rely, first of all, on avoiding the most 'sharp angles' of geopolitical tensions, preventing geopolitics from extensive penetration into the 'organizational fabric' of teaching and research activities and other forms of working with students. A 'managerial mind' should dominate over a 'political mind'; otherwise, there is a high probability that the university's system of working with international students will enter a state of entropy, lacking enough resources to quickly rebuild and reorient in accordance with the new endogenous environment.

Strategies for international students' cross-cultural adaptation are unlikely to be effective if grossly saturated with geopolitical imperatives. Sympathy and antipathy toward any country's regime and actions in the international arena cannot be instilled in a directive, authoritarian manner. Instead, they should be comprehended and deeply realized by the student himself, based on the aforementioned value co-creation paradigm. Thus, the cross-cultural adaptation of international students in Ukraine should take into account geopolitical influence, not as it is presented in mass media, but on a strong scientific basis of international relations theory.

4. Conclusion

As the conducted research showed, the international competitiveness of Ukrainian higher education remains at a rather low level, and the deep reasons for it are not solely Russian aggression or the lack of HEIs financing. The absence of a coherent and consistent policy for the cross-cultural adaptation of international students in Ukrainian universities, as well as the over-dependence of HEIs' policies on the geopolitical situation, deprives the system of training international students in Ukraine of stability and potential resilience. The lack of clear, detailed, and well-structured strategies for raising international competitiveness also harms Ukrainian HEIs' positions in the global arena.

The study also showed a significant impact of the geopolitical process on the internationalization of higher education, which is especially evident in the example of China's 'magic weapon'. A special danger of this geopolitical influence is its often latent nature. Ukraine, being the epicenter of today's geopolitical turbulence, should definitely consider this challenge when designing strategies for attracting and teaching international students.

Meanwhile, benchmarking-type research of the experiences of a number of countries allowed for the conclusion of the expediency of the synergy between New Public Management (servicing and 'client'-oriented approach) and New Public Governance (network building and stakeholders cooperation approach) in the design and implementation of HE internationalization policies, based on the paradigm of value co-creation.

Ukrainian HEIs still have strong academic traditions, highly competent teaching staff, and often an innovative technical base, especially in IT, engineering, pedagogy, and medical profiles. Benchmarking successful experiences from countries that rapidly transitioned from outsiders to leaders in global higher education is crucially necessary for Ukraine to develop the competitiveness of national universities among the pool of potential international students from every region of the planet. This benchmarking, however, should relate not only to designing curricula or course content but, more importantly, to creating a favorable sociopolitical landscape.

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