



# THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

## Edinburgh Research Explorer

### Institutional logic meets global imagining

**Citation for published version:**

Lee, JT, Lo, W & Abdrasheva, D 2020, 'Institutional logic meets global imagining: Kazakhstan's engagement with China's Belt and Road Initiative', *Higher Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-020-00634-y>

**Digital Object Identifier (DOI):**

[10.1007/s10734-020-00634-y](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-020-00634-y)

**Link:**

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

**Document Version:**

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

**Published In:**

Higher Education

**General rights**

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

**Take down policy**

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact [openaccess@ed.ac.uk](mailto:openaccess@ed.ac.uk) providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.





# Institutional logic meets global imagining: Kazakhstan's engagement with China's Belt and Road Initiative

Jack T. Lee<sup>1</sup> · William Yat Wai Lo<sup>2</sup> · Dana Abdrasheva<sup>2</sup>

Accepted: 24 September 2020  
© The Author(s) 2020

## Abstract

Theoretical ideas about globalization and internationalization of higher education emphasize the tension among different ideologies of higher education. According to literature, a competition among states, economy, knowledge, and status generates this tension to drive higher education development. This theoretical understanding not only shapes our global imaginations but also permeates the organizational behavior of universities. In this paper, we focus on the institutional logics that motivate universities in Kazakhstan to engage with China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). We investigate the ways that Kazakhstani higher education interprets and responds to China's vision of a global order. Based on interviews conducted at 10 higher education institutions (HEIs) in Kazakhstan, we argue that Kazakhstan's engagement with the BRI circumvents the cultural connectivity and global cooperation that are embraced by Chinese policy discourse and perpetuated by academic literature. Rather, institutional leaders in Kazakhstan operate with a utilitarian logic that seeks revenue generation, links with industry, and opportunities for students in employment and further education. The pursuit of these strategic outcomes demonstrates a bilateral engagement with China rather than the multilateral cooperation envisioned by policymakers. In a higher education system dominated by the state, the institutions in our study exhibit partial agency to accrue pragmatic benefits rather than concede to isomorphic pressures or mimic internationalization from neoliberal contexts. The discrepancy between policy discourse from China and policy reception in Kazakhstan raises questions about the rhetoric of a multipolar global order and the realities of international cooperation in higher education.

**Keywords** Globalization · Internationalization · Institutional logics · Neo-institutional theory · Organizational behavior · Belt and Road Initiative · Kazakhstan · China

---

✉ Jack T. Lee  
jack.lee@ed.ac.uk

William Yat Wai Lo  
willlo@eduhk.hk

Dana Abdrasheva  
dana@s.eduhk.hk

<sup>1</sup> University of Edinburgh, Moray House School of Education and Sport, Edinburgh EH8 8BJ, UK

<sup>2</sup> Education University of Hong Kong, 10 Lo Ping Rd., Ting Kok, Hong Kong

## Introduction

In 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping announced the One Belt, One Road (一帶一路) initiative while on a state visit to Kazakhstan. Nazarbayev University, Kazakhstan's leading university that opened in 2010 with great fanfare, hosted this momentous event. Xi's ambitious cooperation framework draws on the narratives of the historical Silk Road in linking China with over 70 countries in Asia, Europe, and Africa. Substantive areas of partnership include trade, investment, infrastructure, transportation, poverty reduction, and cultural exchange (Xi, 2013). In 2016, China re-branded this framework as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to minimize confusion over a singular route and deflect criticisms of hegemony. BRI actually contains six geographic routes of connectivity including a maritime pathway. Some observers also refer to this policy as the New Silk Road. BRI has become China's most significant foreign policy platform in modern history with an annual expenditure of roughly \$US150 billion (Economist, 2017). While critics and skeptics fret over Chinese hegemony and the Chinese approach to international development, BRI's ambitious geographic coverage and policy scope are undeniable. This initiative continues to capture the imaginations of many policymakers within China and beyond. The BRI is essentially a policy chameleon that projects multiple hues in order to resonate with diverse policy sectors.

Under the aegis of the BRI, collaborations in higher education exemplify cultural connectivity and "people-to-people bond" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2015; Xi, 2017). While the original conception BRI does not explicitly mark out higher education as an area of cooperation, China's Ministry of Education later released an action plan with multiple strategies (MOE, 2016). This extensive action plan emphasizes mutual benefits through academic exchange and partnerships. To "strengthen the dialogue between different civilizations" such that "harmonious and inclusive development" can take place among BRI countries is the overarching message (MOE, 2016). In more candid terms, this action plan also stresses the "need to promote the reform and development of China's education" and promote China as a destination for international students. Since the announcement of the BRI, higher education leaders inside and outside China have promoted an array of activities that leverage the narrative of the Silk Road. From student mobility programs to research conferences, many linkages with China have been subsumed under the BRI branding. For example, Xi'an Jiaotong University (XJTU) jointly organizes the Silk Road International Summer School each year with Hong Kong Polytechnic University. Over 700 students from across BRI countries have participated in this program since its inception in 2014. In 2015, XJTU initiated the University Alliance of the Silk Road with approximately 100 institutions from 22 countries; this alliance also receives support from the Chinese Ministry of Education.

Kazakhstan provides a critical case study of the BRI given its historical association with the Silk Road and contemporary geopolitical status. For centuries, trade caravans from the Far East trekked across the Kazakh steppes to transport goods to Europe. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Kazakhstan, emerged as the largest country in Central Asia by landmass and the wealthiest given its oil and mineral resources. The BRI is another reminder that Kazakhstan sits at a critical juncture between Asia and Europe and acts as the "buckle in the belt" (Daly & Rojansky, 2018). China's decision to announce the BRI in Kazakhstan in 2013 was cognizant of both historical gravity and geopolitical positioning. Furthermore, Kazakhstan has a sustained record in internationalizing higher education since its independence in 1991. For example, in 1993, the government set up the generous

Bolashak scholarship to fully fund study abroad (full-degree studies). To date, over 10,000 students have benefited from this national scheme (Bolashak, 2016). Other internationalization milestones include the joining of Bologna (2010), the development of successful private institutions staffed with many foreign academics (e.g., Suleyman Demirel University and KIMEP), and the creation of an international university (Nazarbayev University).

Despite the visibility of the BRI and the proliferation of events that convene partner countries, very few empirical studies on policy implementation and cooperation actually exist. Rather, reproducing the rhetoric of partnership, reaffirming mutual benefits, and celebrating the prospects of east–west interactions have become a routine in many circles of policymaking and academic discourse on the BRI. Empirical studies are crucial for understanding how stakeholders operationalize this policy. As Ball (1993) argues, “policy as text” is inadequate for gaining a comprehensive understanding of education reforms in all their intricacies. Noticeably, many of these BRI events focus on “policy as text” with a Sinocentric view while neglecting the voices of partner countries—the critical stakeholders who will ultimately gauge the legitimacy of the BRI and shape its outcome.

This paper examines Kazakhstan’s engagements with the BRI through higher education. Specifically, the paper illuminates the perspectives of higher education leaders in Kazakhstan and clarifies their motivations for pursuing cross-border activities under the context of the BRI. Engagement is a more accurate term than cooperation or partnership because these latter terms imply parity and agency among actors, which cannot be assumed in international linkages. Therefore, the focus of this paper is less about China’s conception of BRI and dissemination of its policy discourse. While these issues are important, the existing literature often foregrounds China. Seven years after the unveiling of the BRI, empirical evidence from non-Chinese stakeholders and critical analyses of this ambitious policy remain scant. Therefore, the focus of this paper is on Kazakhstan as a key node in the BRI. How do higher education institutional leaders in Kazakhstan perceive China’s BRI? What are the institutional logics that motivate universities in Kazakhstan to engage with the BRI? To what extent do structure and agency constrain or support these engagements?

## Theoretical framework

In an effort to understand the perspectives and actions of Kazakhstani higher education, three disparate but interrelated frameworks are useful as analytical heuristics. At the global level, theoretical ideas about *global imagining* of higher education can illuminate competing demands that present new opportunities and challenges for institutions. China’s ardent promotion of the BRI also reveals its global imagining as it disseminates its interpretation of global order across more than 70 nations. At the institutional level, conceptual ideas about *internationalization* provide more tangible frameworks for examining organizational strategies. Specifically, the literature on the rationales of internationalization shed light on why universities extend beyond their local domain. While identifying rationales is a worthwhile exercise, it is insufficient in providing a nuanced understanding of organizational behavior in the broader context of society and culture. Rather, the research on *institutional logic* that emerged out of sociology and crossed over into management and ultimately higher education provides deeper insights into the interplay between structure and agency—a timeless phenomenon that has perplexed and inspired social theorists for many generations. While these three analytical frames are presented here as discrete lines of inquiry with distinct bodies of literature, we recognize that they are interrelated in the

realities of higher education development. Ironically, studies on the internationalization of higher education rarely deploy institutional logic as a theoretical framework even though the unit of analysis is often the institution by default. It is beyond the scope of this paper to engage fully from all three analytical lenses. Instead, the paper will use institutional logic as the dominant lens given its theoretical depth, compatibility with our methodological focus on organizational behavior, and potential to elucidate actor agency. The following literature review covers all three perspectives but focuses more attention on institutional logic.

Competing missions in global higher education are poignantly theorized by Marginson (2011) in his analysis of the imaginaries that policymakers and institutional leaders espouse. Building on the cultural theories of globalization by Appadurai (1996), Marginson identified three pivots in higher education in a global context: status, economy, and knowledge. The tireless pursuit of global visibility and performance vis-à-vis global rankings is emblematic of the status pivot. The dominance of the knowledge economy also steers institutions to present themselves as shepherds of both economic progress and human capital development. Finally, the pursuit of new knowledge remains a core pivot particularly among research intensive institutions. Marginson emphasized that these imaginaries are not mutually exclusive because hybrids are surely evident in higher education. Rather, each imaginary provides a different orientation for higher education. In a way, Marginson's tripartite framework is reminiscent of Clark's (1983) seminal work on the coordinating powers in higher education (state, market, and academic oligarchy) albeit situated in a global context.

Research on the rationales of internationalization often cites Knight's (2004) early categorization: academic, socio-cultural, political, and economic. Academic rationales include pedagogy and interdisciplinarity. Socio-cultural rationales include language acquisition, intercultural competencies, and service learning. Internationalization also occurs through political channels such as development aid, peace education, and geopolitical alliance building, which often echoes the exertion of soft power. Economic rationales speak to the rising commercialization of higher education and the development of a competitive workforce—this is the most dominant rationale today in many regions of the world (Chankse-liani, 2018; Tsiligiris & Lawton, 2018). Knight (2008) updated these rationales to include branding; however, fewer studies have engaged with this new iteration perhaps due to the conceptual clarity of the original categorization.

A more recent treatment of the rationales of internationalization draws on the large-scale survey conducted by the International Association of Universities (IAU) every 4–5 years. Early versions of this survey used Knight's four rationales (2004), but recent versions have identified nine rationales (Egron-Polak & Hudson, 2014). These rationales exhibit strong overlap with Knight's framework. In a quantitative study of over 400 European higher education institutions (HEIs) based on IAU's 2014 survey data, researchers found that the rationales for internationalization did not differ across countries (Seeber, M., Cattaneo, M., Huisman, J., & Paleari, S. 2016). Building on neoinstitutional theory (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), the authors of this study argue that “an organizational rationale for action is oriented toward legitimacy as well as resources, status and reputation, and hence affected by institutional and competitive dynamics in the surrounding environment” (Seeber et al., 2016, p. 686).

A large body of literature exists on institutional theory in the context of higher education. Fumasoli and Stensaker (2013) pointed to the pioneering work by Clark (1970; 1972) for sparking deep interests among researchers to examine universities as organizations. The debate over structure and agency led scholars to develop neo-institutional theory,

which spawned numerous studies on isomorphism as institutions compete for diminishing resources and greater legitimacy (Loomis & Rodriguez, 2009; Croucher & Woelert, 2016; Zapp & Ramirez, 2019). Institutional logics emerged out of neo-institutional theory when scholars began to doubt structural determinism and explore the role of context and agency (Townley, 1997; Thornton & Ocasio, 1999). Inspired by the work of sociologists Jackall (1988) and Friedland and Alford (1991), proponents of institutional logics argue that studies of individual and organizational behavior must recognize the societal context. According to Thornton and Ocasio (1999), institutional logics are.

...the socially constructed, historical patterns of cultural symbols and material practices, assumptions, values, and beliefs by which individuals produce and reproduce their material subsistence, organize time and space, and provide meaning to their daily work (p. 804).

Rather than assume isomorphism as predicted by neoinstitutional theory, institutional logics expose the complex relationship between structure and agency (Thornton et al., 2012). An organization's interests, identities, and values are embedded in its decision-making (Friedland & Alford, 1991; Thornton & Ocasio, 1999). Autonomy in terms of one's ability to exercise choice is a key component of institutional logics even if this agency is partial. This perspective deviates from the large body of literature in higher education that illustrates global convergence (e.g., the world-class university model and New Public Management).

Shields and Watermeyer (2020) recently developed a valuable conceptual framework for evaluating institutional logic through a quantitative analysis of universities in the UK. Their work illustrates three compelling logics: autonomous, utilitarian, and managerial. The autonomous logic propels universities to uphold the traditions of intellectual inquiry and social critique. The utilitarian logic drives universities to work closely with the economy to spur innovation, employment, and growth. The managerial logic places HEIs in a competitive environment that justifies hierarchy and bureaucracy to survive. These different logics partially echo Marginson's global imaginings: knowledge, economy, and status. The autonomous and utilitarian logics also mirror the rationales of internationalization: academic, socio-cultural, and economic, respectively. Managerial logic's emphasis on hierarchical governance and competitive environment exhibits some connection to the political rationale of internationalization as some states exercise diplomacy through higher education.

This literature review shows how global imaginings of higher education, rationales of internationalization, and institutional logics overlap like a concatenated web. While global imaginings and rationales of internationalization are widely used to analyze higher education policies and strategies, institutional theory is uncommon in the literature on internationalization even though many studies focus on institutional case studies. Therefore, we proceed to examine Kazakhstani HEIs' responses to the BRI using institutional logics.

## Methodology

To understand the perceptions of BRI and organizational behavior, this study uses a qualitative design underpinned by semi-structured interviews. We approached HEIs in Kazakhstan that self-identified as being active in internationalization with ongoing engagements with the BRI. We utilized both institutional Web sites and e-mail correspondences to verify

**Table 1** Institutions in this study

	Institution	Location	Participants
1	Private University A	Almaty	1
2	Private University B	Almaty	2
3	Private University C	Almaty	2
4	Private University D	Nur-Sultan	1
5	Public University X	Almaty	1
6	Public University Y	Karaganda	2
7	Mixed University	Nur-Sultan	3
8	National University 01	Nur-Sultan	2
9	National University 02	Nur-Sultan	1
10	National Think Tank	Nur-Sultan	2

engagements prior to data collection. We approached some institutions that were active in internationalization but later found to be inactive in BRI or China; therefore, these were excluded from data collection as the study is not about generic perceptions of BRI or China. Thus, criterion sampling was used to select institutions and individuals who could speak from actual experiences of working with counterparts in BRI schemes to ensure participant credibility and authenticity. Our research participants were deputy vice rectors, vice provosts, deans, and directors of international offices. These individuals led and oversaw internationalization mostly at the institutional level with a few at the faculty/school level. A few participants held leadership positions at a national think tank; their work entailed advising the Kazakhstani Government through policy recommendations and collaborating with Chinese universities in research and planning. Altogether, we interviewed 17 individuals at 10 institutions. These institutions include large, prominent national universities as well as small, vibrant institutions with discipline specializations and one national think tank. The institutions are located in the cities of Nur-Sultan (capital), Almaty (largest city), and Karaganda (Table 1). Interviews were conducted in English, Russian, or a mixture of both languages. Each interview lasted approximately 1 h. Interviews were translated (if necessary), transcribed, and analyzed thematically to identify the main perceptions of BRI and the logistics of engaging with the BRI. Each institution has a pseudonym. A mixed university is both public and private in ownership (“joint stock company” in Kazakhstan’s documents).

## Findings

### Policy perceptions

The general perception of the BRI among our participants ranged from neutral to restrained optimism. Unlike the skepticism or alarm evident in the mass media about China’s ambitious foreign policy, participants genuinely welcomed opportunities to work with Chinese universities, colleagues, students, and industries.

It’s a good opportunity to maintain and have all this cooperation through the countries of One Belt, One Road... This project will have a great impact on education partners between countries, between universities and between people. (Director of International Office, Mixed University).

These views are also in contrast with recurring anti-Chinese sentiments in Kazakhstan as China's presence grows larger in the country's development.<sup>1</sup>

Several participants also noted that the BRI is vague and rhetorical:

We are all very good at talking. Talking is not a problem, but when it comes to moving beyond the metaphor and big picture to some practicalities, it's lacking. This is why we need projects like a massive open online course on Central Asia or some joint degree programs... projects that have a beginning, a middle, and an end, and I think that is not fully resolved yet. (Vice Provost, National University 01).

Elites are usually more optimistic [about BRI]... saying there are lots of opportunities related to BRI and Chinese investment. (Director, National Think Tank).

[Our] level of the economic and political relations with China is very high, but it is not reflected in the development of international university campuses of China in Kazakhstan... We have several branch campuses but no good Kazakh-Chinese university. (President, Private University D).

Several participants noted that there is a modest level of activities between Kazakhstani and Chinese higher education despite the visibility of the BRI and China's geographic proximity. For example, one participant proudly declared that her university currently hosts nearly 200 international students, but only one student is from China (an ethnic Kazakh from Xinjiang).

Noticeably, virtually all participants reduced the BRI to links with China rather than embrace the initiative as a global framework as intended by Chinese policymakers. One participant astutely questioned this discrepancy in policy framing:

When we say Belt and Road and education, it has to be Chinese, Central Asian, *and* European universities. Otherwise it will be just Belt and Road for replacing China and Central Asia – very short. When you speak about One Belt, One Road, and higher education, do you mean regional programs covering all or some 44 countries? Or is it just a new way of saying China-Central Asia and China–Europe? (Manager of International Office, Mixed University).

This critical perspective on policy branding was rare among our participants. Interview questions on BRI often elicited answers that revealed attitudes on China and identified interactions with China.

## Dominance of utilitarian institutional logics

To determine the institutional logics that drive engagements with the BRI, we asked participants questions such as “What opportunities do you see in the BRI for your institution?” “What are your goals in collaborating with universities along the BRI route?” “What are some milestones your institution has achieved in the context of the BRI?” While Chinese

<sup>1</sup> For example, in 2016, protesters expressed outrage against land reforms due to anxieties that wealthy Chinese investors could occupy large swaths of land. The reforms were ultimately shelved. In 2019, protesters lobbied against the relocation of a Chinese factory to Zhanaozen, Kazakhstan. In 2020, violence erupted in southern Kazakhstan between ethnic Kazakhs and the Dungans (Muslims of Chinese ancestry) over an altercation between two individuals. These incidents are sensitive matters in Kazakhstan that receive limited media coverage.



policies and discourse on BRI underscore cultural connectivity through education, culture was seldom mentioned by our participants. A few participants identified cross-cultural exchange as a key motivation, but the overwhelming majority of participants spoke at length about more practical matters with greater urgency and commitment. An initial review of the data indicated that economic interests dominated the logic of engagement, but further cycles of data analysis and recognition of context (both dialogic and societal) reveal that many motivations are in fact largely utilitarian and broader than economic. Among the 10 institutions in our study, utilitarian logic was the primary logic that underpinned involvement with the BRI at eight institutions. For two of these institutions, the utilitarian logic was on par with the autonomous logic, which endorses intellectual inquiry along the lines of knowledge and cultural exchange. The two institutions that did not express utilitarian logic as the primary driver point to autonomous and managerial logic instead; both are small private universities.

The following quotes illustrate the dominant utilitarian logic among the eight institutions:

Our strategy in terms of internationalizing our partnerships... we don't focus on a region because we look at the opportunity first. (Director of International Office, Private University A).

People like us in Kazakhstan... we make choices about creating the best of all worlds. So, we operate obviously on standards for instance of academic integrity that we've inherited from the best intellectual traditions (British and American universities) and at the same time we're interested in the technology, the scope and scale of ideas and ambitions that are coming from China. So, I think as a university we should be smart enough to find the best of all worlds. (Vice Provost, National University 01).

We want to understand how BRI connection can help Kazakhstan achieve its goals and whatever tasks are set in our plans and strategies. (Director, National Think Tank).

These comments reveal a Kazakhstan-centric utilitarian view rather than a China-centric perspective as one might expect for a discussion on a high-profile Chinese policy. The following section presents the three different motivations of engagement to illustrate our argument that Kazakhstani higher education leaders operate largely on utilitarian logic when engaging with the BRI.

## Revenue generation

The tremendous potential of the BRI to trigger a boom in transnational education captivated participants from private universities. In the parlance of higher education, the opportunities are evident in student recruitment, program expansion, and student mobility.

We see market opportunity [student recruitment] in China, India – Asian region rather than Europe, so this [BRI] is a priority. (Director of International Office, Private University A).

There is market demand in Kazakhstan for Chinese [language]. Lots of students are interested. Out of 100 students, the majority select Chinese as their second language. There are also Chinese coming to study Russian. This is the indicator. (Vice Rector, Private University C).

There are 12,000 students from Kazakhstan studying in China. They study in different universities. It's not always good universities. Our task is to make access to good

Chinese education easier for talented Kazakhstani youth. The logic behind developing international campuses expresses the same idea, like [having] a Chinese branch campus [in Kazakhstan]. (President, Private University D).

While outbound student mobility has been common in Kazakhstan since the country gained independence in 1991, a neoliberal approach to internationalization is atypical in its higher education system. Cultivating inbound student mobility is only beginning as a phenomenon. Recruiting Chinese students to come to Kazakhstan and conceiving a Chinese branch campus in Kazakhstan to satisfy local demands are both driven by a neoliberal interest in revenue generation. Interestingly, some of these strategies do not involve China at all but rather reveal a commercial view of BRI countries as an untapped marketplace for higher education. Unsurprisingly, private institutions that lack public funding were more enchanted with the commercial prospect of the BRI compared to public universities.

### Employment and industrial links

Beyond direct profits for HEIs, several participants pointed to their interests in the BRI as a platform for employment among graduates and partnerships with Chinese industries. A chronic challenge in Kazakhstan is the mismatch between educational attainment and employment (OECD, 2017). In response to the BRI, participants rationalized engagement with China as a means to an end in the global job market. Learning Chinese and developing intercultural skills are viewed as pragmatic pursuits rather than something borne out of cultural interests or cosmopolitan ideals. This very utilitarian view of connectivity cuts across institutional types and embraces bi-directional mobility between China and Kazakhstan as the following comments illustrate:

A month ago, we had a delegation of businessmen from a Chinese petroleum company. They want to open a factory here to process gas and metal – that is why it is vitally necessary to us to learn foreign languages including Chinese. (Vice Rector of International Affairs, Public University Y).

Chinese businessmen who are working in Kazakhstan want to enter our graduate or MBA programs because they want to make business in Kazakhstan – that's why they need to know legal regulation and how to make business in Kazakhstan. It is also important for our students to have business skills to work in China and to know legal regulations of doing business in China. (Director of International Office, Mixed University).

At this moment, most engagements of this sort involve teaching and training either in Kazakhstan or China rather than research partnerships.

### Access to education

The clearest example of the utilitarian logic for engaging with the BRI is the access to education in China. Several participants noted the meager quality of education in Kazakhstan and viewed engagements with Chinese universities as a promising pathway for Kazakhstan's youth. One institutional leader at a national university marvelled at China's success in developing its higher and vocational education and reasoned that Kazakhstan should learn from China's experience. Another participant pointed out that several staff members from one international office at a local university received

scholarships from China and ultimately quit their positions to pursue advanced degrees. In interviews, China was often portrayed as a land of educational opportunities for talented and resourceful Kazakhstani youth:

There is also an opportunity for the students to study the language and then go abroad through scholarships... After graduation they easily get scholarships [in China] for master programs. (Manager of International Office, Mixed University).

We have students who are looking for any opportunities in China for summer schools, winter schools, any opportunities to get to China. (Director of International Office, Public University X).

Our task is to make access to good Chinese education easier for talented Kazakhstani youth. (President, Private University D).

We are working with two universities in Shanghai and Beijing. They are very powerful and impressed me even more than European universities. (Vice Rector for Strategic Development, Private University B).

Interestingly, the attraction to China was very strong even when prompted in interviews to address Kazakhstan's long historical ties with Soviet and Russian higher education. Whether or not China is an appropriate education model for Kazakhstan is beyond the scope of this paper, but institutional leaders were unequivocally keen to link with Chinese HEIs for the prosperity of their students. This motivation is reminiscent of the thinking behind Kazakhstan's long-running Bolashak scholarship program, which the government generously funded to send students abroad while efforts to improve the domestic higher education system continued.

### Limited presence of autonomous and managerial logics

Among the institutions in our study, very few identified rationales that reflected an autonomous or managerial logic. A few participants spoke about the value of intercultural dialogue and learning from other societies for the sake of knowledge. Two institutions highlighted research partnerships with China—a perspective that is largely shaped by their status as a national university and a think tank tasked with research. One small private university noted that Asian institutions are now eligible under the Erasmus student mobility scheme:

Now Erasmus Plus does not limit to European universities only. It depends on the call for application... Erasmus is like USAID projects, which are a little bit about politics. European Commission is expanding its influence zone, their policies and power, and Erasmus is promoting its interests including in Ghana, India etc. They are even glad when you apply with partners from Southeast Asia. (Vice Rector for Strategic Development, Private University B).

Recognizing the value of Asian partners in funding applications illustrates a managerial logic whereby organizational behavior changes to fit new bureaucratic incentives. The BRI is suddenly perceived as a platform that can generate benefits through European bureaucracy.

## Structure and agency

Kazakhstan's engagement with the BRI must be understood in the context of its political economy and higher education system. The institutional logic perspective examines practice and agency "to appreciate the constitutive power of broader socio-cultural structures" (Ocasio et al., 2017, p. 17). Structure and agency appeared in different manifestations when participants were asked about actual practices of engagement with the BRI.

Several participants complained that Kazakhstan's engagement with BRI and China lacked details from policymakers and institutional leaders. Given the seniority of some of our participants, this dissatisfaction was directed at the Ministry of Education and Science and the vice-chancellor / president of the university. For example, a participant bemoaned,

It [working with China] is a very recent issue. It happened at the top managers' level, and we as an international office do not have specific information because it did not start implementing yet... It is too early to talk about results. (Director of International Office, Public University Y).

This view illustrates a pervasive sense of detachment among administrators in Kazakhstan's higher education system. The belief that reforms must emanate from the Ministry and institutional leaders in a prescriptive decree is not unique to the case of the BRI but rather endemic to Kazakhstan's higher education structure. Individual and organizational agency are constrained in a system that is historically rooted in centralized decision-making coupled with punitive measures for policy failures (e.g., reprimands, job re-assignments, and demotions). Kazakhstan's higher education system reflects the Soviet legacy of command and control (Huisman, J., Smolentseva, A., & Froumin, I. 2018) even though there are ongoing efforts to introduce institutional autonomy. Interestingly, participants at one national university made the keen observation that the BRI integrates very well with Kazakhstan's latest master plan for national development: *100 Concrete Steps*, which former President Nursultan Nazarbayev promulgated in May 2015:

The *100 Concrete Steps* is Kazakhstan's big policy document [now]. It clearly talks about the same themes: increasing connectivity, modernizing the economy, skilled labour... Things that in one way or another clearly tie to Belt and Road. So, actually every document coming out of here [this University] also references the *100 Concrete Steps*. Every funding application to the Ministry will by necessity include the BRI. Those are the big policy drivers of research right now. (Dean, National University 01).

This view of policy synergy is also noticeable at the national think tank, which holds Kazakhstan's interests at heart:

Our Chinese partner [a government agency] proposed to do a joint project with us on how Kazakhstani strategic goals and priorities match BRI priorities and goals... First of all, it is interesting for them because they want to understand Kazakhstani agenda not only promoting BRI but also understand what is of interest to our government, so they have better sets of proposals etc. We want to understand how BRI connection can help Kazakhstan achieve its goals and whatever tasks are set in our plans and strategies. (Director, National Think Tank).

Integrating two large policy agendas reflects partial organizational agency in the face of structural constraints. While private universities and small institutions may enjoy a level

of reprieve from the state, national institutions such as universities and think tanks are beholden to the state's vision of national development and priorities. The comment about inserting obligatory references to the *100 Concrete Steps* and the BRI in grant applications reflects a managerial logic whereby bureaucracy and competition inform decision-making to benefit the institution (i.e., winning research grants).

While Kazakhstan's higher education system is largely centralized and regulated by the state, actors are not devoid of agency. The 10 institutions we visited had ongoing activities with Chinese universities despite the lack of directives from the state or senior leadership within the institution. These activities included student exchange, reciprocal site visits, summer programs, personnel training, and modest research collaborations. Traveling to China to study and learn from colleagues exhibits agency with a utilitarian logic. One participant explained how a key partnership with China was formed:

There wasn't exactly a selection process [of partners]. It was mostly networking and connections because we already have good relations with Renmin University. With Beijing Normal University, we had a connection through their professor who participated in our events... We also met the Ministry of Finance through our president's connections. (Director, National Think Tank).

Another participant explained that her institution was keen to deepen ties with a university in Hong Kong because her institution wished to replicate a successful hospitality program delivered by the Hong Kong partner. At another university, a participant attributed the benefits of the BRI to individual agency among Kazakhstani students rather than a concerted effort from China:

They [Chinese] don't come to our university and say, "Here are the scholarships!" There is Chinese government scholarship within Belt and Road. Students apply to Chinese Embassy or directly to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China. (Deputy Director of International Office, National University 02).

While significant resources have been devoted to reform Kazakhstan's higher education in the last ten years, policymakers and students continue to view international mobility as a strategy to overcome local structural barriers (e.g., affordability, low quality education, lack of specialty expertise, lack of scientific equipment, etc.). Quality remains a systemic challenge in Kazakhstan's higher education system (OECD, 2017).

## Discussion

Our findings illustrate that HEIs in Kazakhstan interpret and engage with the BRI based largely on a utilitarian logic. Instead of acting as a platform for cultural connectivity and global cooperation as Chinese policymakers intended (Wang, 2015; Callahan, 2016), the BRI is perceived by our participants as primarily a vehicle for Kazakhstan to achieve pragmatic outcomes: revenue generation, employment and industry links, and access to education. Interests in China as a society and culture took on a secondary or imperceptible role when participants elaborated on their institutional interests. Rather, pressing local challenges in higher education spurred participants to mine BRI for alternative solutions that can overcome structural barriers to organizational development and individual growth.

Our findings also echo recent studies in higher education that demonstrate multiple and competing logics among and within universities (Cho & Taylor, 2019; Shields &

Watermeyer, 2020). However, the utilitarian logic is not always about economic benefits in a higher education system that is governed by a strong state. For example, a Kazakh university that collaborates with a Hong Kong university for the purpose of replicating a successful hospitality program exhibits the utilitarian logic with an infusion of managerial rationality that is difficult to ignore. For many years, the Kazakhstani Government has identified tourism as a promising industry worthy of development (PMO, 2019). An excellent hospitality program could generate revenue, distinguish the institution in a competitive landscape, and appeal to the state's vision of national development. Likewise, procuring employment and study abroad opportunities for Kazakhstani students is utilitarian, but it also reflects a strong desire for individual fulfilment and social mobility under a hegemonic state apparatus. Therefore, institutional logics may be difficult to disentangle from each other and from individual aspirations when the state plays an outsized role rather than a diminished role that is characteristic of a neoliberal regime. In many higher education systems worldwide, the state retains significant authority such that hierarchy and bureaucracy are well-accepted norms. Consequently, managerial logic in such contexts is less about organizational decision-making as a variable and more about an imperative that dictates behavior. Rather than focus on the indicators of managerial logic in such contexts, a more rewarding inquiry for future research would be to explore how institutions circumvent this managerial norm to survive and excel.

Among the HEIs in Kazakhstan, our participants represent the handful of institutions that actually engage with BRI. Therefore, contrary to the large body of literature in higher education on neoinstitutional theory that affirms isomorphism in a competitive environment (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), our institutions strike a different path from most Kazakhstani institutions in their decisions to engage with BRI and China. Furthermore, these engagements do not stem from the pursuit of legitimacy over efficiency and rationality as neoinstitutionalists claim as the driving force behind organizational behavior (Bitektine, 2011; Mampaey & Huisman, 2016; Zapp & Ramirez, 2019). Our participants identified efficient and rational goals with limited reference to external judgment or recognition. They exhibited resourcefulness and initiative in seeking opportunities in China or with China for their institutions, staff, and students. The institutions in this study also present a different narrative of internationalization from many in the West, where revenue generation is a dominant rationale to buffer declining public funds for higher education. While the private universities in our study were keen to recruit Chinese students for revenue gains, this interest is still nascent in Kazakhstan's higher education. Utilitarian logic among our participants also includes exploiting the BRI for employment and education opportunities for students; these strategic pursuits are less about neoliberal imperatives than a collective responsibility to ensure prosperity for Kazakhstan's next generation. Therefore, we do not witness a convergence or mimicry in patterns of internationalization when comparing the institutions in our study with others in Kazakhstan or in the West.

Agency operates at both the institutional and individual level in Kazakhstan's engagement with the BRI. Enterprising students are learning Chinese and seeking advanced degrees in China funded by Chinese scholarships. HEI leaders are pursuing partnerships with Chinese counterparts via personal introductions and professional networking. However, as Friedland and Alford (1991) theorized, structure and agency are not dichotomous concepts that operate in isolation. Rather, organizations operate on multiple institutional logics bounded by their social context while continually seeking direct benefits (Cho & Taylor, 2019). Kazakhstan's ongoing efforts to rapidly transform its economy and improve its higher education system loom large in the minds of our participants when they articulate engagements with the BRI. In a system with strong ties to Russia, our participants

actively seek opportunities with China. Some participants reminded us that Kazakhstan's participation in Bologna and engagement with the BRI are in fact complementary rather than contradictory as a zero-sum perspective on power dynamics would surmise. Leveraging a transnational policy such as the BRI to alleviate local shortcomings affirms Marginson and Rhoades' (2002) theorization that actors continue to exercise agency in spite of globalization's omnipresence and structural determinism.

Interestingly, our findings show that Kazakhstani institutional leaders view the BRI as a policy to connect with China rather than with a collective of actors defined by geography, shared history, and solidarity as Chinese discourse emphasizes. Unfortunately, China's global imagining with ambitious goals of global cooperation does not resonate among the institutions we visited. Even neighboring Central Asian states rarely appeared in our participants' comments about the BRI. While the Chinese Ministry of Education (2016) does identify concrete partnership strategies that direct attention to China, the BRI is not conceived as a bilateral foreign policy. Therefore, Kazakhstani institutional leaders' reductive view of bilateral exchange raises fundamental questions about the rhetoric of connectivity and the spatial scope of a new Silk Road when institutional logic defies the global imagining that is disseminated by policymakers, observers, and academics.

Our findings present several policy implications for both Kazakhstan and China as stakeholders in the BRI. For Kazakhstan, an overtly utilitarian logic may result in only short-term gains when Chinese counterparts recognize limited interests in cultural connectivity and global cooperation. With many stakeholders in the BRI, China may gravitate towards partners with a genuine interest in deeper exchanges to accrue mutual benefits. Kazakhstani higher education could support students' interests in Chinese language by building on the work of Confucius Institutes as cultural institutions.<sup>2</sup> Kazakhstan's participation in the Silk Road International Summer School as coordinated by Xi'an Jiaotong University could be expanded to faculty exchanges that ultimately lead to research collaborations. For China, the overall economic orientation of the BRI leaves cultural institutions such as universities marginalized in global cooperation. China's rich history as a civilization and its remarkable progress in higher education and research over the last four decades can provide valuable alternatives to Western epistemology and templates of education (Hayhoe, 2001; Kirby & van der Wende, 2019; Peters, 2020).

## Conclusion

In this article, we examined Kazakhstan's engagements with China's BRI through higher education. Our inquiry is one of the few empirical studies on BRI in the context of higher education. Moreover, we focus on the policy reception in a critical node of the historical Silk Road and a prominent state of contemporary Central Asia. Using institutional logics as a theoretical framework to understand the motivations and behaviors of nine universities and one think tank, we found that Kazakhstan's approach illustrates a strong utilitarian logic. Specifically, pragmatic goals of generating revenue, forging employment and industrial links, and accessing education opportunities for students spur institutional leaders to embrace the BRI. In a higher education system that is heavily centralized and regulated, the institutions in our study demonstrate agency when pursuing opportunities without the

---

<sup>2</sup> There are currently five Confucius Institutes in Kazakhstan.

typical directives from the state and university president. Autonomous and managerial logics that exemplify intellectual pursuits and bureaucracy, respectively, were not prevalent as drivers of BRI engagement among the institutions we visited.

Our broader interpretation of utilitarian logic extends beyond a neoliberal phenotype as characterized in the literature. This interpretation evokes Singapore's well-documented *strategic pragmatism* in Edgar Schein's (1996) influential volume on organizational studies in an Asian context. Pragmatic concerns of capacity-building during the development of the Singaporean nation-state and contemporary Kazakhstan demand strategic efforts that embody multiple logics. We concur with scholars who recently called for further research on competing logics to better understand the interactions and the conditions for multiple rationalities (Ocasio et al., 2017; Upton & Warshaw, 2017; Shields & Watermeyer, 2020). We contend that this endeavor demands contributions from comparative education scholars to clarify institutional logics under different formulations of political economy. Studies that explore changes in institutional logics over time are also lacking in higher education even though Thornton and Ocasio emphasized historical contingency three decades ago (1999).

Finally, Kazakhstan's involvement with the BRI reveals a reduction of this grand policy to connections with China. The original Silk Road was never Sinocentric as Peter Frankopan's (2015) rich volume reminds us. China's own global imagining of cooperation and solidarity also do not present a unipolar or bipolar world order. Greater efforts toward multilateral collaborations among BRI countries are paramount for a truly global framework. China's neighboring countries such as Kazakhstan and Russia will continue to evaluate the BRI by their own experiences, interests, and vulnerabilities rather than by Chinese rhetoric (Daly & Rojansky, 2018). The existence of such a diversity of interests presents the complex reality of a multipolar world order that China is advocating through the BRI.

**Funding** This study was funded by the Education University of Hong Kong (project number (RG96/16-17R).

**Open Access** This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

## References

- Appadurai, A. (1996). *Modernity at large: Cultural dimensions of globalization*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Ball, S. (1993). What is policy? Texts, trajectories, and toolboxes. *Discourse*, 13(2), 10–17.
- Bitektine, A. (2011). Toward a theory of social judgments of organizations: The case of legitimacy, reputation, and status. *Academy of Management Review*, 36(1), 151–179.
- Bolashak. (2016). History of the program. Retrieved July 27, 2020, from <https://www.bolashak.gov.kz/en/ostpendii/istoriya-razvitiya.html>
- Callahan, W. A. (2016). China's "Asia Dream." *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics*, 1(3), 226–243.
- Chankseliani, M. (2018). Four rationales of HE internationalization: Perspectives of UK universities on attracting students from former Soviet countries. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 22(1), 53–70.



- Cho, A. R., & Taylor, B. (2019). Alignment between universities and their affiliated professional schools: organizational segmentation and institutional logics in the USA. *Higher Education*, 78(3), 463–478.
- Clark, B. R. (1970). *The distinctive college*. Chicago, IL: Aldine.
- Clark, B. R. (1972). The organizational saga in higher education. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 17(2), 178–184.
- Clark, B. R. (1983). *The higher education system: Academic organization in cross-national perspective*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Croucher, G., & Woelert, P. (2016). Institutional isomorphism and the creation of the unified national system of higher education in Australia: An empirical analysis. *Higher Education*, 71(4), 439–453.
- Daly, R., & Rojansky, M. (2018, March 12). China's global dreams give its neighbors nightmares. *Foreign Policy*.
- DiMaggio, P. J., & Powell, W. W. (1983). The iron cage revisited: Institutional isomorphism and collective rationality in organizational fields. *American Sociological Review*, 48(2), 147–160.
- Economist. (2017, May 15). What is China's Belt and Road Initiative? *Economist*.
- Egron-Polak, E., & Hudson, R. (2014). *Internationalization of higher education: Growing expectations, fundamental values*. Paris: International Association of Universities.
- Frankopan, P. (2015). *The Silk Roads: A new history of the world*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Friedland, R., & Alford, R. (1991). Bringing society back in: Symbols, practices, and institutional contradictions. In W. W. Powell & P. J. DiMaggio (Eds.), *The new institutionalism in organizational analysis* (pp. 232–263). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Fumasoli, T., & Stensaker, B. (2013). Organizational studies in higher education: A reflection on historical themes and perspective trends. *Higher Education Policy*, 26(4), 479–496.
- Hayhoe, R. (2001). Lessons from the Chinese academy. In R. Hayhoe & J. Pan (Eds.), *Knowledge across cultures: A contribution to the dialogue among civilizations* (pp. 334–370). Hong Kong: Comparative Education Research Centre, University of Hong Kong.
- Huisman, J., Smolentseva, A., & Froumin, I. (2018). *25 years of transformations of higher education systems in post-Soviet countries*. Cham: Springer International Publishing.
- Jackall, R. (1988). *Moral mazes: The world of corporate managers*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Kirby, W., & van der Wende, M. (2019). The New Silk Road: Implications for higher education in China and the West? *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society*, 12(1), 127–144.
- Knight, J. (2004). Internationalization remodelled: Definition, approaches, and rationales. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 8(1), 5–31.
- Knight, J. (2008). *Higher education in turmoil: The changing world of internationalization*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishing.
- Loomis, S., & Rodriguez, J. (2009). Institutional change and higher education. *Higher Education*, 58(4), 475–489.
- Mampaey, J., & Huisman, J. (2016). Defensive stakeholder management in European universities: An institutional logics perspective. *Studies in Higher Education*, 41(12), 2218–2231.
- Marginson, S. (2011). Imaging the global. In R. King, S. Marginson, & R. Naidoo (Eds.), *Handbook on globalization and higher education* (pp. 10–39). Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar.
- Marginson, S., & Rhoades, G. (2002). Beyond national states, markets, and systems of higher education: A glonacal agency heuristic. *Higher Education*, 43(3), 281–309.
- Meyer, J. W., & Rowan, B. (1977). Institutionalized organizations: Formal structure as myth and ceremony. *The American Journal of Sociology*, 83(2), 340–363.
- MOE. (2016). Action on Promoting the Joint Construction of the Belt and Road (推进共建“一带一路”教育行动). Beijing: Ministry of Education, China. Retrieved July 27, 2020, from [https://www.moe.gov.cn/srcsite/A20/s7068/201608/t20160811\\_274679.html](https://www.moe.gov.cn/srcsite/A20/s7068/201608/t20160811_274679.html)
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs. (2015). Vision and actions on jointly building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21<sup>st</sup> Century Maritime Silk Road. National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Ministry of Commerce, China. Retrieved July 27, 2020, from <https://www.chinese-embassy.org.uk/eng/zywl/t1251719.html>
- Ocasio, W., Thornton, P. H., & Lounsbury, M. (2017). Advances to the institutional logics perspective. In R. Greenwood, C. Oliver, T. Lawrence, & R. E. Meyer (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of organizational institutionalism* (2nd ed., pp. 1–23). London: Sage.
- OECD. (2017). *Higher Education in Kazakhstan 2017*. Paris: OECD Publishing.
- Peters, M. (2020). China's Belt and Road Initiative: Reshaping global higher education. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 52(6), 586–592.
- Schein, E. H. (1996). *Strategic pragmatism: The culture of Singapore's Economic Development Board*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

- PMO. (2019). State program for the development of the tourism industry of the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2019–2025. Nur-Sultan, KZ: Prime Minister's Office. Retrieved July 27, 2020, from <https://primeminister.kz/ru/gosprogrammy/gosudarstvennaya-programma-razvitiya-turistskoy-otrasli-respubliki-kazakhstan-na-2019-2025-gody>
- Seeber, M., Cattaneo, M., Huisman, J., & Paleari, S. (2016). Why do higher education institutions internationalize? An investigation of the multilevel determinants of internationalization rationales. *Higher Education*, 72(5), 685–702.
- Shields, R., & Watermeyer, R. (2020). Competing institutional logics in universities in the United Kingdom: Schism in the church of reason. *Studies in Higher Education*, 45(1), 3–17.
- Thornton, P., & Ocasio, W. (1999). Institutional logics and the historical contingency of power in organizations: Executive succession in the higher education publishing industry, 1958–1990. *The American Journal of Sociology*, 105(3), 801–843.
- Thornton, P., Ocasio, W., & Lounsbury, M. (2012). *The institutional logics perspective: A new approach to culture, structure, and process*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Townley, B. (1997). The institutional logic of performance appraisal. *Organization Studies*, 18(2), 261–285.
- Tsiligiris, V., & Lawton, W. (2018). *Exporting transnational education: Institutional practice, policy and national goals*. Cham: Springer International Publishing.
- Upton, S., & Warsaw, J. B. (2017). Evidence of hybrid institutional logics in the US public research university. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 39(1), 89–103.
- Wang, Y. (2015). Foreign Minister Wang Yi meets the press. Retrieved July 27, 2020, from [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/zxxx\\_662805/t1243662.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1243662.shtml)
- Xi, J. (2013, September 7). *President Xi Jinping delivers important speech and proposes to build a Silk Road Economic Belt with Central Asian countries*. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, China. Retrieved July 27, 2020, from [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/topics\\_665678/xjpfwzysiesgjtfhshzzfh\\_665686/t1076334.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/topics_665678/xjpfwzysiesgjtfhshzzfh_665686/t1076334.shtml)
- Xi, J. (2017, October 18). *Secure a decisive victory in building a moderately prosperous society in all respects and strive for the great success of socialism with Chinese characteristics for a new era*. 19<sup>th</sup> National Congress of the Communist Party of China. Retrieved July 27, 2020, from <http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/special/19cpcnc/documents.htm>
- Zapp, M., & Ramirez, F. O. (2019). Beyond internationalization and isomorphism—the construction of a global higher education regime. *Comparative Education*, 55(4), 473–493.

**Publisher's Note** Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.