# Thirty Years of Transformation in Post-Soviet Higher Education: Outcomes and Lessons

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**Abstract**
This article provides an overview of the transformations of higher education in 15 post-Soviet countries since 1991. Post-Soviet transformations were part of the global shift that prioritized individual goods/values over collective goods/values, and a natural and spontaneous economic order over political action. Neoliberal transformations have contributed to social inequalities in post-Soviet societies and higher education systems. The commodification of knowledge has led to the erosion of its intrinsic value.

After Russia started a full-scale war in Ukraine, it became obvious that we need to reflect more on the nature, outcomes, and lessons of post-Soviet transformations. Higher education is only part of the picture; it does not explain everything, nor does it work independently from other social and political institutions. But as it deals with knowledge, social norms/values, and social value, its contributions to society are important to understand. This article discusses main developments in higher education in the post-Soviet period and how, despite the growth of participation in all 15 countries of the region, these developments have limited the potential contribution of higher education to post-Soviet societies.

**Denial of the Soviet and Advancement of the Neoliberal**

The global rise of neoliberalism and the gradual dismantling of the Soviet system started at approximately the same time, in the 1980s. The late Soviet leadership attempted to revive socialism by using political and economic liberalization and market mechanisms. Post-Soviet neoliberal reforms were built on that late Soviet legacy.

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the socialist past was rejected as a "tragic experiment," a dead-end leading away from "normal" development. With it, ideas of the larger common good in society went down as well. Instead neoliberal individuals appeared, working for themselves and their families, focusing on themselves, making free consumer choices, investing into their higher education, and choosing their higher education and career pathways based on perceived labor market outcomes. Reduced public funding, market mechanisms, and competition were part of the neoliberal model that was implemented to various degrees in most post-Soviet countries. Reforms in higher education happened alongside many other socioeconomic reforms that had high human costs, and were associated with political turbulence and military conflicts.

**System-Level Transformations**

Thirty years of transformation in post-Soviet countries have shaped 15 formally different national higher education systems. All 15 systems evolved from the same Soviet model, which restricted the number of institutional sectors and their reputational aspirations. Unleashing positional competition-based markets in the 1990s helped to strengthen the advantage of those educational institutions that were strong before, and to increase the gap between top- and bottom-tier institutions. In that sense—in terms of institutional stratification—post-Soviet systems are comparable to other marketized systems.

The state further shaped differences, both vertically and horizontally: institutional classification systems; degree systems; range of providers; institutional rankings; sectoral subordination; performance-based funding; and the classification of students based on a national admission test and other means. Maintaining or reducing system hierarchies was also a political choice, and as most countries rejected the Soviet egalitarian ideal, there was no policy commitment to overcoming social inequalities. In a few countries, participation rates and participation of women in higher education decreased compared to the Soviet period.

**Institutional-Level Transformations**

Marketization took place largely within the dominating public sector and contributed to system inequalities, not only at the institutional level, but also at the intra-institutional level. The so-called dual-track tuition fee system divides enrollments in each public institution into state-funded and privately funded segments. The shift from Soviet free to fee-based higher education had foundations in the later Soviet period. That helps to explain why the same model was adopted in all 15 countries. In 13 countries, half or more of the student population in the public sector pay fees (in Armenia, Georgia, and the Kyrgyz Republic, the share of fee-paying students is over 80 percent). The other students in the public sector receive state-funded education. Unlike all other international funding models, this system does not apply the same rules to all students, maintaining double standards of social value (money/merit).

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Although money is decisive, it legitimates and fosters inequality. It is characteristic of post-Soviet societies that the system is almost never questioned. It reproduces a cultural divide between Soviet values of higher education as a common good and commitment to egalitarianism, and the post-Soviet ideas of higher education as a private good, consumer choice, and normalized inequality. But wherever the state intervenes, it can reduce built-in inequality, like in Estonia, where the dual-track system was canceled in 2012 for students progressing normally.

**The Purposes of Higher Education**

Neoliberal reforms became foundational in refocusing higher education toward labor market needs and outcomes. For post-Soviet systems, such "vocationalization" was easier to adopt because it echoed the Soviet orientation toward the needs of the national economy. The Soviet system saw higher education as an instrument of both social and economic development, to train cadres for the national economy and to form a new individual for the collective good of socialism, an egalitarian society free of exploitation.

*Perestroika*, which tried to overcome the Soviet biases, highlighted the intrinsic value of higher education as a full development of personality, prioritizing the humanistic purposes of education. Based on human capital theory and the neoliberal imaginary, post-Soviet higher education reduced higher education to an instrument of economic development. It focused on the labor market and on employability, but this time for the sake of the individual, not the collective good.

**Commodification of Knowledge**

Perhaps more importantly, marketization affected the core of higher education: knowledge—which lost its intrinsic value. Knowledge became a commodity, which could take various forms. In a situation of underfunding, described as "diversification of funding sources," all higher education could do was to sell "knowledge." Here, the model of the "entrepreneurial university" was very handy to ensure that the state did not have to do anything and the institutions would have to raise funds themselves, which they did. The first form of "knowledge" that was sold were higher education degrees, which was facilitated by the dual-track tuition fee model.

Giving access in exchange for payment to those underperforming at the national test legitimized nonexcellence in higher education. It contributed to the understanding that higher education is just a commodity to be bought, with no intrinsic value, rather than demonstrating a triumph of individual free choice. For the academic profession, undermined by decades of low salaries, insecure employment, lack of social status, and stratification, the commodification of knowledge resulted in erosion of the academic core of higher education. This led to prioritization of applied knowledge, applied research, and consultancy work, to complement low public funding.

Commodification also facilitated the development of a large-scale market in constructed academic papers, including doctoral dissertations, student essays, and journal articles. Everything has become for sale. Academic values and academic freedom have never been strong and have not received any grounding in the post-Soviet period, being further undermined by external political pressures.

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**Contribution of Higher Education to Society, and Its Limitations**

The bitter part of the post-Soviet experience is that the nature and implications of the marketization and commodification of higher education were not unknown at the beginning of the reforms; this was discussed in international literature. Post-Soviet transformations were part of the global shift that prioritized individual goods/values over collective goods/values, and a natural and spontaneous economic order over political action.

While higher education expanded over the last 30 years and we saw some good institutional examples of higher education development, the contributions of higher education to society can be only considered successful if realized on a systemic and global level. That has not happened. Competition, a fetish of the neoliberal perspective, divides and diverts individual academics, students, institutions, national systems, politicians, states, and societies from combining their efforts in achieving common goals such as peace, tackling climate crisis, handling pandemics, pursuing justice and others. That could and should change. ◢