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# Internationalisation in a context of non-recognition: the case of Higher Education in Northern Cyprus

Théotime Chabre

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***Boundaries, identities and hybridity in Higher Education***

**Internationalisation in a context of non-recognition: the case of  
Higher Education in Northern Cyprus**

**Key words**

Internationalization, Higher Education, North-Cyprus, Turkey, conflict, intermediaries, international relations, non-recognition.

**Abstract**

A peripheral space of the international political scene, North Cyprus has nevertheless become a regional hub in terms of higher education over the past decade. Using quantitative and qualitative data collected between 2016 and 2018, this paper aims at discussing the integration of Northern Cyprus, under a ad-hoc political status, in regional and international student mobilities and its impact in terms of international network building.

**Biography**

Théotime Chabre is a first year sociology and political sciences PhD candidate at the LAMES and the CHERPA laboratories. He is co-supervised by Sylvie Mazzella (LAMES) and Elise Massicard (CERI). He works on the dynamics of internationalization of the Higher Education Sector in Cyprus and Turkey.

## **Introduction**

“As TRNC, we have traveled considerable distance in order to become an educational island in higher education.” The Minister of National Education of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus Özdemir Berova put in words the ambition of this small secessionist Mediterranean territory: becoming a global hub of higher education. Available figures seem to give him some credits. If we were to include North Cyprus in the data released by the UNESCO, Northern Cyprus would be home to the most internationalized student body in the world : 85% of the student population are international students, considered as students that study in an other country than the one they have obtained their diploma and from which they are not nationals, far from Australia, which is considered the most internationalized country in terms of higher education students in the world by the Institute of International Education(Institute of Higher Education 2017). In raw numbers, the number of international students in the territory tops the figures in countries such as Spain or Saudi Arabia: Among the 95,500 students that were register in 2016-2017 in one of the 17 officially recognized universities, 80,000 are international students. In terms of a figure that tops In other words, 85 % of the student population and a third of the population of the entire territory are international students, compared to 1,35% of the Australian population.

The dynamics of higher education sector in Northern Cyprus are tough to identify through the lens of the existing literature on internationalization of higher education. OECD policy advisor Stephan Vincent-Lancrin(Stephan Vincent-Lancrin 2008) highlights development aid policy, economic dynamism and international visibility as main factors of HE attractiveness. But, The TRNC does not maintain any international development aid policies, a historic soft-power, and its economy, less than marginal due to the size of its local market and its official status of “illegally secessionist entity” and “occupied territory” (4<sup>th</sup> interstate Cyprus vs Turkey).

All of these statements incite me to ask the following question: how did the higher education system in place in Northern Cyprus manage to develop in such a marginalized area?

*From an economic perspective, North-Cyprus cannot be considered as part of the global North (quote). In the same time, an overwhelming part of the incoming student are departing from countries considered as part of the global South, leading me to consider the student mobility dynamics towards this territory as South-South migration. This paradigm, which is used and also criticized by many (Elieth P. Eyebiyi et Sylvie Mazzella 2014), is debatable but remains one of the key instrument through which higher education dynamics are studied.*

In this essay, I will attempt to explore the dimensions of Northern Cyprus higher education sector by recontextualizing it historically, geographically and economically. At the same time, I will try to give a critical look on the understanding of North-Cyprus as a geographical territory and a political entity. I will process in three steps. I will dedicate the first part of this article to describe the development of the higher education sector in Northern Cyprus throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> and the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In the second part, I will attempt to evaluate to which extent the dynamics of the HE sector in Northern Cyprus are dependent on its ad-hoc political situation, or must be understood in a larger paradigm, such as South-South student mobility patterns. The third part will be devoted to interrogate the dynamics between the private and the public sector in the producing of an internationalization context in Northern Cyprus.

## **Method**

This paper uses a theoretical framework from public policy analysis, international relations and sociology of higher education. It is supported by empirical material collected during a year of online fieldwork two month-long preliminary fieldworks in Cyprus in 2016 and 2018. It is made of 23 non-systematic semi-directive and informative interviews with students, teachers and employees of the International Office picked up from 5 of the oldest and largest universities in Northern Cyprus.

## **I. A territory which has known an expansion and internationalization of its student population**

## a. Description of Cyprus

Cyprus is the third largest island of the Mediterranean. It is located 70 kilometers south of the Turkish coasts and 105 kilometers west of the Syrian shores. As of now, there are officially 1,2 million people living there. Since 1974, the island is divided in two parts, following a military operation led by the Turkish army. The southern part, approximately two-thirds of the island, is controlled by the Republic of Cyprus, a member of the European Union since 2004, which is internationally recognized as the sole sovereign State over the island. The northern part is *de facto* controlled by a secessionist entity, the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC), which is politically and militarily dominated by Turkey<sup>1</sup>.

### Box 1: Historic recap: From the Ottoman Empire to the British Crown

As a crossroad between Western Europe and the Middle East, Cyprus has been occupied by many foreign powers across history. Home of Greek colonies in the Antiquity, it became a Roman than a Byzantine territory up until 1192. Occupied by the Lusignans than the Venetians, it is conquered by the Ottoman Empire in 1571, under which a Muslim community develops among the native Greek-speaking Orthodox. Both will become what is nowadays known as the Turkish-Cypriot and the Greek-Cypriot communities. In 1878, it falls into the hands of the United-Kingdom. From 1950 onwards, A local insurrection among the Greek-Cypriot community demanding the union of Cyprus and Greece, known as *Enosis*, raise against the colonial power. In the same time, members of the Turkish-Cypriot community put forward claims of separation and unification with Turkey. The independence in 1960 is negotiated between the United-Kingdom, Turkey and Greece on the basis of a consociational republic which distributes power among both communities, with the three latter States being keeping a role of supervision as “constitutional guarantors”. Raising tensions end up producing a major political crisis which leads to the isolation of most of the Turkish-Cypriots in enclaves and the *de facto* territorial division of both communities in 1963. After a period of 11 years of turmoil plagued by violence on both sides, Turkey launch a military operation as an answer to a coup attempt aimed at enforcing *Enosis*. During the operation, Turkey takes control of the north of the island and imposes a population exchange. The northern part is officially delegated to the

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<sup>1</sup> The use of the term « Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus » in this paper does not reflect any support or does not aim to push forward any form of recognition of the secession.

Turkish-Cypriot authorities that had developed in the enclaves as an autonomous province of Cyprus. In 1983, taking the failure of the peace negotiations as a pretext, these authorities declare independence, but only gain recognition from Turkey, which considers it as its baby-nation (*Yavru Vatan*) and keeps a heavy presence in all the fields of economic and political life. As of today, the still on-going reconciliation process has not yielded major results. The referendum on the Annan Plan in 2003 created a momentum that enabled the unilateral opening of the border the same year. But the Greek-Cypriot party, which then joined the EU in 2004, rejected it. The latest attempt, between June 2015 and December 2017, failed as the result of the Crans-Montana conference and as of today the calendar is not clear.

## **b. The history of the education system in Northern Cyprus**

The development of the Higher Education Sector in Northern Cyprus is profoundly entrenched in the history of the island and can be described in three main temporalities.

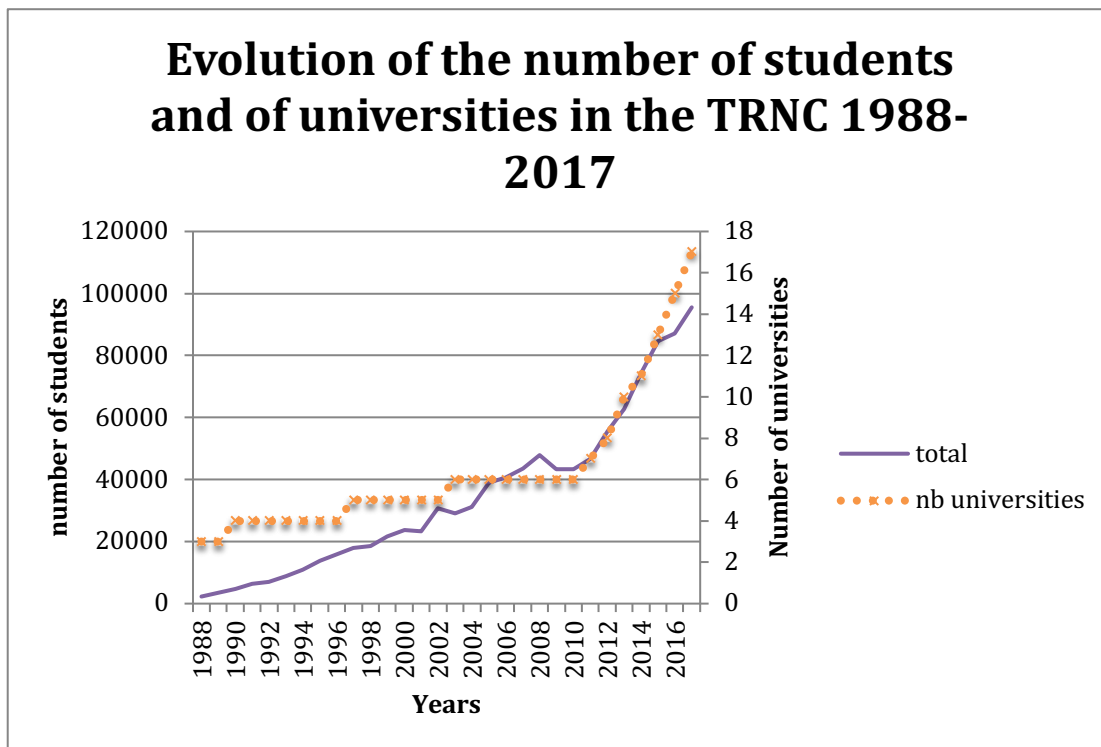
The period between 1885 and 1983 is characterized by a restraint local offer in terms of higher education and strong dynamics of outbound student mobility. A restraint number of vocational schools are set up on a community basis in order to train teachers and engineers. For the Turkish-Cypriot community, three institutions are created, under the auspices of the newly settled Turkish Republic: an academy for primary and secondary teachers (*Ataturk Öğretmen Akademisi*) in 1937, a police academy (*Polis Okulu*) in 1969, and a school for engineer (*Yüksek Teknoloji Enstitüsü*) in 1979<sup>2</sup>. However, the main option for higher education on the island is expatriation, mainly to the colonial power, or, depending on one's community, to Turkey or Greece. These dynamics endure after the independence of the Republic of Cyprus (RoC) in 1960, as the three countries keep a decisive influence on the island (see Box 1).

After 1983 and the formal independence of North Cyprus as the TRNC, both communities' higher education type of offer diverges. While the RoC maintains vocational school and refrain from authorizing university level institutions to open, the TRNC witnesses the creation of a number of public non-profit and private for-profit universities. Between 1983 and 2001, two

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<sup>2</sup> The stated objective of the latter is to favor the emergence of a local work-force capable of rekindling an economy left in shambles by putting to take advantage of the properties left behind by the Greek-Cypriot refugees.

public universities (*vakıf üniversitesi*<sup>3</sup>), three private universities and one campus of a Turkish university are set up and are rapidly increasing in terms of number of students. In 2003-2004, the island of Cyprus undergoes a dramatic political transformation, with the failure of the referendum on the Annan Plan and the RoC's accession to the European Union (see Box 1). In the subsequent years, no new institutions are opened in the North, until 2011. Since then, the number of officially recognized universities has substantially raised, with 11 new universities and 15 others have been accredited and are programmed to open in the coming years. These new institutions remain however marginal in terms of activities and in terms of number of students. In the same time, the demographics of the student body dramatically evolve, with a growth of foreign students of 221% on the 2011 – 2017 period.



**Graph 1: The number of universities went from 3 in 1988 to 17 in 2017. In the same time, the total number of students has been multiplied by 42.**

In 35 years, higher education has become the leading economic sector on the territory, on a par with tourism (Mehtap-Smadi et Hashemipour 2011), which had previously virtually no higher

<sup>3</sup> Technically, all universities in Northern Cyprus follow the Turkish higher education system, meaning they are all financed through a foundation, or « vakıf ». But during interviews, the term vakıf university was only applied to the universities whose foundation are financed and controlled by the State. The other universities are dubbed « private university » (öz el üniversitesi).

education legacy. The local authorities have made it their national priority and a symbol of the ability of the TRNC to maintain economic sustainability(Susanne Güsten 2014) despite the hurdles created by the embargo and not being part of the European Union. Beyond economic sustainability, the existence of a vibrant and internationalized higher education sector is, at least for the local political actors, shown as a proof that the TRNC exists in the international community, despite all except Turkey officially states the contrary. It has become a symbol of the capacity of this political entity to sustain. But how to describe this entity, and in what conditions is it sustaining? I will try in the subsequent part to explore the mechanisms through which such a higher education sector developed in this territory, by first concentrating on the relation between North Cyprus and Turkey.

## **II. Giving meaning to the role of Turkey in the higher education sector in North Cyprus.**

The question of Turkey's investment in Northern Cyprus is one that has been studied profoundly (Bozkurt 2014). The difficulty that presents this case is that there are no consensus on how to describe the political nature of North Cyprus, especially regarding Turkey. According to international law, North Cyprus is an occupied territory of Turkey and the TRNC cannot be considered as an independent State. Furthermore, the declaration of independence and the recognition by Turkey are null and void<sup>4</sup>. Regarding social sciences and especially political sciences literature, the Turkish presence is not contested but its legitimacy is the object of fierce debates(Copeaux et Mauss-Copeaux 2005), sometimes hard to distinguish from individual political inclinations when the authors are personally concerned by the issue. The Turkish presence is visible through different channels: the Turkish State maintain 30,000 permanent soldiers on the island and supports numerous sectors of the economy through the Support Council of its embassy. Turkey's influence is also very visible by the number of Turkish companies operating on the territory and the large proportion of the population made out of Turkish nationals permanently or temporarily living on the territory: settlers(Yücel Vural, Başak Ekenoğlu and Sertaç Sonan 2015), businessmen or tourists. Students are a part of this category and the Turkish-Cypriot higher education system is deeply rooted in the Turkish

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<sup>4</sup> UN resolution no.541 and no. 550 ; Loizidou and Cyprus (intervening) v Turkey, App No 15318/89, §64, ECHR 1996-VI



higher education system. This is mainly the result of a historic investment of HE by the Turkish authorities, both as a way to cope with the limitations of its own HE offer and in order to enable access to international resources for its occupied territory. Up to the early 2000s, this relation drives almost exclusively the development of the Higher Education sector in Northern Cyprus.

### **a. Investing North Cyprus as a way to cope with the limitations of Turkish HE system**

Institutionally speaking, the universities in Northern Cyprus can be considered to be to some extent dependent on their institutional link with Turkey. At the time of their creation, and for several decades, the only quality insurance body that recognized them was the Higher Education Council (Yüksek Öğrenim Kurulu, YÖK) of the Turkish Republic. This can be traced back to the creation of the first universities in the country, and especially the creation of the main State-run university of the TRNC. The historic records of Levantine University state that both Turkey and the recently established TRNC decided in 1985 to transform the Yüksek Teknoloji Enstitüsü into a proper university under the YÖK<sup>5</sup>. A decision that was enforced the next year with an ad-hoc law voted in the TRNC parliament (Parliament of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus 1986). In total, between 1984 and 2017, 17 universities open in Northern Cyprus, 2 publics and 15 privates. For each of them, a formal recognition by the YÖK is a must to obtain the right to open courses. The link was formalized through bilateral agreement. According to the one - signed in 2008<sup>6</sup>, the YÖK has a capacity of interference in many domains of HE regulations in Northern Cyprus, especially the organization of programs and the fee regulations. The agreement also states that YÖK shall organize control visit every-year to check if the institutions keep up with the regulations, which it does irregularly in practice (O.K. 2018).

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<sup>5</sup> 1985 : Governments of Turkish Republic (TR) and Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) mutually agree on opening a university called 'EMU'. Members of the T.R. Council of Higher Education visit the Institute of Higher Technology with the aim of transforming it into a university.

1986 : Following the TRNC Assembly's approval of the Statute establishing the North Cyprus Education Foundation and EMU (18/86), the Institute of Higher Technology is converted into a state University assuming the name of EMU. <https://www.emu.edu.tr/en/about-emu/emu-history/593>

<sup>6</sup> International Agreement of reciprocal recognition of the universities between the Republic of Turkey and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus.

<http://www.yodak.gov.ct.tr/Portals/1119/KKTC%20-%20TC%20milletleraras%C4%B1%20anla%C5%9Fma%20.pdf>

The administrative tutelage is not uniform. State universities, contrary to private universities, namely Levantine University and Continental University, receive official funding from the Turkish Embassy in the TRNC through its development and economic cooperation office<sup>7</sup>. It also evolved through time, with the increasing institutionalization of local control and supervision agencies. Until the beginning of the 1990s, YÖK is the sole accreditor of Higher Education in Northern Cyprus and works hand-in-hand with the Ministry of National Education of the TRNC. But after 1993, the local administration starts to take up some prerogative and develop proper quality insurance body dedicated to Higher Education. The Coordination, Evaluation and Planning Organisation was established within the Ministry of Education of North Cyprus in order to provide coordination between the universities and to licence new programs. It evolves in 2005, with an independent body being created, with accreditation prerogatives: the Higher Education Planning, Evaluation, Accreditation and Coordination Council (YÖDAK)<sup>8</sup>. The body is directed by a college of five academics from Northern Cypriot universities, elected by the parliament among candidates presented by political parties. YÖDAK has not replaced YÖK but works side by side with it: for example, in order to obtain permission to open a new university, one must now obtain accreditation from both YÖDAK and YÖK. But YÖK seems to keep the upper end. As an illustration, five projects have been accredited by the YÖDAK but not by the YÖK and are still not accepting students as of May 2018.

From a Turkish perspective, the opening of new universities in Northern Cyprus offered new opportunities for a higher education for would-be Turkish university students that failed their post-highschool test and which families can afford the costs of education<sup>9</sup>. From 1988 to 2017, the number of Turkish students attending these universities has continuously risen, with an annual average gross rate of 14,25%<sup>10</sup> and a total of 53329 students for the year 2017-2018. Since 1988, the period for which data is available, Turkish students have always represented,

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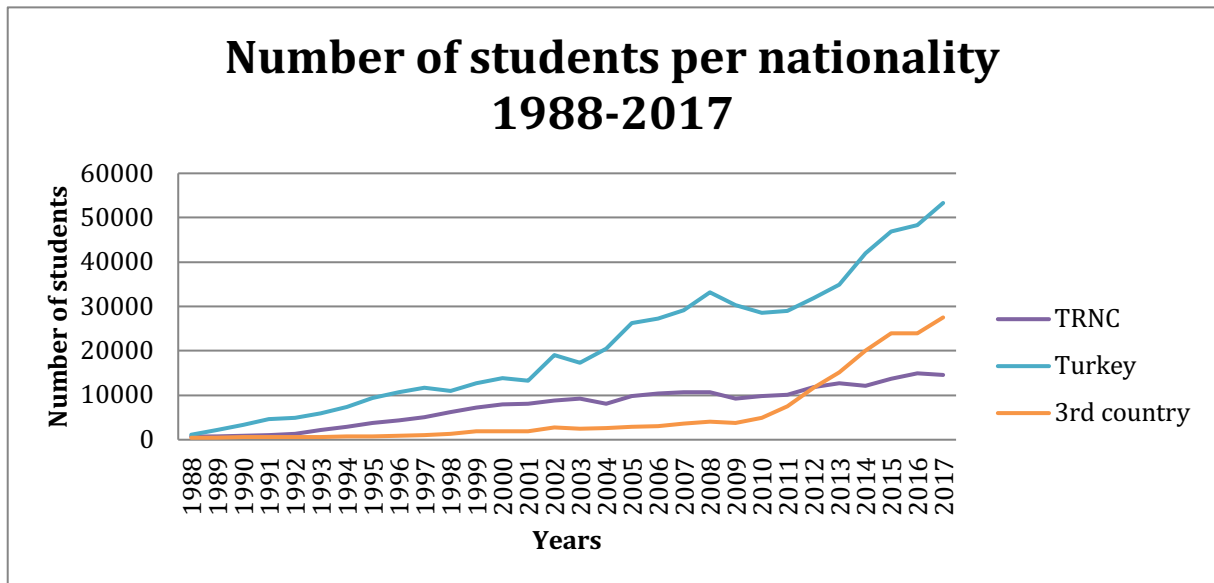
<sup>7</sup> According to the 2016, reports of the Economic Planification Office of the TRNC and the Development and economic cooperation agency of the Turkish Embassy in Northern Cyprus, Turkey contributed to 32 million lira for the higher education sector in the TRNC in 2016. KKTC Ekonomi Durum Raporu, 2016, Lefkosa buyukelcigi.

<sup>8</sup> Art 8 and 9, KUZZEY KIBRIS TÜRK CUMHURİYETİ YÜKSEKÖĞRETİM YASASI, 13th of December 2005.

<sup>9</sup> (David Behar 2002) A vision correlated in two different interviews by people implicated in the creation of a public and a private universities in Northern Cyprus, May 2018.

<sup>10</sup> DevPlan Annual Statistics, TRNC, December 2017

by far, the major share of total students. For the academic year 2017-2018, 66% of the students come from Turkey (se Graph 2).



Graph 2: Number of students per nationality. Sources: Department of Development Planning (DevPlan), TRNC, 2017 annual rapport.

This phenomenon is so important that Northern Cyprus has become in the Turkish collective mind a backdoor to higher education, as a last case opportunity in case other plan fails(David Behar 2002). The average points necessary to get into a university in Cyprus is among the lowest compared to other universities accredited by the YÖK. This phenomenon is particularly visible in some specific departments that are difficult to enter in, such as Law. The attractiveness of the law faculties in Northern Cyprus is so important for the Turkish would-be law students that Turkey imposed a quota on each Cypriot universities regarding the intake of Turkish citizen in their law department.

## **b. HE as a way for the local actors to bypass the paucity of economic resources**

On the Turkish-Cypriot side, according to different local actors that have taken part in the creation of the historic universities, the development of universities has never seemed to serve

the objective of providing higher education to the local population but rather provide a way to bypass difficulties to develop a local economy. <sup>11</sup>

The access to international trade is rather difficult for this territory, as a consequence of the condemnation of the 1983 proclamation of independence, the imposition of a embargo on importations from the TRNC by the European Union in 1994 and the general limited resources of the territory. In consequence, the economy is largely dominated by the tertiary sector, with its leading industry being tourism, especially the casino industry and medical tourism(Katircioğlu 2010).

The development of universities is strongly correlated with the structure of the local economy. Building and maintaining facilities and the arrival of foreign students has boosted large sectors of the economy, including construction, restauration and accommodation. It also provided a job market for a large range of highly qualified Cypriots, especially in the academy. There is a tendency for a growing number of Cypriot academics compared to Turkish and other nationalities academics, as the growing academic sector offers one of the most rewarding job market on the territory<sup>12</sup>. This can be seen especially in private universities, that are owned by the most successful business families on the island and whose economic model is based on services provided to the students. International Students in Northern Cyprus and their families are so central in the local economy that they are often rather described as “alternative tourists”(Katircioğlu 2010). In 2011, Mehtap-Smadi and Hashemipour estimated that 40% of the economy in the TRNC can be traced back to the higher education sector(Mehtap-Smadi et Hashemipour 2011).

The limited share of Cypriot students in the universities, Cypriot (14657 in 2017, 15% of the student body in 2017), both inferior to Turkish students and to Cypriot studying abroad<sup>13</sup>, seem to confirm that the accommodation capacity of the universities is not proportioned to attend to local demand.

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<sup>11</sup> Interviews with A.A., the head of the mechanical engineering department of NEU, february 2016, and H.Y. a member of the rectorate of EMU, may 2018.

<sup>12</sup> Interview S.S., associate professeur at CIU, May 2018.

<sup>13</sup> In terms of students, there is a sensible share of the total students that indeed are but the major part of university students are attending universities abroad, mainly in the UK, the US and Turkey. Diaspora networks, a deep-rooted tradition of student expatriation, a larger symbolic recognition of foreign diplomas and the availability of numerous financial support mechanism for candidates are among the reasons that appear to explain this phenomenon. See, Dezalay, « Les courtiers de l'international. Héritiers cosmopolites, mercenaires de l'impérialisme et missionnaires de l'universel », Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales 2004/1 (n° 151-152), p. 4-35.

At this point, one can wonder of the legitimacy of talking about the “internationalization” of the HE sector in North-Cyprus. The role of Turkey as an administrative tutor, an quality insurance guarantor, a curricula supervisor and a student provider is so crucial that the relation cannot be characterized simply as one between a providing country and a host country. If we follow the conclusion of Perouse(Pérouse, s. d.), it can be argued that, given the particular relation that bound Turkey to North Cyprus, be it described as a colonization process(Navaro-Yashin 2012) or a relation of patronage(Scott Pegg 2017), the notion of international border is not faithfully describing the mobility patterns between these two spaces. What could be considered as internationalization might better be understood as one of the facets of a process of territorial integration of Northern Cyprus into a larger Turkish space.

However, this conclusion only holds to explain the proportion of Turkish students. It does not give any clue on the presence of “real” international students from other country. Their case is far from being anecdotic: in 2017-2018, they represent 29% of the total of students. Their number are rapidly expanding, with an average annual growth rate of 27,5% for the period 2010-2017. This mobility invites us to look closely at both the origins of this phenomenon and evaluate its implications in terms of foreign policy and formal international relation building.

### **III. Coming to the world : putting North-Cyprus on the map (of international education)**

Official data on the origins of “3<sup>rd</sup> country students”, as they are officially labeled in administrative documents, are scare as the government nor the universities release detailed information on the nationality of the students. The sole number that is presented is the number of nationalities, which is to be taken with precautions, as it does not represent the demographic weights of the different national groups. I should add that the Unesco figures on student mobility do not seem to include Northern Cyprus in its calculation, neither as an independent territory nor as a part of one other country (Cyprus or Turkey), which makes independent fact-checking more difficult. The gross available data, without nationality details, give however some interesting information. The main one being that there seems to be two period regarding

the influx of 3<sup>rd</sup> country students. The first one, between 1988 and 2009, shows a relatively stable number and proportion of 3<sup>rd</sup> country students (+10,34% per year). In a second time, from 2009 to now, 3<sup>rd</sup> country students have grown at a high, sustained rate (23,83% per year), higher than the growth of Turkish and Cypriot students.

Partial data give an idea on the origins of the largest national groups represented in the international student body. The data I present here have been taken from a working document from the YÖDAK in 2015, and compared with other data issued in periodicals(Mine Atlı 2017) and during interviews with high ranking university officials(Interview 2018) (See Graph 3).

<b>ORIGIN COUNTRY</b>	<b>STUDENT NUMBER</b>	<b>DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS</b>
<b>NIJERIA</b>	7274	NO
<b>ZIMBABWE</b>	1882	NO
<b>SYRIA</b>	1857	NO
<b>JORDAN</b>	1793	NO
<b>IRAN</b>	1943	NO
<b>PAKISTAN</b>	1506	YES
<b>IRAK</b>	1110	NO
<b>LIBYA</b>	1126	YES
<b>EGYPT</b>	681	NO
<b>AZERBAIJAN</b>	511	YES
<b>TURKMENISTAN</b>	406	NO
<b>INDIA</b>	270	NO
<b>RUSSIA</b>	201	NO
<b>LEBANON</b>	372	NO
<b>KAZAKHISTAN</b>	475	NO
<b>CONGO</b>	403	NO

**Graph 3: The 16 most represented nationalities (except Turkish and Cypriot nationals) in the North-Cypriot HE system in 2015. Source: YÖDAK work document**

The first thing these data can tell us is that there is no significant correlation between the existing diplomatic ties of the TRNC and the origins of students. The unrecognized State has managed to create a limited diplomatic network consisting of 29 unofficial permanent representations in nearby partner States or international/regional organizations. But, aside from a few cases where correlation appear to be significant, namely Azerbaijan, Libya and Pakistan, the actual international ties of the TRNC do not correspond to the countries of origins of students. They do neither correspond to the diasporic ties of the Turkish Cypriot communities, mainly present in the UK, US and Australia. The following development attempts to formulate alternative hypothesis to explain mobility dynamics of “real” international students towards North-Cyprus through a qualitative material gathered through a fieldwork in May 2018.

#### **a. From a case by case internationalization related to regional turmoil...**

The fieldwork I have conducted in May 2018 led me to propose to hypotheses that, in combination, can explain much of the dynamics on a macro-level. The first is that a sizeable portion of international students have been attracted to pursue education in Northern Cyprus out of safety concerns in their home country. North Cyprus has always hosted a minority of non-Turkish foreign students. In 1988, 438 students are counted as 3<sup>rd</sup> country in the official statistics of the Ministry of National Education. According to interviews with members of the first administrative teams of the first wave of university, these mobilities are on a case by case scale, almost exclusively young people coming from war-torn Middle-Eastern countries in times of dire crisis<sup>14</sup>, either directly or as a second step after a sojourn in Turkey as refugees(Interview 2018). In some cases, the case by case influx progressively got institutionalized with the development of official ties with the home country accreditation bodies, on a department basis, as it seems to be the case with Iran(Interview. 2018). But during this time period, internationalization appears to be the concern of a few individuals in the HE sector, especially at the most developed and renown university, the State-run EMU. There is no official strategy to attract foreign students, no directorate delegated to international student affairs.

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<sup>14</sup> HY, MH, May 2014

This hypothesis of Northern Cyprus universities as a “shelter” for regional students is also put forward to explain part of the increase in the second period and helps explaining to a certain extent the higher increasing rate of the period from 2011 to now. For some university officials, the turmoil that followed the “Arab Spring” led to the disruption of HE in some of the concerned countries, a phenomenon that has been already studied in other countries in the region (Aydin et Kaya 2017). This interview extract is particularly enlightening :

*“The Arab Spring « helped » a lot. For many years we tried to get Syrians to come to Northern Cyprus, not even one came before the war. Now they moved here. It was an opportunity. There is at least 1100 (Syrian) students now. In Lybia, Lybians were eligible to get a scholarship to UK or US for postgraduates, the undergraduates were all studying in Lybia. Now, lots of universities here get undergrads from Lybia.” (Interview 2018)*

The disruption of the local HE sector in countries marred by civil unrest and the deterioration of public services proved to be beneficial for the Turkish-Cypriot HE institutions. This source of students has augmented following the larger deterioration of public safety in Libya and Syria following the collapse of the State after 2011. To get some perspective, there were more Syrian students in Northern Cyprus in 2015 (1857) than in the whole of Turkey in 2014, with a number of 1422 registered this year (Keith David Watenpaugh, Adrienne L. Fricke, James R. King 2014). If some of these students seem to end up in Cyprus after a sojourn in Turkey, as refugees, most of them come directly to Cyprus, creating new international mobility patterns that put North Cyprus as an independent territory on the international map.

## **b. ... to an “offensive” integration in the international market of higher education**

Another source of explanation is the investment by local universities of the market of international education. According to interviewees, the first reflexion process on active internationalization has started in the early 2000s. Two phenomena could have triggered this debate. The first is the failure of the Annan Plan and the subsequent integration of Southern Cyprus under the leadership of the Republic of Cyprus (RoC) in 2004. This situation lowered the trust towards the European Institution and the potential of integrating European Higher Education space, as well as consolidated the capacity of the RoC to lobby against universities



it deems to be illegal. In consequence of this rejection, North Cyprus, as a non-recognized entity, has been banned from joining the Bologna Process and Turkish-Cypriot universities have been blocked from participating in the Erasmus programs, depriving them of a great potential of internationalization. The second phenomenon is the increase of the HE sector in Turkey that heightened the competition for Turkish students and made diversification a more attractive target.

As a result, Turkish Cypriot universities, and especially the State-funded university, Levantine University, have started to look up for ways to attract foreign students. Different strategies have been developed side by side: first, universities have developed their own networks, through active promotion and agent networking. Levantine University started to actively develop an international strategy in 2004, a strategy that progressed to a point when specific institutions were created to attend to international student affairs under the rectorate. This institution, led by a dedicated vice-rectorate, appears to celebrate the individual efforts that were done in the 1980s and the 1990s, as the same Iranian professor that instigate the first internationalization steps was nominated to this position. Other universities seem to have followed in the subsequent years. This is particularly visible for Global University. According to a professor that was involved in the first major internationalization process for this universities, delegations including an academic and a marketing agent were sent to targeted destinations to do on-spot admission. These delegations were supported by a network of agencies which the university had hired in advance (Interview 2018). In the same time a group of 10 universities were gathered under the sponsorship of Turkey to promote studying in Northern Cyprus through the “Study in North Cyprus” umbrella organization in the early 2000s. It worth noting that this network pre-dates the creation of its equivalent in Turkey by almost a decade<sup>15</sup>. The universities, either individually or under “Study in North Cyprus”, have in common to aim three regions in particular, Africa, the larger Middle East and Turkic Countries in Caucasia and Central Asia, with a focus on Africa<sup>16</sup>. Recently, other countries have been added to the targets, especially non-Turkic CIS countries and India. Combined strategies have produced their results, managing to attract a great number of students, specifically among the main providers of outgoing

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<sup>15</sup> M.A. Indicates that Study in North Cyprus was created at the end of the 1990s and the Turkish agency responsible for « Study in Turkey », *Turkish Universities Promotion Agency (TUPA)* was only founded only in 2010.

<sup>16</sup> It should be noted that these regions roughly correspond to the regions of origins of foreign students in Turkey as well, but the network of internationalization of Turkish universities seem to be distinct to the one of the Turkish-Cypriot universities to a large extent. Further studies is needed to assess the signification of the existing degree of correlation.

students: out of the 15 most represented nations in North-Cyprus universities, 6 of them are among the 20 most providing countries<sup>17</sup>. The observation and interviews I realized in the International office of Levantine University (State-funded) and Global University (Private) pointed towards the central role active promotion of the universities, especially the heavy reliance on intermediaries. These intermediaries, that were described most of the time as “agents” come from diverse professional and social backgrounds and do not all work in the same conditions. In each countries of intervention, universities purchase the service of agents, that range from professional and government approved companies with large university portfolio in different countries to local entrepreneurs that offer their relations with government and accreditation officials. But the term “agents” also sometimes, but not always, cover the activities of “student assistants” that are employed on a part-time basis by the international office to organize the promotion of the university in their country, or region of origins, usually through their family and hometown networks(Interview 2018). If we go further and define agents as individuals that offer intermediary services between would-be candidates and the university in exchange for financial retribution, we can also count in the students that receive money or partial fee exemption in exchange for cooptation of new students(Interview. 2018)

### **c. The role of the State officials**

During this process, except in the case of the Study in North Cyprus program, government bodies, and especially TRNC government bodies do not seem to have played a central role. If we look up at the reason that have been displayed in media and by interviewees as to why the country managed to become so attractive, university officials have put forward several advantages that I have ranked in four categories: Geography, Culture, university governance and State policies. Regarding State policies, the crime rate is only loosely related to domestic governance, and only the openness regarding visa policy can be counted as a proactive measure in terms of public policy. Most of the other reasons are the result of university policies, especially related to marketing, and to geographical conditions independent of the State will. Regarding other aspects, the State seems to be dependent on its status of “Baby-State” of Turkey, especially for the relations with would-be students prior to their arrival in Cyprus. For candidacy validation, every university candidates theoretically has to be screened by a representative of the TRNC Ministry of foreign affairs prior to his formal acceptance. But, as in most countries the TRNC does not have a diplomatic mission, university candidates have to

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<sup>17</sup> Unesco Database on international student mobility, last viewed 09.05.18

apply to the local Turkish embassy for the interview. According to a former foreign minister of the TRNC Following the large increase in demands towards Northern-Cypriot universities, Turkey has in some case demanded TRNC to supply civil servants in order to deal with the interviews of university candidates, but the TRNC cannot reach candidates in countries where itself or Turkey do not have a representation. This example actually also highlights the prevalence of industry interests on State interests in the development of this international network, as State officials are sent to countries on the basis of the needs of universities, most of them being private. In other regards, the TRNC is also dependent on Turkey to make students come to Cyprus and to make the go, as the only access to and out of North Cyprus is through Turkey.

In other words, the agency of the TRNC State officials looks rather constrained, both because the internationalization of the HE sector is promoted by private actors, and because it has a very limited capacity of acting beyond its territory. The State seems to be more present in terms of controlling the students once they are in Cyprus: the immigration police is reported to have a tight screening of the incoming students, pushing the universities to be present at the landing of the students. They will then have to submit to a medical exam in order to verify their health situation. They will be deported over the finding of diseases such as AIDS. Students are also becoming illegal once they do stop going to class, freeze a semester or delay their payments (which are at least in some cases bound to interest) and can be legally subjected to deportation, a subject on which the Ministry of interior is increasingly giving more attention.

<b>Geographical advantages</b>	<b>Cultural advantages</b>	<b>Advantages related to the university governance</b>	<b>Advantages related to State policies</b>
Proximity with Middle-Eastern countries	Muslim environment	Low grade and language proficiency requirements	Light visa policies
Easy access	Secular society	Relatively low fees and service costs	Low crime rate
Perceived proximity with (inclusion in) the EU/the West		Diploma recognition through international accreditation	Technical support of Turkish ministry of foreign affairs.
Good climate and being a Mediterranean island		Good facilities and the quality of the courses	
		Good word of mouth	
		Heavy reliance on the intermediaries Students/Alumni support (local promotion, cooptation and agent services) Biased agent promotion Cases of human trafficking	
		Aggressive targeted marketing	

**Graph 4 Classification of the advantages of North Cyprus regarding the internationalization potential as mentioned by interviewees and medias.**

The lack of State implication in this process can be one of the reasons for a number of wrong practices that have been denounced regarding the international student body. Other reasons have been stated by students and syndicalist engaged in movements trying to alert the public opinion on the situation of foreign students, mainly lack of transparency on the fee requirements,

aggressive marketing, unfair agent services, and in some occasion human trafficking(Mine Athi 2017).

**d. “It does not match” : assessing the impact of the internationalization of universities on the reach of the TRNC on the international scene.**

The internationalization of universities does not seem to have provided the country any progress in terms of foreign recognition. According to the former minister of foreign affairs, both process, higher education internationalization and formal international recognition, simply “do not match”(E.C. 2018). But a closer look on the topic shows that a series of informal contact lines have developed. It might not be the result of concrete diplomatic offensive from TRNC State officials but it still has the merit of existing. Three *fields of contacts* are worth looking with attention: First, in their efforts to become attractive abroad, universities need to insure incoming students about the recognition of their diploma, even if the TRNC lacks political recognition. In order to insure this, universities are creating contact with officials through their prospection activities but also through their participation in university associations: for instance, all the universities in Northern Cyprus are members of the European Universities Association (EUA), the International Association of Universities (IAU) and the Federation of Universities in Islamic World (FUIW)(Sari, Firat, et Karaduman 2016) ; through contracts with private accreditation companies in order to bypass lack of recognition: they are some of the biggest clients of accreditation companies like ABET (engineering) and FIBAA (business and management) ; by signing partnerships with universities all over the world : most of them have signed bilateral agreements with universities in the West that enable them to send students abroad for one or two semesters. As an example, according to the Academic Affairs Coordinator of EMU, the university signed 55 international cooperation agreements with foreign universities between October 2014 and summer 2017(O.K. 2018). The university currently sends students for a semester in different destination in Europe and the US and has a master program with Bologna University. It also hosts a Master level program from Warwick University in its campus and has had over the years a strong relation with San Diego University. The latter case actually underlines that these higher education relations, even if they might be not considered by some as relevant in terms of international relations, are sometimes perceived as such by others. In December 2006, the student gazette from San Diego State University reports that the (now defunct) Summer Study Abroad in Cyprus Program, offering summer courses in EMU for SDSU students, has encountered strong opposition, especially from one member of the

Californian State Board of Education, that happens to be one of the leading figure of the American Hellenic Institute Foundation<sup>18</sup>. The political potential of a dynamic HE sector is also not totally lost for Turkish-Cypriot authorities, that for example keep reminding on occasion EU officials they have included in the latest version of the law on higher education a provision stating that higher education must respect the necessary criteria in order to be able to join the Bologna Process as soon as it is authorized.(TRNC 2005)

Second, the internationalization of universities in Northern Cyprus create specific needs for new national communities that, for some, account for thousands of people each. The administration of their countries of origins are brought to maintain regular activities in the TRNC in order to provide them regular services. A good example of this field is the case of the Iranian embassy in the Republic of Cyprus. According to a former assistant in the embassy, the main day to day activity in the embassy is to register Iranian students in the TRNC. In order to do that, an agent must go to the universities to get the official papers from the students and the university(E.A. 2018). Some negative events also bring countries of origin to maintain contact with TRNC officials: administrative from providing countries are brought in to visit the universities, investigate in cases of complaints (claims of misconduct, murders, sexual violences on nationals), assist for the renewal of passports. In the universities, “national association” that are organized by the universities, often serve as an intermediary between the community and the embassy in Turkey or in South Cyprus.

Third, the TRNC benefit from indirect contact with the countries of origins through the intermediary and alumni networks of universities. The now recent alumni network does not seem to have concrete impact in terms of official political ties or economic penetration but it certainly creates awareness of the existence of the TRNC and sympathy (or dissatisfaction , depending on the experience) for the country, which has its important for an entity engaged in a propaganda battle on the international stage to gain legitimacy. They also facilitate further efforts for internationalization, as a number of foreign alumni are engaging in international promotion of their universities in various forms. More research should be done to assess if there are case, or patterns, of officials from International offices in universities transferring to a public position in a government agency with habilitation to maintain foreign contacts, and if that what

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<sup>18</sup> Cyprus Study abroad deals with opposition, Daily Aztek, 4.12.2006 and « San Diego State’s Turkey Trouble, by James O. Goldsborough, 11.01.2007

the case, in which degree they make use of their acquired international experience in their position.

In other words, the internationalization of the HE sector might not support “official recognition”, but it allows the building of a North-Cyprus “soft power”<sup>19</sup> as an educational hub, allows major North-Cyprus actors to develop and maintain international networks and more globally gives awareness about the very *de facto* existence of the TRNC. So, at the end, the very question of the necessity of recognition can be raised. If we follow the reasoning of Berg and Toomla (Berg et Toomla 2009), certain forms of normalization can be reached by political entities that lack formal recognition. Further research shall be conducted in order to interrogate the potential of higher education as one of the “normalization channel” through which these entities normalize.

## **Conclusion:**

This paper attempted to make sense of the development of a large and internationalized higher education in the non-recognized political entity of Northern-Cyprus (TRNC). I have shown that in order to grasp the dynamics of this sector, one should take in account both the relation that links this territory to its “Patron State” (Scott Pegg 2017), Turkey, and the local economic dynamics of a small and embargoed territory. Actors in the HE sector appear to have developed hybrid practice that cross-over the public/private boundaries but also between the formal local/international boundaries one expects in a more “traditional” political context. Furthermore, I have demonstrated the necessity to develop a multi-level analysis on both the specific “national” level, the regional level regarding the implication of conflicts in the neighbouring countries and the actor level, especially by making a focus on the structure and the organization of internationalization strategies at the university level and the role of intermediaries. In the last part, I attempted to bridge what seem at first as two different subjects: an internationalization process led by mercantile objectives and the development of State-level international relations. This work leads me to identify four main fields of interest for further studies: one concerns the relations between the HE sector in northern Cyprus and the HE sector in Turkey and their degree of interpenetration. The second aims at understanding better the dynamics related to the development of intermediary networks that would take in account the dynamics in the countries

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<sup>19</sup> Nye

providing students and in the countries providing bilateral agreements, in a global reflexion on South-South higher education mobilities. The third one targets the professional trajectories of individuals implicated in universities international strategies and their potential political and economic activities. The last field of interest would be the local economic and political implication at the local society level of the major demographic change brought by the massive incoming of international students.

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