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Borders Bridging Degrees: Harbin and Vladivostok’s Dual-Degree Programs

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China and Russia, two large countries with socialist histories and deep educational roots (Bray, 2007, p.589), are important education systems in today’s world. They are rarely compared, and knowledge on how the two systems cooperate still remains limited. The interactions between the systems have been subject to political fluctuations for a considerable period of time. The two nations share one of the longest land borders in the world—a border that once separated the two countries and cultures, enhanced hostility between them, and was rarely crossed by anyone during the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). However, the border has become very different since the 1990s, as the two countries seek to gain economic advantage from their proximity to each other.

In this context, the past 10 years have been notable in reshaping interactions in higher education between China and Russia. The universities in the Far East of Russia, driven by a strong need to obtain additional revenues because of inadequate financing from the federal state, began bringing in students from China not only for language study and exchange but also for procurement of degrees. Some of the universities formed partnerships with Chinese universities, which enabled both sets of institutions to jointly award Bachelor’s degrees to students from both countries. However, these programs stand apart from the mainstream education offered by both systems because students are not given opportunity to complete their full course of degree study in just one of the two countries. Moreover, there is not full crossover (mobility) of the programs and their teachers between the two countries, as happens in the majority of Chinese institutions acting under the Regulations of the People’s Republic of China on Chinese–Foreign Cooperation in Running Schools (Ministry of Education, 2003).

This chapter presents a first attempt to define and analyze the joint dual degree programs (JDDPs) as a specific phenomenon in cross-border
education between China and Russia. A particular aim of the research was to determine the factors that brought the partners to enter agreements with each other and implement them. Another goal was to explain why and how such programs came into being at the tertiary level of education, especially as they were not part of the two countries’ respective national governmental policies on cooperation between education systems.

To achieve my aims, I began by conducting a lengthy series of in-depth but semi-structured interviews in 2006 and 2007 (for a schedule, see Table 11.1) with administrators, teachers, and students in two partner universities per country. Two of them were in Harbin, China, and I refer to these later in this chapter as Partnership I. The other two (Partnership II) were in Vladivostok, Russia. The administrators were top university administrators. Among them were three policymakers (consuls of Russia in China and an official of the Heilongjiang provincial educational commission) and a retired senior professor from a third university in Harbin; the rest were administrators at the institutional level, running the particular programs. The teachers included those directly involved in teaching international students in the programs. Some were language teachers, or teachers of specialist subjects. Some also had pastoral responsibilities for the international students resident at their university. I also spoke to students in focus group settings. These students were all resident, at the time, in their placement abroad. I also considered and reviewed relevant documentation from national governments, triangulating the information from them with the interview data.

Many of the questions that I asked each group applied to all groups, but I also had sets of questions specific to each group and individual, depending on who they were and which posts they held. I furthermore asked each educator to evaluate the programs by listing specific problems experienced, overcome or not overcome, or predicted. The interviews were conducted in the interviewees’ native languages (Chinese and Russian), and normally at their home offices (i.e., in Harbin or Vladivostok). I asked a Chinese colleague, with extensive experience in the areas I was seeking to study, to check and test the interview protocol and its Chinese version when I piloted the study in early April, 2006. I conducted the pilot with a Russian colleague directly involved in running one of the programs under investigation, and who, in 2006/2007, was pursuing a Russian doctorate in philosophy (cultural studies).