

How Status, Elitism, International Capital and Marketability Drive the Practice of Student Mobility within Transnational Higher Education

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Abstract

Internationalisation exists in various forms across Higher Education. Transnational Higher Education (TNHE) enables students to study in one country for a qualification issued by an institution in another country. Student mobility programmes give students the chance to travel and experience university life abroad. Both TNHE and student mobility are facilitated via the formation of strategic partnerships between foreign institutions. Universities look to these partnership arrangements not only as a way of offering opportunity to their students, but also as a way of becoming more of a global presence on their own terms. This study identifies the driving forces behind the search for suitable partners across the Higher Education spectrum. It identifies status, elitism, international capital and marketability as integral to the practice of setting up student mobility partnerships. It further suggests that these driving ideals are supported by a neoliberal ideology in which accountability and performativity are used as tools to justify international partnerships. While this may be superficially successful in the short-term, it is proposed that the development of deeper, more meaningful links would be a more rewarding long-term strategy.

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Introduction

Internationalisation takes many forms within Higher Education (HE). In today's world, HE has been 'influenced by the globalization of our economies and societies and the increased importance of knowledge [...and...] driven by a dynamic and constantly evolving combination of political, economic, sociocultural, and academic rationales' (De Wit & Hunter, 2015). Although universities have always incorporated certain forms of internationalisation, particularly in the form of visiting scholars and shared research, the massification of HE has seen more modern manifestations of internationalisation emerge. Transnational Higher Education (TNHE) is one of the most prominent and significant of these new internationalisation models. TNHE is a program of study where students are based in a different location to the institution which will award their qualification (Wilkins, 2016).

Student mobility programmes are one of the most visible forms of TNHE partnership. Broadly speaking, student mobility is used here to signify an agreement (such as an exchange programme) between institutions which gives students the chance to undertake part of their course of study in a location away from their host university. Such programmes are naturally attractive to students (as well as potential students) due to the exoticism of visiting a foreign location. Meanwhile universities are keen to emphasise how this kind of experience can prove of benefit to participating students once they enter the global labour market.

This paper firstly identifies the forces which drive student mobility within this context. It contends that TNHE institutions employ neoliberal practices when looking to establish student mobility partnerships as a way to boost their institutional prestige. It further argues that this search for status perpetuates existing hierarchical elitism within the HE sector. Meanwhile it claims that students who sign up to mobility initiatives are looking for a way to increase their own individual international capital. These motivating forces combined lead to both individuals and the institutions seeing the programs as a way of making themselves more marketable. Finally, I question whether setting up TNHE student mobility partnerships within such a neoliberal framework allows all participants to derive the maximum value from this practice.

Looking to internationalise – the establishment of student mobility programmes

Student academic exchange is perhaps the most common type of partnership between institutions. Student mobility is not a new phenomenon, but it has certainly become a more achievable goal for the average tertiary student. Programs such as the Fulbright Program, set up in 1948, were originally aimed at the elite of the elite, driven by the belief that academic mobility could contribute to cultural understanding (Altbach and Teichler, 2001). The number of internationally mobile students has increased exponentially since then, rising from c.100, 000 in 1950 to c.3.5 million in 2009 as opportunities for students to travel in search of better educational opportunities have proliferated (Shields, 2013). Numbers are projected to reach 7 million by 2025 (Hudzik, 2011).

Internationalisation initiatives are generally expressed alongside particular metrics for assessing how successful they have been e.g. 50% increase in number, type and range of academic partners/international students involved in 30% of all student clubs and

societies/100% increase in outward student mobility. It is clear that accountability of 'internationalisation performance' is paramount. Measuring success will mean that a university can focus on how they are seen by international partners. This language may indicate to some extent the pressures exerted on the university by local and national state stakeholders, who demand evidence of the university's international outreach. Such performative procedures serve to illustrate clearly the way in which the TNHE university has embraced neoliberal ideals and believes in them to drive the development of the institution.

Driving forces of internationalisation in a neoliberal TNHE institution

Modern TNHE universities are looking to establish themselves among the global HE hierarchy in order to compete for students and research income. In pursuit of these goals, many have an internationalisation strategy which plays a crucial role in the efforts to raise its status. Central to this strategy is the establishment of partnerships with other, more prestigious institutions. The following section discusses issues which arise from the implementation of these kinds of partnership plan, looking at their implications for universities at an institutional level, as well as how they affect the participating students on an individual level.

TNHE is by its very essence a neoliberal education form which encourages and exacerbates competition among students, staff and institutions. It extends beyond borders in the same way that multinational companies span continents and wield greater power than nation states. Neoliberalism suggests that as a result of increased competition due to globalization, the consumer-student is able to buy their education globally, which will eventually lead to increased student mobility and the creation of new World Class Universities (WCUs) (Shields, 2013). As Ball (2015) points out, neoliberalism now runs through all facets of academic life and its performative practices, such as indexes, indicators and measures, have turned those who work in universities into neoliberal subjects competing with one another on a daily basis. Neoliberal categories such as competition, rational choice and the knowledge economy are now an unquestioned fact of life for students, academics and management alike (Shields, 2013). Excellence and performance are key to the existence of the modern university (Harris, 2008). The competition which is central to neoliberalism is demonstrated most clearly in HE through rankings which confer status on universities.

Prestige is a concept which pervades Higher Education. The status of a university is as important now as it has ever been. As Marginson (2011) notes, prestige leads to a ceaseless spiral of competition on various fronts. The consumers (i.e. the students) strive to be accepted to the most prestigious institutions, and thus improve their (and their family's) social standing. At the same time the institutions themselves compete with each other to be recognised for their academic quality. In this way, those institutions which are successful will be able to attract the strongest students and consolidate their status.

Many countries have focussed on developing their top universities into so-called WCUs, in order to improve the prestige of the nation (Courtois, 2018a). Research performance has previously been the main way of establishing status within the HE hierarchy – it is visible and measurable so although it may not directly generate

revenue, success in research can contribute to maintaining a university's position of prestige. In recent years teaching quality and internationalisation measurements have also been used as a number of ranking systems have been introduced in order to attempt to quantify university status.

Rankings have assumed a critical importance to universities. These emergent new accounting tools claim to offer judgment on the quality of an institution. They may be used by students to decide which college to attend, by governments to decide which foreign institution may be invited to open a campus in their country, and by universities themselves to decide whether to set up partnerships with each other (Maldonado-Maldonado, 2013). The rankings remain dominated 'by a global super-elite of prestigious American and British universities' (Naidoo, 2011). As Hazelkorn (2011) points out, despite there being over 15000 HE institutions worldwide, there seems to be a media fascination with the performance and rankings position of 100 so-called WCUs. The rankings systems have consolidated the historical hierarchies of university status (Marginson, 2014), while supposedly offering a way for lesser universities to jostle for position in the race for prestige. There appears to be no choice for those not at the top table except to see rankings as an opportunity for advancement, even if there is little chance of becoming a WCU. HE leaders are thus forced into making every effort to improve the position of their university within the rankings; to that end, internationalisation has become one of the key areas targeted for improvement.

The 'race to internationalise' among universities has been concurrent then with an increased awareness of prestige as a result of rankings. The establishment of partnerships has been a widespread strategy used by university leaders as a form of internationalising. Often the goal is to increase prestige through association with a high-status institution from abroad (Seeber et al., 2016). It has been claimed that direct economic benefit is rarely a motivator for initiating links (Altbach and Knight, 2007), although this may be changing as a result of mass student mobility programmes. As Knight (2015) has highlighted, having a large number of overseas partners may seem prestigious, but in reality, the management of multiple arrangements can be challenging, and it is unlikely that all of these are productive partnerships. She suggests that there is a trend nowadays for universities to put a limit on partnership numbers, and to try to form deeper relationships with those select few (ibid.). This would seem to suggest that the prestige of new partners will become more relevant as a result.

Concurrent with internationalization trends, there has been a move towards the massification of HE over recent decades (European Parliament, 2015). Often driven by government policy, access to a place at university has become much more achievable for the general population of many nations. Thus, HE has moved from being the preserve of the elites within a country, to being a level of learning to which many can aspire. This is not to say, however, that elitism has been eradicated. As Maxwell (2018) notes, elitism is not a concept with which most institutions would like to be associated, but 'elite making' is a likely outcome of any system in which participants promote their own excellence and superiority. In the past, the fact that a student had simply attended university was a sign of their membership of the economic or educational elite; nowadays the difference between elites and non-elites is subtler, but still exists. Marginson (2011) points out that as higher education has

become more socially inclusive, it has also become more stratified, with significant differences in status and resources between WCUs and lesser institutions. As HE massifies, elites look to attend WCUs in order to maintain their social status (Shields, 2013). These WCUs are dominated by students who come from privileged backgrounds and who already have the social and academic capital to be accepted there. These elite students are those who are in the position to be able to invest in their own human capital (ibid.). In this way elitism in HE serves to maintain social inequality (Peter, 2018).

Elitism is therefore happening on two interconnected levels; institutions are striving to become recognised as WCUs while individuals seek to improve their own capital by being educated at top strata universities. Evidently, institutions which do not rank among the most prestigious need to find ways of associating themselves with those universities who do belong at the top table, and this is a key motivation for the establishment of many partnerships. Institutions, generally acting independently within a market-driven system, select partners according to rankings and accreditations (Engwall, 2016). For these universities, establishing partnerships with global WCUs is useful for developing research networks, as well as solidifying their own positions.

Internationalisation has been seen by many to be an answer to elitism. De Wit and Hunter (2015) suggest (in a modification of a definition put forward by Knight) that internationalisation is an intentional process ‘to enhance the quality of education and research for all (my emphasis) students and staff, and to make a meaningful contribution to society’. Similarly, Hudzik’s vision of Comprehensive Internationalisation sees the process of internationalisation as being able to democratise education for all students and staff through allowing access to international perspectives (Hudzik, 2011). Altbach and Teichler (2001) argue that non-elite students and non-elite universities are being given the opportunity to participate in internationalisation and should make the most of this. However, the counterargument to these points is strong. Maxwell (2018) points out that there is clear evidence that internationalisation practices are driving stratification within higher education. WCUs and their elite attendees can afford to look outwards and focus on the global, while lesser institutions and their less-privileged students are restricted to the local. Those who gain the most from new internationalisation networks are the national and transnational elites who enjoy access to WCUs (Brown and Lauder, 2006 cited in Shields, 2013). Middle-class groups who do not yet belong to this global elite lack the strategies to effectively put their international desires into practice, while lower class groups do not even get the opportunity to try (Maxwell, 2018).

Student mobility partnerships serve as an example of how elitism can be perpetrated in an internationalised HE system. Historically, academic exchanges, designed to offer experiences that would broaden the cultural perspective of the participating students, have largely been the preserve of the elite in both developed and developing nations, (Altbach and Teichler, 2001). This is admittedly no longer the case. Opportunities to participate in student mobility partnerships are more common than ever before. However, it remains hard to argue that TNHE reduces elitism in any way. On the contrary, it appears to demonstrate that more choices are available for the elite;

in other words, '[it] potentially amplifies class-based differences in educational opportunities and outcomes' (Courtois, 2018b).

Student mobility programmes attract student participation through the promises of having the chance to travel, enjoying new and exotic experiences abroad, and, perhaps most significantly in an era when a HE qualification is a significant investment in one's future, being a way of standing out from the crowd. Stakeholders across the HE spectrum appear convinced of the intrinsic value of time spent studying in a foreign institution. Central to the argument of proponents is the idea that students who accumulate 'international capital' will be at an advantage in terms of employability following graduation. This 'international capital' is related closely to the concepts of intercultural competence or global citizenship; it can be summarized as having the ability and confidence to function effectively within a different cultural environment; an idealistic view sees global citizens as being socially responsible and displaying civic engagement in addition to global competence (Morais and Ogden, 2011 in European Parliament, 2015). Internationally-mobile students may develop into cosmopolitan citizens who are engaged with the global community and have an international and moral outlook (Nussbaum, 2006 cited in Boni & Calabuig, 2017), who are open, tolerant, respectful and responsible (Boni & Calabuig, 2017), and who display dignity and common purpose (Castro et al., 2016).

Global citizenship education is used by individuals and institutions alike to raise their international profiles (Maxwell, 2018). While social responsibility and civic engagement may be positive by-products of global citizenship, the end goal for the student (or parent) consumer is primarily to develop the global competence which may eventually lead to a position working in an international environment or for a global multinational. As Bates (2012) has identified, education is invariably used as a tool for the development of global citizenship by those (especially parents) who see it as a way of opening up future opportunities by allowing advancement in social status. Key to this advancement is acceptance into the transnational elite as identified by Sklair (2012). Waters (2006) has shown how parents in Asia use international HE as a way of accumulating valuable cultural capital. In the name of 'consumer choice', the middle-classes invest in educational qualifications which are unattainable for the working classes in order to emphasise and maintain their position in society (Bourdieu, 1984, cited in Waters, 2006). Those who are global citizens may be afforded some of the benefits enjoyed by national elites. This is the perceived future internationalized life and experience which is advertised to students in university marketing. The promotion of global citizenship goals clearly reflects the global economy and the job market as it stands.

Internationalisation practices such as student mobility therefore offer the chance for social mobility and self-development, while leading to the development of universities with a more international outlook. Yet the fact that these practices have become commonplace does not mean that there are not questions regarding how true these assumptions are, and also therefore how effective such schemes are. Firstly, the extent to which students who go abroad are able to develop the characteristics of international capital should be determined. Knight (2015) in particular has highlighted the fallacy that greater numbers of international students lead to an increasingly internationalized institutional culture, noting that many of these students do not integrate effectively and instead tend to socialize with other international students in

small, safe groups. While this may mean a broad international experience for those students, it somewhat negates the original reasons for choosing a particular course in a particular institution in a particular country. It also does not suggest the development of cultural understanding necessary for true integration into a foreign society, let alone the elite of that society. Secondly, the link between the development of intercultural competence and the opening up of career opportunities remains dubious, despite the claims of research such as the Erasmus Impact Study (CHE Consult et al., 2014 cited in European Parliament, 2015) which states that international students strengthen key transversal skills, fare much better on the job market and have a 23% lower unemployment rate. It may simply be the case that those students who have the motivation to take more risks and step outside of their comfort zones by committing to study abroad are similarly more motivated in the job market.

Nevertheless, student mobility programmes are increasingly sold to students as a way of deriving more value from their courses. Students are ostensibly being given the chance to stand out in the crowd of graduates. Seen from a neoliberal perspective, these students are investing in their own futures, by increasing their value in the knowledge economy. Modern students recognize that they are part of a global labour force, and as a result will need to compete against students from all over the world for employment opportunities (Shields, 2013). Thus, they make the rational choice to increase their employability by increasing their international capital and getting access to the more elite positions (such as in multi-national companies) afforded by globalization. According to Courtois (2018a) the desire to acquire international capital is 'a vast emotional resource that universities can tap into'. Governments and institutions are happy to promote this viewpoint as, in addition to the economic benefits it brings, internationalisation can raise the status of institutions and, by proxy, the status of whole nation states. The link between employability and university reputation is explicit – higher quality education is seen as leading to increased employability while employability is used in rankings systems by institutions as an indication of the quality of their education (Lomer, 2016; Hazelkorn, 2011). In the neoliberal system, those students who fail to succeed are themselves to blame (Brennan & Naidoo, 2008, cited in Lomer, 2016). However, the prevalence of the neoliberal narrative serves to obscure the situation. As higher education has massified, competition for elite positions has intensified. Similarly, as participation in student mobility programmes increases, the perceived advantages of global citizenship and international capital it brings will also diminish. As Courtois (2018a) adroitly identifies, non-elites who do not understand the workings of the global labour market may be led to miscalculate how beneficial their investment will be.

A central reason why HE institutions tend to fixate on becoming more prestigious, and thus rising within the rankings, is to make themselves more marketable to potential students, staff and partners. In the neoliberal model, market forces mean that the profile and reputation of an institution are supremely important in order to encourage student enrolments, and as a result, there has been serious investment in universities across the world into marketing and branding campaigns and departments (Knight, 2014; Altbach and Knight, 2007). Rankings play an important role in the promotion of institutions with a majority of international HE leaders saying that they are useful for recruiting students, and that positive rankings are without exception highlighted in speeches, online, and when lobbying policymakers (Hazelkorn, 2011).

HE institutions in the USA have historically led the way in terms of marketing themselves as destinations for internationally mobile students, but have lost market share since the 1980s as other countries, such as the UK and Australia, have become more competent at marketing their study opportunities for students from abroad (Altbach and Teichler, 2001). These openly entrepreneurial strategies form part of a neoliberal internationalizing agenda in these countries, and institutions may be supported in their marketing efforts by local or national authorities if they wish to raise the profile of the area and attract talented people and investment capital (Marginson, 2011). Singapore, for example, ‘embarked on a major marketing and recruitment drive to attract students from the region and worldwide’ (Naidoo, 2011). This coordinated national policy sees international students as bringing benefits beyond simply revenue (Sanders, 2018) and aims towards developing a global alumni body with experience of living and working in Singapore. In the case of China, the national government encourages the university to recruit international students, but there does not seem to be much support, or indeed interest, in creating opportunities for graduates to remain in China after their courses finish. Despite this, marketing often focuses on international qualities and location in China: ‘... you will find an international community of learners in the heart of China’s ongoing economic success story and opportunities found nowhere else on Earth’ (XJTLU, n.d.)

Internationalisation efforts are at the forefront of many university marketing campaigns. In Asia funding has increased for marketing and promoting institutions globally (European Parliament, 2015), although this does not necessarily mean that its institutions have successfully internationalised. The internationalisation of an institution is universally seen as making it more attractive, and of better quality overall. There is a danger inherent to this; the chance that internationalisation will be promoted at a university solely in order to raise its global brand. Castro et al. (2016) provide an example of this from an unnamed Asian institution who ‘take an economic approach to internationalisation’ by using their foreign faculty and students for the purpose of raising their international profile. Knight (2015) also warns against this, drawing a clear distinction between genuine internationalisation plans aimed at comprehensive internationalisation, and international marketing campaigns which seek to exploit internationalisation efforts for commercial gain. In an ideal world, an international marketing campaign simply highlights the international strengths of a university; but as Harris (2008) reflects, economic imperatives brought about by the neoliberal system can easily lead to ‘academic capitalism’ which manifests itself in the mission statements and aggressive marketing campaigns of universities, and which links back eventually to the drive to establish profitable partnerships. Thus, we can see the juxtaposition between competition and cooperation engendered by the partnership model. When it comes to marketing, the public face of the university appears to show an atmosphere of benign cooperation, but this belies the fact that each university is competing for limited resources; namely student enrolments (Knight, 2014).

Concluding remarks

It is important for HE institutions to attempt to find a balance when instigating internationalisation policies. While most institutions have a well-developed rhetoric with regard to the benefits of partnerships, it has been suggested elsewhere that too much focus is directed to student mobility, international reputation and short- and

medium-term gains, at the expense of the internationalisation of the curriculum and learning outcomes (De Wit and Hunter, 2015). Many universities claim to be international but this is often simply their own representation of fragmented ideas and activities taking place simultaneously (European Parliament, 2015). This could be addressed on two fronts. Firstly, institutions should look to internationalise coherently and holistically. Comprehensive Internationalisation (Hudzik, 2011) represents a broad interpretation of internationalisation and may be useful for framing institution-wide commitment to partnerships. Secondly, rather than introducing a wide variety of mobility arrangements, in each of which a small number of students are involved, universities should endeavor to develop more full-bodied relationships (Sutton, 2010). Such partnerships can be seen as being transformational, rather than transactional, and should look to transform the institution as a whole, rather than just the life of individuals (ibid.).

It appears to be impossible for HE institutions operating in the modern world to be unaffected by issues such as prestige, rankings, marketability and elitism. The prevailing climate of neoliberalism forces universities to compete for students and income within a global market, which leads ultimately to a juxtaposition in which institutions need to join together with nominal competitors in order to gain an advantage. It is hoped that an association with universities of higher prestige may mean that lower-ranked universities can improve their position in the global rankings. However, it should be recognized that this is a zero-sum game (Marginson, 2011) and for every university which uses internationalisation practices successfully in order to advance, there is a university which has been displaced.

The use of neoliberal accounting procedures is likely to encourage the establishment of partnerships and acceptance of greater numbers of international students in order to meet targets, rather than because they bring value. At newer TNHE institutions, the use of targets is understandable as a way of forcing proactivity in developing relationships with other universities. There is a danger however that it represents short-termism, and that it does not encourage the development of partnerships and programmes which enable the university and its students to truly internationalise.

Overfocussing on the prestige of potential partners also may be to the detriment of TNHE. Such an approach is likely to mean that there is an emphasis on joining together with universities in the Global North and steering away from riskier partnerships with the South. This would appear to be short-sighted and limiting; it is surely the case that a carefully chosen, well-managed, mutually beneficial partnership with an institution of similar or even lesser notional status is of more value than a nominal link with a more prestigious body which has been set up for the sole purpose of being able to be highlighted in promotional materials for new students. Universities should be encouraged to at least consider the notion that they could step out of their comfort zone and embrace difference and diversity. As Hoey (2016) notes: 'bringing ignorance to the table is as important as bringing knowledge'. Differences in power dynamics can be overcome by ensuring that partnership programmes exhibit mutuality (Mwangi, 2017).

For individual students, participation in student mobility offers the opportunity to increase their international capital. Similarly, on a much larger scale, HE institutions hope to increase their status and marketability through associations with other

prestigious organisations. In this context, membership of the elite is the ultimate goal of internationalization for both students and universities. I contend, however, that this is virtually unachievable for the majority of those involved. All happens within a modern capitalist context in which the forces of neoliberalism foster competition on institutional and individual levels and the tools of accountability and performativity are used to justify such an approach. Internationalisation has been embraced within HE on a similar scale to the way globalization has encompassed the business world. As neoliberal economic policies have created greater economic disparity between rich and poor and stratified opportunity, so does neoliberal education policy perpetuate inequalities within HE. It has no option but to act as such, because the ecosystem in which it exists necessitates a survival of the fittest mentality.

It would be naïve therefore to imagine that TNHE can operate outside of a neoliberal context, but by incorporating elements of CI, and looking to introduce transformative relationships with other universities, it may be able to show a true international ethos. A sensible long-term approach to strengthening as an institution needs to avoid the excesses of scattergun approaches to progress and gaining prestige, and instead should seek to introduce sound and sustainable internationalisation. A serious university is not just one which has been internationalized, it is one in which internationalization means something (Harris, 2008). This meaning could come from partnerships which provide real opportunities for the university and its students to make the most of a spirit of cooperation in a competitive world.

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