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# Placing knowledge: mobility in internationalised higher education

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## **Placing knowledge: mobility in internationalised higher education**

### **ABSTRACT**

Internationalisation of higher education is premised by a seeming paradox: On the one hand, academic knowledge strives to be universal in the sense that it claims to produce generalizable, valid and reliable knowledge that can be used, critiqued, and redeveloped by academics from all over the world; on the other hand, the rationale for strengthening mobility through internationalisation is based on an imagination of the potentials of particular locations (academic institutions). Intrigued by this tension between universality and particularity in academic knowledge production, this paper presents preliminary findings from a project that study internationalisation of higher education as an agent in the interrelated processes of place-making and knowledge-making. The project is based on three case-studies. In this paper, focus is on PhD students' change of research environment. This is used as a case for studying what comes to count as e.g. relevant, good, true knowledge, to whom, where and why.

### **Background**

This paper presents preliminary findings from a project concerning the role of mobility in internationalisation of higher education. The project is based on three case-studies one of which is presented here – namely PhD-students' change of research environment.

Since the 1990s, the political and institutional concern with internationalisation of higher education has been accompanied by a substantial growth in research on internationalisation which is dominated by pragmatic publications targeting practitioners and policy-makers in higher education (Teichler, 2005, Kehm 2011). In general, scholarly debates have focused on the role of neo-liberalism as a structuring force in contemporary international education and,

linked to this, issues of competitiveness, marketization and export of higher education (Brown, Lauder & Ashton 2008, Mosneaga & Agergaard 2012) as well as the emergence of an economic (rather than purely academic or social/cultural) rationale for internationalising higher education (de Wit, 1999, 2002; Knight, 2008; Knight & de Wit, 1999). In terms of mobility of academic staff and students, special attention has been given to students/staff's motivations for going abroad (Allen 2010; Brooks & Waters, 2011; Findlay et al., 2012; Gonzalez et al., 2011; Jöns 2011), the challenges and benefits of intercultural teaching and learning (Anderson et al. 2006; Huttlinger & Keating 1991; Kim 2009; Tange & Jensen 2013), language acquisition (Allen 2010; Balá & Williams 2004), questions of brain drain/gain/circulation and 'vertical mobility' (Findlay et al. 2006; Hazen & Alberts 2006; Jöns 2009; Rizvi 2005a), issues of employability, transitions to both low-skilled and high-skilled labour markets (e.g. Brooks & Waters 2011, Liu-Farrer 2009, Sykes 2012), and aspects of identity formation, sense of belonging and (national, regional, global) citizenship (Ong 2005; Olds & Thrift 2005, Prazeres 2013, Rizvi 2005b).

### **Theoretical and conceptual inspiration**

With its focus on mobility, this project is informed by and extends current debates within the field of mobility studies. Addressing various flows of people, technologies, material objects and information, the 'new mobilities paradigm' (Sheller & Urry 2006) criticises the sedentarist and static bias characterizing much social science. The paradigm demonstrates the significance of movement and networks of connection as well as the interdependent immobile infrastructures within which such mobilities are embedded. Through three cases (one of which is presented here), this project picks up on these discussions and recognizes movement and stasis as fundamentally interconnected aspects of human condition (Schiller & Salazar 2013). The project takes recent studies of the spatial differentiation and unevenness of international student mobility (Waters & Brooks 2011, Valentin 2012) one step further by exploring how mobility contributes to reshaping ideas of specific places as competing sites of knowledge production.

When conceived of as situated (Haraway 1988), the production of academic knowledge cannot be seen in isolation from where it is produced (Livingstone 2010); or expressed differently, knowledge is from 'somewhere' (Gupta & Ferguson 1997). Based on an understanding of internationalisation as human mobility, the project analyses how, in, and through these processes of mobility, places (e.g. a laboratory, an institution, a city, a nation-state or region)

are conjured up as unique and come to count as central to the production of certain kinds of knowledge. Analytically, the project employs a notion of place as dynamic, best thought of as relational (Agnew, 2011) and requiring human agency (Sack, 1997). Thus place should not be seen as a geographically fixed site, but as a location that is “constructed out of a particular constellation of social relations, meeting and weaving together at a particular locus” (Massey, 1991: 27). In focusing on three cases, the project examines how knowledge-making is intrinsically linked to place-making, i.e. how what comes to count as e.g. relevant, good, universal/particular knowledge, to whom, where and why, is linked to the way people engaged in international collaboration or exchange come to map the world and conjure up particular places.

#### **Case: Changing research environment to construct universal knowledge?**

This subproject explores the role of mobility for knowledge-making and place-making using Danish PhD-students’ change of research environment as an example of mobility. According to the Ministerial Order for the PhD education, PhD-students should “participate in active research environments, including stay at other, mainly foreign, research institutions, private research enterprises etc.” (Retsinformation, 2013). Each institution (usually the PhD school) has its own interpretation of this, but generally there is a requirement of ‘studying abroad’. Hence, there is a strong notion of particular places as important for the training of PhD-students. Yet, with increasing globalisation of research and communication (e.g. journal articles available on the internet, communication via e-mail or Skype) and with the idea of scientific knowledge as universal, one may ask why this change of research site is perceived as important.

Building on Livingstone’s framework for the geography of scientific knowledge (2010), this case explores how ‘knowledge’ and ‘place’ are perceived and reshaped in the context of PhD-students’ mobility. The case examines what comes to count as e.g. relevant, good, true knowledge, to whom, where and why and how these mobility practices remap the world. More specifically the case examines: 1) How do PhD-students and their supervisors articulate rationales for universal knowledge-making and put them into practice against the requirement for change of research environment? 2) How do PhD-students and their supervisors contribute to place-making and remapping the world through their discourses and mobility practices in regard to change of research environment?

### Implications for further research

While the existing literature clearly addresses the aspect of mobility/immobility, it does not explore and theorise 'place' (see also Prazeres 2013), including how conceptions of place are tightly related to the way people come to understand and value certain kinds of knowledge as universal/particular, and as good or relevant. By emphasising the interconnected aspects of place-making and knowledge-making in processes of internationalisation, this project contributes to and extends the emerging field of geography of knowledge and education (Jöns 2007; Kraftl 2013; Livingstone 2010; Thiem 2009) along with the scholarship linked to the spatial turn in educational research (Fenwick, Edwards, & Sawchuk 2011; Gulson & Symes 2007; Helfenbein & Taylor 2009).

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