



Distinctive and comparative places: Alternative narratives of distinction within international student mobility



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ABSTRACT

Moving beyond the ‘world-class’ institutional model of international student mobility, this paper examines alternative narratives of distinction relating to place of study. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with international students at universities in the UK, Austria and Latvia, we illustrate how students inside and outside mainstream reputable higher education institutions narrate and reconfigure markers of distinction to validate their international mobility and location of study, in part to compete with peers at other (more prestigious) institutions. We demonstrate the importance of lifestyle and experiential places within a global differentiated higher education landscape and argue that many students engage in comparative narratives of place of study to authorise the symbolic capital associated with international education. The findings also consider how experiential places and mobility capital are used for distinction not only during educational mobility but within post-study aspirations.

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1. Introduction

International student numbers are increasing worldwide along with the internationalisation of higher education. World-class universities in particular attract large numbers of applicants hoping to join the ‘elite’ ranks of higher education and all the benefits that this entails following graduation. In the UK, Oxbridge has long held the mantle of institutional reputability within higher education, casting a shadow on less esteemed but arguably no less respectable institutions. Yet, as this paper will argue, the importance of place should not be overlooked within a global higher education context. While the academic prestige associated with elite universities endows students with professional and personal distinction, other higher education destinations and institutions also offer distinctive qualities that entice prospective applicants. Extending the scope beyond an entirely ‘world-class’ institutional focus, the aim of our paper is therefore to deepen understanding of claims of distinction that relate to place of international study.

The symbolic struggle between institutions within a globalising higher education market seems to have widened in scope from academic prestige to place distinction (Collins, 2014). In comparing the options available to them within a global higher education system, some international students’ choice of destination may have just as much to do with the distinction and quality of everyday life as of the formal education on offer (Ho, 2014). This study redresses the overlooked importance of lifestyle and experiential pursuits in international student mobility scholarship. With the dominance of institutional reputation and prestige within higher education, the originality of this paper lies in demonstrating that quality of life and place matter. It advances scholarship by illustrating how place of study is integrated into a student’s lifecourse and future possibilities. Instead of confining comparisons to the reputation and prestige of institutions, we will argue that students draw comparisons between distinctive places (Raghuram, 2013). The paper sheds light on our understanding of narratives of distinction and comparative places within higher education. The importance of place, as we will show, not only lured students to particular destinations, but was also used in narratives of distinction to validate their international study location and to compete with peers in other places. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with international students in the UK, Austria and Latvia, the paper offers

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conceptual and theoretical contributions to alternative narratives of distinction within a differentiated higher education system. We suggest that, given constraints (e.g. finances and failures which might impede access to world-class universities), some students seek out other ways to validate and enhance the recognition that might be given to their education and reconfigure distinction through alternative markers.

We illustrate this by reviewing the literature on the motivations and drivers for international mobility in order to build on scholarship that theorises these through distinction. We then present the methods used to unpack the conceptual basis of place within distinction-making from students' narratives. Our findings are presented in relation to three themes: first, we examine the importance and comparative framing of 'place' for symbolic capital within international student mobility. Second, we demonstrate how social diversity is drawn upon within these experiential and comparative narratives of distinction. Third, we explore how the importance and symbolic value of experiential places extends well beyond educational experiences to post-study mobility aspirations.

2. The drivers of international student mobility

The research literature recognises diverse drivers of international student mobility, mostly derived from theories of human capital (Gérard and Uebelmesser, 2014). The different forms of capital – i.e. economic, cultural, social, and symbolic – are resources that can be converted and exchanged for financial and social gains. International education is seen to provide valuable and varied accumulations of cultural and social capital that can be used towards economic capital within future employment (Holloway et al., 2012; Waters, 2005). Much of the work on student motivations for overseas study has explained their mobility in terms of improving job opportunities following graduation (Baláz and Williams, 2004; Brooks and Waters, 2009a). Waters (2006) has shown how family units temporarily relocate abroad for higher education as part of a family strategy to gain cultural capital that can benefit students' future credentials. Indeed, for some international students, familial and social networks are the driving forces behind their educational mobility. The study abroad experiences of friends and wider social networks can support and inform students' decision to move overseas (Beech, 2015) while for other students the presence of social ties and co-nationals (Ma, 2014) or romantic partners (Brooks and Waters, 2010) living abroad guided their mobility to specific destinations. Overseas studies are also a way for students to build social contacts as future resources for the workforce, but also to acquire social capital to gain entry into an exclusive and distinctive group.

As cultural and social capital is primarily and prevalently accumulated within international student mobility, it inevitably endows students with an advantage over peers in the labour market (King et al., 2011; Waters, 2012) but also with a social mark of distinction (Findlay et al., 2012). Symbolic capital – a component of cultural capital recognised through prestige – can derive from the recognition of uniqueness and difference in social and institutional standings. World university rankings have become the barometer for institutional reputability and prestige and, by that effect, the measure of social distinction of its students. Among a cohort of UK students overseas, Findlay et al. (2012) found that students sought difference and distinction by attending a 'world-class' university. Since these institutions exemplified academic and social prestige through their highly rated reputation within global higher education rankings, students were able to draw more than just academic credentials from their studies overseas; they distinguished themselves from peers in the UK through their newly acquired

and enhanced symbolic capital. This indeed reinforces pre-existing inequalities and differences between young people in the country of origin by positioning already privileged students (those with prior human capital) ahead of stay-at-home peers (those deprived of the necessary human capital for mobility). However, with many world-class institutions located in the UK, British students' mobility to other reputable institutions overseas may indicate a less direct path towards distinction. In fact, for British students denied access to 'elite' institutions at home, such a move overseas can reflect what Brooks and Waters (2009b) have termed as a 'second chance' opportunity for achieving 'success'. An international education at ivy leagues or other foreign 'elite' universities becomes a 'roundabout route' to obtain valuable forms of cultural and social capital for distinction upon return home (Waters, 2006). However, much less is understood of international students at institutions on the margins of the prestige spectrum. Our study thus investigates the experience of international students not only in the UK, but also in Austria and Latvia.

Implicit in students' pursuit of prestige in international studies are their prior experiences of mobility which facilitate and even drive their educational moves beyond national borders (Carlson, 2013). In this sense, mobility capital – based on previous mobility experiences and indirectly through those of the family (Murphy-Lejeune, 2002) – is sought and reproduced through international educational mobility and can be drawn on for professional or personal ambitions later in the lifecourse (Findlay et al., 2006). Brooks and Waters (2010) have argued that mobility capital is entwined with the other forms of human capital and that young people may be embedded in a (generational) culture that regards international travel as a valuable experience. Indeed, King et al. (2011, 164) have attributed part of students' international studies to a 'youth mobility culture' in which living and travelling abroad are a 'rite of passage', and Findlay et al. (2012, 124) echo this perspective by noting 'the social construction of "internationality" within this educational milieu'. Although prior mobility can incite future mobility for an international career (Findlay et al., 2016), post-study trajectories are largely constrained by students' social networks (Geddie, 2013). In fact, recent studies point to students' post-study aspirations as emergent and influenced by social networks, both in their place of origin and their current place of study (Collins et al., 2016; Mosneaga and Winther, 2013). Nevertheless, research in this area still has gains to make in understanding how mobility capital is utilised during and after international studies. As such, this paper considers the intended use of mobility capital within post-study distinction and lifestyle aspirations.

With these summative findings, scholars have contributed to theorising international student mobility through a search for educational prestige and hence distinction. However, educational desires for symbolic capital and mobility are not necessarily calculated in advance but are instead emergent and fluid in relation to previous experiences, future aspirations and social relationships (Collins et al., 2014; Yang, 2016). In contrast to international studies as a strategy for future employment, scholars have found that some students seek out or gain cultural and mobility capital within experiential, rather than professional goals (Findlay et al., 2006; Waters et al., 2011). For example, Waters et al. (2011) have revealed that for some British students a degree abroad represented an opportunity for fun and adventure. Instead of viewing overseas study as a strategic measure to advance and compete within the labour market, students' motivations were driven by a search for happiness which nevertheless entailed the accumulation of cultural and symbolic capital. Privilege and advantage can be reproduced, even unintentionally, through a pursuit of adventure and a 'carefree student lifestyle' (Brooks and Waters, 2010, p. 217). Building on these works, the paper will show that the production of distinction within more experiential inclinations is fluid

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