The educational space of global online higher education

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how standards and codes for collaboration in international higher education influence the educational space of global online education and the way it functions within the context of international development aid. Firstly the article discusses the educational space of higher education and the geography of education whereby the aim is to situate global online education within the on-going discourse on standards in higher education, international development aid, and the knowledge economy. The article then examines a qualitative case study of an Internet-based masters programme attended by students from Europe and Africa. A main focus of the empirical analysis is the students' experience of being geographically immobile while collaborating online internationally, including how this circumstance affected their motivation and participation and the benefits of the programme. In the concluding discussion it is argued that even though online collaboration among students and educational institutions is not entirely equal, common standards created a space in which positions were challenged and practices were changed over the course of online participation.

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1. Introduction

The geography of global higher education has become an emerging academic field in light of the significant impact of higher education on the so-called global knowledge economy (Robertson, 2005; Hoyler and Jöns, 2008; Findlay et al., 2012). A main contribution of geographers to this field has been research on student mobility (Holloway and Jöns, 2012; Jöns, 2009; Raghuram, 2013), in which the central focus has been how participation in international education contributes to the accumulation of capital by students (Findlay et al., 2006; Waters, 2009; Brooks and Walters, 2011; King et al., 2011; Waters and Leung, 2013). Another significant contribution by geographers has been research concerning Anglo-American domination within the international higher education sector (Paasi, 2005; Olds, 2007; Jöns and Holyer, 2012). At the same time, a small number of studies have focused on new technology and higher education, including in the Global South (Holloway and Jöns, 2012; Maintz, 2007; Rye, 2007, 2008, 2009; Unwin et al., 2010).

Although recent contributions from geographers have enhanced our understanding of the globalisation of higher education, it is remarkable that only a few studies have focused on online education in global digital networks and the implications of this type of education for students living in the Global South. New digital technologies will most likely fundamentally change the global space of higher education in various ways (Edwards, 2012). In addition, higher education provided through distance learning using the Internet is a considerable and growing sector in international higher education (Naidoo, 2006; Marginson, 2008; Rovai and Donwney, 2010). Moreover, the recent growth of the open courseware (OCW) movement, including the expansion of massive online open courses (MOOCs), has created a new reality in online higher education (Rhoads et al., 2013). Finally, a number of prominent social theorists claim that new digital communication technology has great explanatory power regarding the geographical inequalities between countries and regions (Castells, 2001; Harvey, 1996; Giddens, 2000; Urry, 2003, 2007). Nevertheless, the social implications of new types of global communication structures and information technology are still under discussion in geography and other social sciences (Kleine and Unwin, 2009; Bradshaw et al., 2005; DiMaggio et al., 2001; Castells, 2009). Therefore, geographers should be interested in further exploring this new educational space and the social implications of higher education that takes place across borders through digital technology.

To address these concerns, the present article raises the following question: *how does the acceptance of standards and codes for collaboration in international higher education influence the educational space of global online education and the way it functions within the context of international development aid?* The main focus of this study is how students experience being part of an aid-funded

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online higher education programme and how this experience is related to changes in international development aid and the development of a knowledge society. The research question is first explored through a discussion of the educational space of higher education and the geography of education based on contributions from geography and studies in higher education. The aim is to situate global online education within the on-going discourse on standards in higher education, international development aid, and the knowledge economy. The article then examines a qualitative case study of an Internet-based masters programme attended by students from Europe and Africa. A main focus of the empirical analysis is the students' experience of being geographically immobile while collaborating online internationally, including how this circumstance affected their motivation and participation and the benefits of the programme. The concluding discussion relates the students' experiences to international standards for higher education, international development aid, and the notion of the global knowledge economy.

2. Spaces of global higher education

Increasing human capital by widening educational access is widely recognised as a useful means of encouraging national, social, economic and/or political development in both the Global North and the Global South (Holloway and Jöns, 2012; Teferra and Altbach, 2004; Rowland, 2003; Wells, 2008: Gyimah-Brempong et al., 2006). Primary and secondary education have traditionally been the main concerns in low- and middle-income countries and for international aid agencies (Colclough, 2012). Nevertheless, as Koehn (2012) argues, a paradigm shift in development strategies began in the 1990s based on the idea that knowledge is the core driver of economic and social development. Koehn relates this shift to the notion of a knowledge society, which originated in international institutions involved in development projects, including the OECD, the World Bank and national aid agencies. Similarly, Singh (2010, 2011) illustrates how the policy narrative regarding higher education institutions in both the 'developed' and the 'developing' worlds relates to the notions of knowledge, innovation, and the skills necessary for economic growth and competitiveness (see also: Koehn, 2012, 2013). As a response, universities in the Global North have invested considerable resources into transnational partnerships, many of which focus on development objectives that are similar to those of the masters programme analysed later in this paper (Obamba and Mwema, 2009; Barrett et al., 2011).

An important factor in any type of international partnership or cross-border exchange of higher education, and a focus of this article, is the acceptance of various standards and codes related to modes of delivery, content, and other similar issues (Raghuram, 2013). The wider recognition of standards has contributed to the recent increase in flows of information, knowledge and culture between countries and regions (Castells, 2009). In the education sector, as in many other sectors, the English speaking part of the world has largely shaped the premises of these protocols, both linguistically and by establishing the standards for degree programme, quality assurance, and so forth (Paasi, 2005; Jöns and Holyer, 2012). Simultaneously, through the Bologna Process, Europe has recently become a stronger authority in defining international conventions for higher education (Hartmann, 2008; Sall and Ndjaye, 2008). Today, the Bologna Declaration even influences education outside of Europe, including education in Africa (Raghuram, 2013).

By examining at the global trading patterns of cross-border higher education, we find that the flow primarily occurs within the OECD countries and that Asian countries in particular are significant importers of education (Scherrer, 2005). In contrast, trade in higher education is limited in other low-income countries (Marginson, 2006; Marginson and Sawir, 2005). Even with the recent rapid economic growth that has occurred throughout a large portion of the African continent, future higher education in low-income parts of Africa will partly depend on alternatives to market-driven global higher education, including initiatives by international aid agencies and by various foundations and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) (Singh, 2010). Kohen (2013) suggests that without external support, many sustainable development initiatives within higher education would not exist today. Therefore, the development of global higher education should not only be understood as a conventional business activity; such development should also be considered in terms of how it is linked to global foreign aid systems (Okolie, 2003).

In cases in which higher education has been used by international aid agencies as a development strategy in the Global South, providers have traditionally been faced with two primary alternatives in organising international higher education geographically. One alternative has been to utilise existing educational structures in the Global North for student mobility. In seeking to promote development in the Global South, international aid agencies and private foundations have regarded study abroad programmes as an expedient way to increase human capital in developing countries (Kritz, 2011). Consequently, since the 1960s, graduate-level scholarship programmes have enabled thousands of nationals from Africa to study at tertiary education institutions in the Global North. The assumption guiding these scholarship programmes was that study abroad programmes would allow countries to develop the scientific, engineering and management expertise that they needed to compete effectively in the international economy (Raghuram, 2013). After completing their degrees abroad, students were expected to return home to help build the university programmes that would train the next generation of skilled workers at home. Kritz (2013) sees this form of international aid as a part of the de-colonisation process in which national capacity is built in the Global South. Others trace the roots of these programmes to the colonial period, when 'natives' were brought in from the colonies to work as servants for colonial powers in their homelands (Singh, 2010).

This development strategy has, however, as noted by Vinokur (2006), been criticised and it has been claimed that when students from low-income countries receive education in developed countries, the Global South loses important knowledge resources as a result. In addition, Vinokur suggest that states in the Global South may be reluctant to invest in their education system when students leave the country to find work. In response to the 'brain drain' hypothesis and the possible negative effect of student migration from the Global South to the North, the number of scholarships awarded by NGOs and bilateral agencies declined significantly in the 1970s, particularly for students from Africa (Kritz, 2013). Accordingly, most African students who have gone abroad for higher education in recent decades have done so by drawing on family support (Kritz, 2013), joining the global flow of students migrating to the UK and the USA (Brooks and Walters, 2011). African students, however, remain marginal within the greater scheme of international student mobility due to weak purchasing power (Marginson, 2008).

A second type of initiative used to develop the Global South through investment in higher education has involved identifying and developing educational institutions in low- and medium-income countries. The ensuing process is referred to as "institutional mobility" and includes the movement of financial resources, knowledge and technology from the Global North, usually supplemented with the exchange of personnel at the institutional level. The goals of this process are institutional development and national independence in the educational sector (Singh, 2010).

Historically, Singh relates this development to colonial and postcolonial practices in which colonies aimed to develop Euro-