Higher education reform in the 'periphery'

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Abstract

In recent years, an increasing body of work has addressed the 'corporatisation' and 'commodification' of universities, and higher education sector reforms more broadly. This work refers mostly to the traditional core hubs of higher education, such as the Anglo-American research university. In the emerging anthropology of higher education policy, accounts of the implementation and negotiation of reforms in more 'peripheral' contexts often remain absent. This collection of articles addresses this absence by focusing on the interplay between narratives of global policy reform and the processes of their implementation and negotiation in different contexts in the academic 'periphery'. Bringing together work from a range of settings and through different lenses, the Special Issue provides insights into the common processes of reform that are underway, and how decisions to implement certain reforms reaffirm rather than challenge peripheral positions in higher education.

Keywords: core and periphery, higher education reform, policy transfer, political economy, universities, world system

Globally, the higher education sector experiences a turbulent time of reform towards corporatisation, commodification, and the profound restructuring of universities and the higher education sector at large. In this Special Issue, we take a closer look at places that, in one way or another, assume and negotiate positions of periphery in the global field of higher education, and whose experiences of sector reforms have received comparatively little scholarly attention to date. While we work with concepts such as core and periphery developed in classical world systems analysis (Wallerstein 1974), we develop them to better respond to the higher education context. Within this paradigm, core countries, advanced

capitalist economies usually located in the Global North, are characterised by better infrastructure, a service based economy and political stability, which gives them significant economic advantage to extract surplus from international trade and labour flows. Peripheral countries, on the contrary, are at a geopolitical disadvantage according to these criteria, relying on income from extraction and agriculture, providing low-skilled labour, often in the context of a more volatile and easily exploitable political situation. However, periphery, as we employ the term here in relation to national higher education systems, connotes not only a structural or material position within the transnational hierarchies of the contemporary world system. but also a symbolic or performative position vis-à-vis global policy or core locations that become invoked to justify agendas to implement specific policy reforms. We thereby employ a broader notion of 'periphery' than its more delimited usage in world systems analysis, in an attempt to rethink different kinds of configurations along axes of core and periphery in both material and symbolic manifestations.

More recently, Philip Altbach drew on a core-periphery model in the discussion of university systems. He distinguished between 'powerful universities and academic systems - the centres' and 'smaller and weaker institutions and systems with fewer resources and often lower academic standards - the peripheries' (Altbach 2007: 123–124). Along these lines, he characterised the centre/periphery relations as a new form of neo-colonial domination. Altbach described the mechanisms of this domination as focusing on a number of distinct processes: the introduction of English as main medium of instruction and publication, the brain-drain of scholars and students, the dominance of the American MBA model across the world, the opening of core (especially U.S.) university campuses or distance/online learning programmes around the world with little adoption of local scholarship and knowledge (cf. Looser 2012) and the world trade agreements that put commercial profit before public good (Altbach 2007).

Contributions to this Special Issue both complement and partially question these lines of inquiry along centres and peripheries in higher education, while specifically exploring new ground to illustrate how a symbolic position-taking is played out in an uneven terrain. By addressing the implementation of higher education reforms in places as varied as Finland, Japan, Ukraine, Egypt and Jordan, contributors to this Special Issue illustrate issues that arise with the strategic, selective, or imitative adaptation of global policy blueprints from vantage points that negotiate positions of academic periphery in one way or another. These positions may overlap with or differ from core-periphery dynamics as defined in classical world systems theory in a purely economic sense. While some authors apply classic world systems analysis to contemporary national and regional higher education sectors, other contributions identify different positions of periphery within global and national academic systems. We thus explore thinking through notions of core and periphery in relation to policy reform processes in higher education from different vantage points.

The articles in the Special Issue reveal the ways in which peripheral contexts internalise core 'norms' that perpetuate narratives of excellence designed for research-intensive core institutions. Such 'excellent' institutions are held to provide not just cutting-edge research, but also top educational experience. We suggest however, that the process of internalising core norms of 'excellence', results in self-peripheralising practices. The latter are not necessarily reflected in the ways in which policy is imposed top-down, but in the ways that policy is translated and adapted by institutions, through reforms that reinforce rather than challenge peripherality. As the articles illustrate, current processes of higher education reform significantly alter the social role and local pertinence of universities in peripheral academic contexts. Moving between different scales of reforms and their intentions and outcomes, the authors show ways in which internalised symbolic dependencies produce material effects that profoundly reorganise higher education systems, often with self-peripheralising results.

This Special Issue, then, aims at contributing to the critical appraisal of the implementation of higher education reforms in peripheral locations in the global academic field. It follows on from earlier work on university reforms (Wright and Rabo 2010), with fresh insights into this quickly moving field. We contend that self-peripheralisation is perpetuated by embracing and internalising core narratives and policy reforms in an increasingly homogenised field of global higher education. Ultimately, then, there is a need to explore how practices and imaginaries are reproduced not only because they follow economic path-dependencies but also because organisations and collective subjectivities internalise and reinforce policy norms in the neoliberal era. Our hope is that our critical appraisal will assist in the search for approaches that challenge peripheral positions within the global field of higher education in a more meaningful way than to mimic policy blueprints that prescribe narrowly delineated developmental trajectories for universities and higher education sectors outside the global core. A central claim of the special issue is that higher education institutions in differently conceived 'peripheral' positions can go another way if they reinvent old and produce new practices and imaginaries of what education is about, without succumbing to all norms of institutional and workforce organisation that are prevalent in core institutions.

Discussing core-periphery relations in contemporary higher education

To discuss the question of core-periphery relations, we draw on theoretical tools from the sociology of (higher) education, the anthropology of policy, political economy and world systems analysis. Combining ethnographic observations with policy analysis and historical inquiry, the authors show how, even in what could be qualified as core countries (Japan and Finland) and semi-peripheries (Ukraine, Egypt and Jordan), when it comes to higher education reform, positions of periphery are assumed and symbolically enacted.

Earlier work on universities and higher education sectors from a vantage point of world systems theory makes the case of a classic neo-colonial model of domination through core-periphery relations. In Arnove's work (1980), for example, higher education policies as part of international development aid are discussed as poorly disguised development efforts that, effectively reproduce the structural conditions of global inequality based on classic core-periphery relations. They do that on two levels. On the one hand, local academic elites, trained in core universities or programmes emulating core values of higher education, are often active in producing knowledge for public and private actors in core research hubs, reinforcing their values and interests in a process of neo-colonial domination (Vessuri et al 2005). On the other hand, while higher education in many peripheral systems still offers limited access to the majority population, and employment opportunities in high-skilled sectors are scarce, graduates of peripheral universities often join the low-skilled labour force migrating to core countries as cheap labour. In this, peripheral contexts remain at a disadvantage in global processes of knowledge production, indirectly preparing the, often racialised, labour force required for export-led extractive economies benefitting metropolitan countries, and thus reinforce global inequality (Altbach 1981; cf. Wallerstein 1974).

The global higher education sector meanwhile appears to have undergone changes that defy an exclusive analysis through classic core-periphery dynamics and world system analysis. Besides the reinforcement of a vertical ordering of national higher education sectors along core-periphery lines as described by Arnove (1980), contemporary higher education sectors are increasingly discussed through a conceptual lens of a putatively horizontal process of homogenisation. This includes a global agenda on common 'standards', 'quality', and a general orientation towards quantitative indicators that can be compared and competitively ranked across national systems, supposedly enabling global competition according to free-market principles.

Ideologically, the global agenda that revolves around a common set of policy reforms evokes an imagery of a horizontal levelling of the playing field of higher education. It suggests an equality of opportunity of sorts for all universities to partake in the competition for a top position of 'excellence' in the production and dissemination of knowledge. At least in principle, such a model suggests the possibility for all individual universities and national university systems to produce universally relevant and recognised knowledge, move up in global rankings, recruit international students and faculty and host key scientific debates within a homogenised field of higher education with ever more similar standards around the globe. In its logical consequence, this free-market model would lead to results that contrast with the rather fixed position of countries and university sectors in an unevenly developed world system in which higher education agendas in core and peripheral contexts are clearly delineated.

Contributions to this issue illustrate how the supposed homogenisation may, in fact, ideologically obscure the processes that reinforce and reorder higher education sectors along vertical lines, producing a specific core-periphery dynamic within the higher education sector. What we see is an apparently more voluntary subjugation of self-perceived peripheries to the dominance of higher education policy agendas and evaluation mechanisms emanating from core contexts in the global field of higher education. Consequently, actors in charge of individual institutions or whole national higher education systems even in otherwise wealthy countries internalise the division between top-ranking universities and other institutions as the determining developmentalist axis. Instead of developing their independent scientific and policy agendas, evaluation mechanisms and approaches to questions of academic impact and teaching excellence, they engage in discourses of 'lagging behind' and practices of 'catching up' through policy reforms.

To tease out the mechanisms that reinforce inequalities in what is presented as an increasingly homogenous field, we find Simon Marginson's seminal work on the global field of higher education particularly useful. Marginson discusses the 'dynamic and uneven' global flows of people, technologies, media and messages, information and knowledge, norms, ideas and policies, finance capital and economic resources' (Marginson 2008: 304). According to Marginson, these flows occur within global patterns of difference that constrain or shape them, such as language diversity, pedagogies and scholarship, uneven development, and a variety of organisational systems and cultures. To study the interplay between these flows and patterns of difference, Marginson suggests the use of Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical insights around issues of individual and institutional position-taking 'within an ensemble of positions in a relationship of mutual exclusion' (Bourdieu 1996: 232; Marginson 2008: 304). He also uses Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony, 'the "spontaneous" consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group' (Gramsci 1971: 12; Marginson 2008: 308). These tools have been used for example by Pavel Zgaga and his collaborators to exemplify how hegemonies work, drawing attention to the top-down way in which reforms happen among core players in higher education (Zgaga 2014; Zgaga et al. 2013). Through the contributions of this Special Issue, we further develop some insights of this body of work, which remains vague on its description of 'peripheries', and on the particular mechanisms through which certain economically wealthy countries remain stranded in the academic periphery.

A new form of subjection into a peripheral positionality in higher education, we suggest, is often created at a symbolic level that does not necessarily reflect material core-periphery relations in economic terms. Instead, as some of the contributions of the special issue show, especially Muliavka and Trifuljesko, symbolically embracing positions of periphery through reforms for 'catching up' produces material effects of peripherality in the

field of knowledge production. Besides the structural and material constraints that reinforce core-periphery dynamics and a vertical ordering among universities and national systems, the symbolic imaginary of a horizontal level of a homogenised field of higher education ultimately reorders structural inequalities toward a global field of competing universities rather than merely between national higher education sectors. Evoking a homogenous field among potentially equal locations, then, obscures the (re)production of structural and material inequalities in a vertically stratified global field of higher education.

In this way, we both draw on and depart from the more narrowly defined core-periphery dynamics as the subject of world system analysis that is based on the division of labour between core and peripheral contexts. We do so by juxtaposing the functioning of core-periphery dynamics in higher education with the overall landscape of the economic world system, exploring their contrasts and convergences. This allows us to highlight cases in which central institutions or whole higher education systems in core countries show patterns of symbolic semi-peripheralisation. Thus, we illustrate trajectories brought about through mechanisms of a symbolic position-taking within core-periphery dynamics in contemporary higher education. We also depart from dependency-theory perspectives that view 'peripheries' as mere receptacles of reform. The contributions to this Special Issue look at 'peripheral' locations as active agents with diverse and sometimes internally contradictory agendas and how these make the mechanisms at stake less easy to discern as a clear-cut model. They show that often choices framed as 'catching up' with policy models prescribed in core countries are less dictated by real structural pressures than based on short-term political agendas. A frequently coercive and rushed implementation of hegemonic norms in higher education reform packages based on short-term political agendas comes at the expense of local traditions, priorities, and development axes that hold potentials for challenging peripherality.

The workings of the neoliberal model in the academic periphery

The most significant change in the higher education sector over the last decades is the adoption and adaptation of neoliberal models. As recent debates on the 'chaotic concept' (Jessop 2013) and varieties of capitalism in the periphery of Europe (Bohle and Gerskovitz 2012) have shown, neoliberalism itself is not a single model that comes with a guide book. Its characteristics and intensity of implementation in combination with other governance features instead vary in different historical instances and geographic locations. Still, there are some widely prevalent features when it comes to higher education. For example, an increased privatisation of the sector and the promotion of a more agile and 'efficient' governance structure are combined with the introduction of performativity-led new public management governance strategies, including the proliferation of an 'audit culture' (Shore 2008; Shore and Wright 2015; Shore and Wright 1999; Strathern 2000). A growing institutional and individual competition leads to the intensification of processes of (self-)promotion, (self-)assessment, and (self-)surveillance (Lynch and Ivancheva 2015). Defined as a contributor rather than a cost to the exchequer, the higher education sector is facing an increase of contractual project-based arrangements and the obliteration of 'unprofitable' subjects and disciplines, especially in the humanities (Lynch 2015).

Against this background, the articles in this Special Issue show that despite distinguishing features in different contexts, there is an overall unidirectionality of the reforms. An ever-greater centralising power delegated to senior management levels within universities and state administrations comes at the expense of consultation with academics and the consideration of non-commercial roles of universities. The subjection of all universities to competition in global rankings requires universities aiming for top rankings to prioritise research over teaching, and places ever growing pressure on low-ranked universities

to either aim for better rankings or focus entirely on vocational training. It thus puts at disadvantage departments, institutions and whole national higher education systems less equipped to accumulate research funding and to attract international faculty and students. While the collaboration of universities with the private sector is ideologically prescribed as beneficial to society, it often comes with a rather narrow focus on 'employability': an ideological construct used to place the responsibility on universities not for their social relevance to society but for their narrowly defined graduate success on the job market. It instrumentalises university education and shifts its focus toward activities dedicated to producing workers ready to join and benefit the private sector (Boden and Nedeva 2010). At the same time, under growing demands for public accountability through audit and evaluation, universities have become increasingly bureaucratic and divorced from their contexts.

At face value, a top-down imposition of policy can be observed along with 'mimetic isomorphisms', that is, the imitation of structures in core countries by peripheral universities under the premise that this would benefit them (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Shore and Davidson 2013). Focusing on the performative and the discursive side of assuming a position of periphery in higher education, however, sheds new light on how they respond to the core. It shows how peripheral positions are both enacted and acted upon with different degrees of strategy and agency. Yet we argue that besides the globally unequal distribution of infrastructure and flows of knowledge, financial investment and faculty and students between locations as alluded to by Marginson (2008), there are other symbolic mechanisms at play that are insufficiently explained through structural factors alone. This is evidenced in the contributions to the Special Issue. The cases direct our attention to how even at places not ascribed to the global periphery, policy reform is presented as inevitable or without alternative by invoking a position of periphery vis-à-vis other locations of 'centre' or a global core.

Rather than real structural constraints, a pattern is set in motion that produces the material effects of peripheralisation and subjugation to the dominance of core hubs of knowledge production.

Across the contributions, policy rhetoric presents a picture of supposed reform imperatives for aligning with processes elsewhere, or for overcoming positions of periphery by either fostering or levelling out specific local particularities and relevance. Rather than simply structural necessity, we suggest that potentially self-peripheralising practices are at work when policy reforms are justified by the need to 'catch up' with those positioned as leaders in a symbolic field of global higher education. Instead of looking for alternative systems of evaluation and assessment of their social relevance (see Ivancheva 2013), higher education sectors and universities internalise norms and aspirations mostly relevant to core institutions.

The Special Issue: bringing 'peripheral' issues to the core of the higher education debate

The articles examine the adoption and translation of global reform trends, as illustrated above, in peripheral contexts of higher education. The works of Rausch and Trifuljesko illustrate how in Japan and Finland, countries that cannot be designated as 'periphery' in economic terms, higher education policy reform is justified as a process of overcoming a peripheral position of 'lagging behind' the perceived global core. In Trifuljesko's case, the University of Helsinki de-emphasises its public function as Finland's principal national university, in order to position itself as a player to compete with the global core of research universities. As university managers work to position the university as striving to achieve 'global excellence' and to make it a brand on a par with 'top' universities, they simultaneously erase important aspects of its historic identity and public mission.

Trifuljesko illustrates how these processes at the University of Helsinki play out against a background of its ambiguous positioning in core-periphery relations. By material indicators, Finland and the University of Helsinki are part of the core, but they inhabit a geographical position at the edge of Europe that at the same time lends force to a symbolic positioning of periphery. Through nuanced historical and ethnographic analysis, Trifuljesko engages Doreen Massey's notion of 'space' (2008) as a product of an ongoing process of negotiating interrelations and privileging some specific connections over others. She uses this concept to illustrate how university managers engage in 'spatial' work to assert that the university is at a core of top universities and how they seek to detach it from what they consider, and proclaim to be, its symbolically peripheral location. Drawing on the power of ethnography for exposing some of the contradictions in the (self-)positioning as core or periphery, Trifuljesko shows that even in places where the underpinning economic reality might suggest possibilities for an alternative pathway, a unidirectional development becomes a self-fulfilling prophesy. The choice of symbolic position-taking follows a self-peripheralising logic, that does not question the hegemony of excellence of 'world class' universities. This choice of framing made by the senior management of the university denies how the Finnish higher education sector, and the University of Helsinki as its principal public university, offers relevant scientific and pedagogic interventions, unless they fit the requirements of global rankings. Here, the imperative to shed any symbolic association with periphery through an exclusive focus on becoming a 'world-best university', risks undoing the university's unique role and public mission in the Finnish context, and thus closes down alternative trajectories.

In Rausch's case study, the position of a rural Japanese university, far away from the national and urban knowledge production centres, provides for an opposite imperative: a more exclusive focus on local relevance that moves to separate peripheral universities serving local

needs from a national core of universities positioned as players in global research. Here, symbolic relations of core and periphery are evoked within a national system of higher education. While the university is subject to the same set of neoliberal reforms of university governance and evaluation that are homogenously applied across Japan, the intra-national relations of symbolic core and periphery among universities in Japan illustrate a process of stratification of universities between those with a mission focused on competing with global research and those serving the needs of local private sectors.

Despite the centralisation, managerialisation, corporatisation and privatisation that Hirosaki University also undergoes, its focus on local relevance could give the Japanese university more opportunity to manoeuvre from its peripheral position when compared to the University of Helsinki, which subjects itself to imitate what are regarded 'world-best' universities. While Rausch emphasises the emancipatory potential of this position, his article also cautions that increased local relevance is developed at the expense of social sciences and humanities departments and fosters a narrower emphasis on vocational training and producing knowledge and graduates for the local private sector. Hirosaki University does not overcome the structural constraints that the rural university faces in times of budget cuts that reduce investments in planned reforms.

Peripherality plays out in a different way in the Ukraine, a country of the former socialist world whose gradual accession to the European Union has also meant the alignment of its higher education sector with EU-driven core policy. In the Ukrainian case, Muliavka explores how the transfer of policy blueprints associated with the EU and a global higher education trajectory towards 'competition' and 'quality' runs the risk of cementing the role of Ukraine's higher education sector in a 'peripheral' economy focused on labour extraction. These blueprints also perpetuate its subordinate structural position to the capital flows of core economies. The cutting of budgets, student stipends, and the contraction of the university

sector through forced mergers has been paralleled by a steep decline of GDP and economic opportunities in the country. These changes have solidified the link between economic marginalisation and the deepening crisis of the national higher education.

Leaving its 'Soviet past', and dreaming of its 'Western future', Ukraine's accession to the EU core remains uncertain. Demonstrating its ability to subject itself to core policy demands aimed at inviting business investment, Ukraine crafts its higher education programme under the uncertain deadlines and consequences of accession (or the lack thereof). As Muliavka points out, different trajectories often lead to a similar conclusion that legitimates the retrenchment of financial student support and the marketisation of higher education, and which is linked to an economic dependency on sustaining a cheap workforce to attract core investment. This observation is valid for most post-socialist countries in the EU's periphery that share a context of ideological rejection of welfare mechanisms as 'past'. In this way, Muliavka's analysis most closely articulates core-periphery relations congruent with world system analysis, yet also illustrates the symbolic force that notions of periphery in contemporary capitalist systems lend to the legitimisation of core-oriented policy reform.

In Cantini's sophisticated comparison of the Middle Eastern cases of Egypt and Jordan, the implementation of World Bank programmes and the view towards Europe are fraught with tensions. Similar to Ukraine, yet with less clear ultimate direction for higher education sectors, the selectivity of policy adaptation speaks to tactical play in negotiating the reform demands of global lenders with the maintenance of the political status quo by local elites. In contrast to other contributors to this Special Issue, Cantini places analytical emphasis on what prevents the implementation of the reform packages, or parts thereof, to which the governments in Egypt and Jordan are nevertheless committed in principle. Besides resistance from within universities and other civil society actors, Cantini shows how respective governments themselves at times halt or delay, rather than enact, specific policy

pathways promoted through core players such as the World Bank. In the case of Egypt, Cantini illustrates how reform packages promoted through the World Bank keep pushing in the same direction and remain largely the same in content and strategy over time, irrespective of shifting national political contexts. Similarly, in Jordan, reform policies face resistance through different actors within and beyond universities. Yet, the decisions of the governments of Egypt and Jordan to shelve or delay World Bank-supported higher education reforms ultimately seem to stem from the resistance of different interests, namely, to not give away control over established systems and the status quo.

Cantini thereby sheds light on how policy travels in the case of two distinct contexts in the Middle East and provides a different example to the way core-periphery dynamics play out compared to the other contributions to this issue. Whereas other cases illustrate how policy frameworks emanating from core locations are locally adapted and implemented based on specific agendas, Cantini's cases demonstrate how local policy agendas lead to stalling and delaying higher education reforms promoted by core players such as the World Bank. Based on the cases of Egypt and Jordan, he remains more sceptical about the unidirectional development of core-periphery relations as a material and symbolic force of advancing policy reforms and helping their legitimisation. While Cantini is clear that the Middle East occupies no exceptional position in global processes of higher education reform when it comes to trends such as privatisation and a discursive focus on employability, his case studies show that at times countries resist core-periphery relations not because of counter-hegemonic position-taking or by taking up a decidedly alternative route, but because global policy reforms contradict – not always progressive – national policy agendas. Yet, Cantini's analysis also demonstrates that it is not enough for national governments or individual institutions simply to resist reforms that represent the interests of core countries; they also have to offer alternative routes for higher education reform. Without offering viable a policy that would

address the contradictions and challenges of the existing systems, such acts of resistance merely amount to a stalemate. They feed short-term political agendas based on retaining governmental control rather than directing and responding to long-term social change.

Concluding reflections and lines for further inquiry

In summary, the Special Issue narrates and reflects upon ways in which the use of concepts of core and periphery both unearth and problematise perceptions of centrality and marginality within national higher education systems vis-a-vis their actual structural conditions. The articles also identify the abilities of different polities to mobilise material and symbolic resources to challenge their global position. Besides paying attention to the political economy behind reforms, the articles shed light on the centrality of symbolic perceptions and hegemonic discourses that are reflected in national-level higher education policies. The contributions illustrate how by pressing through reforms based on symbolic positioning, that positioning often becomes translated into material realities that further contribute to the production and reproduction of structural effects. The contributions of Muliavka and Trifuljesko, in particular, show how the introduction of such reforms often amounts to throwing out the baby with the bathwater, bringing in a whole package of neoliberal austerity, new public management, economic rationalisation and curtailing social sciences and socially pertinent disciplines to fit the logic of the market. Once introduced, these reforms keep those institutions that are structurally ascribed and symbolically self-ascribed to the periphery of higher education in a position of continual subjugation to core policy. They stay trapped within a broader dynamic of a core-periphery division of labour in the world system.

Most authors identify how peripheral universities and higher education sectors have agency and could develop alternative trajectories. Yet their articles illustrate how most of their agency, human and economic resources, are stirred into programmes that reaffirm their

peripheral position vis-a-vis core institutions and national higher education sectors rather than subverting it. In this process, we also see higher education as one of the fields in which there is a reinforcement of what Fernando Coronil (1994) calls ‘subaltern states’, as a relational concept of social agency that is used to designate subjects in a subjected state of being. This silencing effect of neo-colonial domination, the impossibility to speak, or to utter (policy) statements, is sometimes adopted by the core of the peripheral state (Coronil 1994).

With this special issue we contribute both to world systems theory and higher education studies. We (re-)introduce world systems theory into higher education studies and relate it more closely to the question of how institutional reform contributes to the production and reproduction of the periphery in higher education. By doing that, we show that the higher education sector also brings lessons to world systems theory. The contributions show how symbolic position-taking can produce or resist material effects of self-peripheralisation. We show that, in the case of higher education, these cannot be sufficiently explained through structural analysis of divisions of labour between core and peripheral locations alone. Further work is needed to describe processes of resistance and alternative discourses and practices within and across peripheral higher education contexts in a more holistic way. These concern, for example, the dynamics of progressive local and national projects for higher education reform, attention to vocational and religious education with local relevance, processes of class formation through higher education, the introduction of digital and surveillance technologies in higher education and the management of capital, knowledge goods, services and labour flows that defy national boundaries: all these are important to understand how the landscape and outcomes of core-periphery relations in higher education are shaped and how they can be acted upon with alternative imaginaries and practices. Exploring national level policy reform through the lens of core-periphery relations, then, is also important to inform the examination of market interventions, capital and technology flows beyond national boundaries. While such

work may re-centre the debate of core-periphery dynamics in higher education at different scales, this special issue illustrates how material effects are produced and shaped on the national level, which still holds the keys for the regulation of higher education around the globe.

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