Why Place Matters: Imaginative Geography and International Student Mobility

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Abstract

This paper develops and extends the recent work on international student mobility by expanding beyond the traditional push–pull factors of migration to show that students are influenced by more than the economic in their decision of where to study. It uses original data collected through interviews and focus groups with 38 higher education international students at three UK universities located in Aberdeen, Belfast and Nottingham to show that when students choose to study overseas they are influenced by diverse perceptions of place that they have constructed over long periods of time. These imaginative geographies are the direct result of exposure to a range of different media, as well as stories relayed to them from members of their social networks. This paper demonstrates that students studying in Scotland and Northern Ireland appear to have highly developed imaginative geographies in relation to their chosen study sites. By contrast, international students studying in England tended to have little conception of their chosen place of study. In this case the powerful imaginative geographies that had been instilled within them focused on London, overshadowing their understanding of their chosen study site.

Keywords

International student mobility; imaginative geography; transnationalism; qualitative research; place; UK regional study

Introduction

On the 28 September 2012 the British Council published a video on their Education UK website entitled "the Adventure of a Lifetime". The three-minute film followed the exploits of a typical, female international student beginning university in the UK. It

showed her gaining a top class education, whilst encountering heritage, cultural diversity, improved job prospects and adventure. That is to say it made much of the idea that choosing a UK university is about more than studying alone. As these key points flashed onto the screen the student was transported through a range of different UK universities, sites of key cultural significance – such as Stonehenge and the Giant's Causeway – and experiences. Throughout, she engages in different sports, she is enjoying the countryside, she attends music festivals and she is making "friends for life". The UK is therefore sold to prospective students not only as a place of learning and cultural diversity – something which, arguably, other countries can also offer – but as a unique place, filled with distinctive experiences. It is marketing and media such as this that will increasingly play a key role in the formation of international students' imaginative geographies of their place of study (Mercille 2005; Appadurai 1996). This paper shows that these geographies are central to a student's decision to choose the UK as a study destination, to the regional or even city level.

The film, however, takes no account of the geography of the UK itself. Rather the four regions are considered as a whole, instead of offering insights into the distinct cultures of England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. The clips are sequenced in a way that does not express that the Giant's Causeway is in Northern Ireland, or that Stonehenge is located in the south-west of England. There is, therefore, no coherent geographic narrative. In a sense, this is also reflected in much recent work on the geographies of international students, which has tended to focus on push-and-pull factors of migration or on instrumental factors influencing a student's choice to study overseas (see Mosneaga and Winther 2013), rather than on the importance of place. As Carlson (2013) and Raghurum (2013) assert, there is a need for geographers to redress this balance.

It is important to note, though, that work analysing these economic factors has begun to assess the importance of social and cultural influences, not least the building of social and cultural capital through an international education. Waters (2009) showed that even as the tertiary education infrastructure improves in many traditional sending countries, choosing an overseas education has remained popular, especially within Asia. She suggested that instead many middle class families continue to send their children overseas, believing that by pursuing scarcity degree value will be maintained (see also Findlay *et al.* 2012). Geographic mobility can, therefore, be considered a form of capital which is often perceived as immediately transferable to economic capital as graduates enter into the labour market (Leung 2013; Brooks and Waters 2011).

Equally, spending time overseas becomes synonymous with providing opportunities and experiences that would not otherwise be available if they had remained at home (Bagnoli 2009). The networks established, language skills gained, personal development and an improvement in their intercultural communication skills may also be considered important by their prospective employers, playing a key role in procuring work when they enter into the job market (King 2011; King and Ruiz-Gelices 2003; Messer and Wolter 2006). The current literature therefore suggests that obtaining an international education is considered by students as a way of gaining access to new forms of capital, thereby improving their job prospects and enhancing social difference (Findlay *et al*. 2012; Geddie 2013; Holloway *et al*. 2012; see also Baxter and Britton 2001). It, therefore, continues to focus on international education as an economic benefit, rather than assessing the social and cultural factors implicated in choosing to study overseas as key influences in their own right.

A notable exception to this is Waters *et al.* (2011) which suggested that privileged UK students may choose higher education overseas to avoid the overly restrictive university system at home. These students consider becoming an international student as allowing freedoms, fun and adventure that would otherwise be denied to them. Waters *et al.* (2011), however, offers more general insights into their perceptions of the higher education system rather than their ideas of the places themselves, the focus of this paper. It offers a departure from recent work by showing that students are influenced by a variety of different media, such as literature, television, advertisements (see Thompson *et al*. 2007) and word of mouth, when choosing their study destination, mobilising this information through their imaginative geographies. This operates not only at the level of the UK as a whole, but has distinct regional nuances indicating that students are highly selective in terms of where they choose to study – much more so than recognised in the current literature. This paper will argue that international students choose their place of study under the influence of personal or collective imaginative geographies that they have constructed, often over long periods of time (Gregory 2009; Driver 2005; Said 1985a). These geographies help them build, what they believe, is an accurate understanding of the country and the different cities and universities in which they choose to study. This paper will detail the ways in which these imaginative geographies are produced and how this influenced their understandings of three UK universities located in Aberdeen, Belfast and Nottingham. It aims to steer our understanding of student mobility away from that which is economically motivated to show that there are wider social, historical and cultural nuances to their decision.

Following a brief methodology, this paper is arranged thematically, identifying how Said's (1985a) theory of imaginative geography is central to student decision-making. It will explore the imaginative geographies of international students in three contexts. First, it will consider how concepts of power and postcolonialism influence international students, echoing work by Madge *et al*. (2009) who stated that often these historic linkages make the UK an obvious choice for many students. Second, it will discuss how these geographies are rooted in community. They are shared imaginings, formed by the collective rather than by the individual– although subjective understandings are also important (Driver 2005). Third, it will analyse how these perceptions often rub uncomfortably with the reality of both the experience, and their destination. This is because imaginative geographies are constructed across distance (Morin 2011) creating distorted 'realities' where that which is imagined differs to that found when *in situ* (Springer 2009).

Methodology

This paper uses qualitative data collected through semi-structured interviews and small focus groups of up to five individuals at the three case study universities. In total thirty-eight international students from twenty-three different countries participated in the research between March 2011 and January 2012. The only prerequisite for participation was that the students were enrolled on a degree-seeking programme of study, rather than taking part in a short-term exchange programme. The participants include students from traditional sending countries (such as India and Malaysia (Naidoo 2007)) and non-traditional sending countries (such as the USA and Canada). Despite some interest from British expatriates who had returned to the UK for their higher education, it was decided to focus only on those who were of other nationalities. Indeed, Wilkins's (2013) demonstrated that expatriate children were often influenced by their desire to return to their 'home' country for education, making them less representative of the wider international student community.

Introducing imaginative geography

According to Said (1985a) imaginative geographies arise from perceived power relations between two nations or regions, where the more dominant of the two produces representations of the 'Other'. This would often involve a set of discourses through which the West created an imagined and exotic East (Torres-Olave 2012; Buchowski 2006; Kennedy 2000). While European nations were perceived as being

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powerful and articulate, Asian nations, often colonised, were instead considered to be defeated and distant, irrational and dangerous. These beliefs were reinforced throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by British and French novelists, journalists, travellers, historians and so on, which the wider public were unable to challenge as they could not travel to these far flung destinations (Morin 2011; Said 1985a). Their works reinforced popular prejudices and fed upon cartographies of fear by, according to Springer (2011), producing 'Our' world through the construction of a perverse 'Other'.

While Said used the example of the binary distinctions between the West and the East in the nineteenth century, the concept of imaginative geographies can be applied to any context which compares the familiar 'ours' with the unfamiliar 'theirs' (Holloway and Valentine 2000). These imaginative geographies occur both on a subjective and a social scale (Driver 2005). International students are the perfect candidates to explore their imaginative geographies, prior to their departure these students have the time, together with their peers, to establish both an imagined experience of an overseas education and of their study destination. This can develop through their own understandings of the UK, however, frequently the participants noted that they knew of many individuals that had studied overseas and that often becoming an international student was the norm in their home countries, as Asan, a Nepalese student in Aberdeen noted:

> 95 per cent of people from my school they just go abroad. People select from America, over here in United Kingdom, Australia, also people go to India for technical programmes…

Irrespective of whether the students were from traditional sending countries or not, most had known other people who had studied overseas. Those who had not noted they knew of friends, family or acquaintances who had travelled extensively. Students are therefore receiving information about the overseas study experience from their social networks, as well as from advertising campaigns by organisations such as the British Council, and the universities themselves, to create a collective imaginary of being an international student. This is combined with other imaginative geographies about the UK more widely, which, in the case of international students are again formed by international recruitment strategies, as well as through contact with other media – in particular television and the internet – and their own experiences of having visited the UK in the past.

Power and Postcolonialism

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Central to imaginative geography and Orientalism is the idea of power, and how power relations arise between two places (Radcliffe 1997), refracted through multiple socio-historic factors (Inokuchi and Nozaki 2005). In the case of higher education, this may involve the reiteration of concepts of academic imperialism, portraying the UK, and Western education more generally, as having different and entrenched cultural, social and emotional values compared to elsewhere (Madge *et al*. 2009). The British Council video portays higher education in the UK in these singular terms. It represents the UK as *the* place to receive a world-class education, alongside other opportunities for personal growth. Indeed, the British Council is in itself a postcolonial institution, and these values underpin how they choose to market the education available in the UK (Madge *et al*. 2009). Many of the participants echoed these discourses throughout the research. Rafiah for example, from Trinidad and Tobago, described how many people in the Caribbean have an "inferiority complex" in particular when compared to the UK and the USA. She attributed this to the "colonial history" which led to people in her home country believing that "everywhere foreign is bright and better". She went on to state that this relationship had been, in part, responsible for movements of people between the Caribbean and the UK for decades. Rafiah said that she:

> had [a] like more…positive image of the UK over the US and Canada – I don't know why...it's something, I wouldn't say elitist, I don't know, just sort of…magical

Rafiah betrayed a complex imagining of the UK which is both subjective, as well as part of a collective understanding shared by other people from the Caribbean (see Driver 2005; Gregory 1995a). The UK, and overseas HEIs more generally, have a certain "glitz" about them that she feels her home country is lacking. By choosing the UK she believes she will stand out from the crowd, as the education is conceived by other people in her home country as superior to that of Trinidad and Tobago, sentiments shared by her peers when she stated that "when you get the chance to go you go". Hoelscher and Alderman (2004) identify these collective memories and ideas, such as those discussed by Rafiah as creating concepts of identity and one's place in the world, where in this case the Caribbean is identified by students as inferior to the education offered elsewhere.

The participants who were studying in England were most likely to draw explicitly upon these postcolonial connections and discourses. This is reflected in collective ideas of who the 'British' are. Farid, a Pakistani student, had, over time,

built a clear understanding that this was limited to the English, rather than the rest of UK more widely. He stated:

> before 1947 you know we were ruled by English people…both India and Pakistan cherish their projects…we are really curious to know more about education in England and English people.

Farid clearly states that amongst people in his home country and in India it is not the British who are conceived as the colonisers, but the *English* in particular. This sheds light on the absence of specific references to postcolonial influences by the participants in Aberdeen and Belfast, despite students from former British colonies also taking part. In particular, it shows that the way in which students consider the UK as a historical colonial power varies between the UK's constituent regions. While students outside of England did draw on what could be considered postcolonial references – discussing issues of power and dominance (see Hoelscher and Alderman 2004; Clayton 2013), only within England did students explicitly recognise this as being influenced by the UK's postcolonial position. For instance, Suren, an Indian student studying in Aberdeen drew on ideas of the area as having a long history of education and that in terms of "inventions and discovery" the Scottish had been more successful than those elsewhere:

> …everything had its origin, any invention or discovery was made by Scottish men, starting with the – I don't know – until the Dolly of the sheep…a lot of…inventions that happened, if you trace back the history…they happened from Scottish people only.

Postcolonial discourses of power and academic imperialism (see Madge *et al* 2009) are, therefore, key to developing understandings of place. This conception of the UK as providing a superior education is in part built through current marketing campaigns and strategy, but is likewise a remnant of the UK as a powerful and colonising nation that has infused the social imaginary, influencing international and overseas students. Thus the British Council's marketing strategies – and those of UK universities more broadly – while positioning the UK in a postcolonial context subtly draw upon a persistent imaginative geography of British imperial power.

Community: Creating Shared Imaginings

Imaginative geographies are both subjective and rooted in the community (Driver 2005). Many of the participants identified that when choosing where to study they

were influenced by those who have chosen to engage in educational mobility in the past, as Asan's earlier quotation suggested. These flows of international students have led to the creation of diverse imaginative geographies regarding the UK study experience. This occurs through the dissemination of various media such as television, film or the web (*ibid.*) but also through the sharing of an overseas experience. As students chose overseas education they would often share their experiences with those at home, creating an imaginative "geography" of an international education.

This "Travelling-In-Dwelling" (Clarke 2005) is an interactive process, with international students able to share their stories, photographs and so on with those who are currently at home. With the rise in social networking websites this is even easier as they facilitate "material and imaginative connections between people, communities and places" (Blunt 2007:690) that may otherwise have been lost (Ellison *et al* 2007). Those overseas can therefore continue to be socially and politically involved with their home countries when away (Collins 2009). Social networking sites allowed Hazel, from the USA, to maintain contact with friends when they were backpacking in Europe, inspiring her decision to study overseas:

> I had a friend that did five months…in Europe and I think that kind of…fuelled it… I always wanted to go over here, or always go someplace else and study for a while but I think the fact that they did it made me really kick-start me and really made me start applying for schools.

This concept of following others or seeking out the same experiences was common amongst the participants, with students using knowledge that had been built up over long periods of time to create an understanding of an overseas experience, demonstrating how imaginative geographies are often generalised understandings (Gregory 1995a). Suraya, a Malaysian student, noted that the UK was a place where students with "good results" chose to study. Equally there was a clear understanding amongst the participants of the 'best' places to study in the UK. Cambridge and Oxford, in particular, are considered by students as being elite institutions and very clear centres of power and cultural heritage (Deslandes 1998). Sachin, an Indian student, noted that:

> in India…when you say "British Universities" there are two main categories. One is Oxford, Cambridge, London School of Economics and UCL I think, and…everything else…Oxford [and] Cambridge, are seen as being a…higher standard.

The fact that several students drew attention to this hierarchy, together with Sachin's comment, suggests this is a commonly held imaginative geography of the UK higher education system. This is supported by Williams and Filippakou (2010) who suggested that such a hierarchy existed, with Oxbridge and London based universities, like the London School of Economics perceived to be the best places to study. They argued the past financial and academic autonomy of UK universities had allowed them to develop a niche within the higher education marketplace. Consequently, certain universities have built a unique identity with which students, parents and staff, are able to have strong, emotional ties (Wæraas and Solbakk 2009).

As well as these widely held imaginative geographies of a UK higher education system, students' communities were also able to play an active role in formulating imaginative geographies of certain destinations. Song, a Taiwanese student, described there being a "culture" in her home country of studying in the USA. In her experience many academics had, themselves, studied in the USA and would then advise future students to study there themselves. This, together with exposure from other outlets, including film and television series, often using locations in the USA, had led to a greater familiarity with the USA than the UK (see Ridanpäa 2007). She went on to state that "if there is no other concern people will prefer to choose…US just because they only have impression and understanding of US." This made it particularly stressful when she chose to study at Nottingham because there was a lack of understanding about the city:

> my relatives they do not know where is Nottingham…they only know London…some of my previous professors or colleagues…they've never heard about Nottingham so that's really stressful and even after I choose to come here…I still feel very, very upset…because finally I choose the unexpected choice.

Song's insights are interesting, particularly those which reflect London as representative of the rest of England, a frequent misconception held by international students considering overseas study. While students often had imaginative geographies which were specific to Northern Ireland and Scotland, or even to the particular cities in which they studied, imaginative geographies of England were bound up with understandings of London. This leads on to the final section of the paper, the contrasts between perceptions built through imaginative geography and reality experienced.

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Perceptions and Reality: Uncomfortable Bedfellows

Imaginative geographies occur over distance, both in terms of physical space and in terms of time (Said 1985). They can, therefore, be formed by individuals and societies from all cultural backgrounds, as such even international students who did not have a postcolonial relationship to the UK had also developed imaginative geographies of the country. Mattias, a German student, had a clear imaginative geography of the country and in particular England. He found that Nottingham – his chosen place of study – did not follow this stereotype. This is unsurprising given that imaginative geographies are primarily concerned with representations of cultures, nations, people and places (Coles and Walsh 2010), rather than with the reality itself. Mattias felt that the multiculturalism of Nottingham was not representative of the rest of the UK more widely. Instead he reflected on time spent in Chippenham, which he believed painted a more accurate picture of the UK:

> [Chippenham] was really a quite nice area…I wouldn't say British at its best, but British as what I would have expected it to be. It was like…a small village or a small town. Which is very nice and comfortable so it was as you expected…or rather as I expected

Mattias believed the multiculturalism of Nottingham had been influenced by the internationalisation process of the university, rather than reflecting a natural change. Instead, he read the landscape for a place which was reflective of his imaginative geographies (see Urry 2002), identifying Chippenham as a place which could be considered truly "British".

Mattias's experience demonstrates how life in the UK is often very different to the imagined experience of international students. Indeed, as imaginative geography deals with the invention and construction of geographical space beyond a physical boundary the realities are often obscured, with stereotypes instead becoming 'knowledge' (Morin 2011; see also Gregory 1995b). Jack, a student from the USA, noted that when he spent time working with a charity in Scotland two years previously he had learnt of an alternative Scottish life, one which he had not been aware of before. Jack reflected that Scotland is often romanticised and drew attention to images of the Highlands, kilts, bagpipes and whisky which were often portrayed as unique to Scotland – factors also identified by other international students who had chosen to study in Aberdeen. Nonetheless Jack stated that he had experienced "real life" in the region and had seen:

a lot of kids just wandering around at night looking for trouble…for a lot of internationals who are only here just for a short while it's easy to pretend that's not there…but when you're actually getting your hands involved…you realise…this is the ugly part of life that they don't tell you about…

As Jack suggests, over time students would find that their preconceptions were often challenged. By focusing on heritage and tradition there was a failure to address the authentic lifestyle of the people of the region. This concept of a misrepresentation is an important theme within the imaginative geographies literature. Cater (2001) suggested that when experiences of places failed to live up to the idealised 'reality' imagined people would often seek out their idealised experience, looking for signs of it within the landscape. This echoes Jack's statement that it is easy for international students to pretend the socioeconomic problems he had experienced in Scotland were not there, or others, like Mattias would instead suggest that these particular places were not necessarily reflective of the rest of the region or country.

This concept of a different reality was most frequently present amongst students who had chosen to study in England. The participants were often surprised that Nottingham was very different to London, a city which many of them had visited in the past or, at the very least, had been key to the development of their imaginative geographies. Rafiah, in particular was disappointed that it did not have the same "glitz" that she had expected, she said:

Nottingham is a quiet little place…it's conducive to studying and whatever but it's not…particularly amazing…it's not vastly better than…home or anything like that…the university is really good…but the actual city itself…it's alright

Rafiah was not alone in her comparison with London. Catherine, from the USA, also stated that while London was as "big and spectacular" as she had imagined, but stated that other places in the UK were less impressive. For many participants, therefore, Nottingham was placeless, at least in terms of their imaginative geographies; instead London became a proxy for other English cities and destinations because it is one of the only places in the UK that they have experienced, either through visits, media outlets or so on.

Conclusion

To conclude, this paper has demonstrated that international students have complex imaginative geographies which influence their decisions of where to study. It shows this through three distinct frames. First, it has identified how the concept of academic imperialism taps into a postcolonial ideology both in terms of the 'colonised' as international students choose the UK as their study destination, but also in terms of the 'coloniser', with the UK using distinctive references of power and dominance to sell the higher education system to prospective students. This reflects work by Driver (1992) and Said (1985b) which stated that imaginative geographies are bound up in both the Self and the Other, and therefore both must be included in any "consideration of Orientalism" (Said 1985b:90). Second, it suggests that these imaginative geographies have a social dimension, and are formed through communities. Third, it has shown that these imaginative geographies often sit uncomfortably with the reality of the places considered. The international students, particularly those at Nottingham, were often disappointed that the reality of their experience was very different to what they had expected. Said (1985a) suggests that this is not unusual. In particular he states that knowledge which claims to be about something actual it "is not easily dismissed. Expertise is attributed to it…[creating] not only knowledge but the very reality they appear to describe" (Said 1985a:94).

International students therefore arrive in the UK with an understanding of what they believe they will find. This is influenced by the development of marketing media, such as the "Adventure of a Lifetime" film produced by the British Council, but also through their social interactions with friends and family which normalises travel or education abroad, and helps to build an imaginative geography of the best places in which they ought to choose to study. These other influences need to be identified alongside those which deal with economic factors or the social and cultural, to build a more accurate understanding of international student decision making, taking into account the history, legacy and tradition, both of the countries involved and of the wider processes of student mobility.

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