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Performances of Care: Questioning Relationship-Building and International Student Recruitment

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1 INTRODUCTION

In September 2020, Queen's University Belfast became one of the first UK universities to charter a flight for international students in light of the restrictions on mobilities in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. The flight from Beijing to Belfast brought almost 400 new and returning students to campus and the cost was subsidised so that each student paid the equivalent of a commercial airfare. In the press releases that followed, Vice-Chancellor Professor Ian Greer, who welcomed the students personally at the airport (together with the Consul-General of the People's Republic of China in Belfast), said:

I am delighted our students have made the journey safely from China to Belfast. I am confident the direct Queen's charter flight has gone some way *to alleviate any fear and stress* our students and their families may have felt. *I am proud Queen's was able to support our students in this way as the health and safety of our students and staff is paramount for the University.* We have been working hard to plan for the year ahead to ensure students have a safe, authentic and enjoyable student experience (Queen's University Belfast 2020: No pagination, emphasis my own).

The University's reportage on the flight was couched carefully within a wider narrative of care by Queen's for its international students with considerations for their mental health and wellbeing, in addition to offering a positive student experience for the academic year. Yet, the neoliberalisation of the UK higher education sector is one that is not often associated with care. Indeed, caring and ethical behaviours have been absent within discussions of student recruitment and it is apparent that some forms of internationalisation are both exploitative and do not focus of the students' best interests or their welfare (Waters, 2018). This is because the internationalisation of our universities, and the allied pursuit of high-value, international students, continues to be a key focus both of university policy and governmental agendas. The neoliberal narratives that arise as a result, are – I argue – incompatible with a system which prioritises the student as an emotional being.

When considering the UK context, the benefits of recruiting international students tend to be focused on the short-term. An analysis of English policy revealed that international students are treated almost exclusively as a short-term economic benefit, with little regard for the longer-term potential that is offered by a highly-skilled graduate workforce (Brooks,

2018a). UK-wide this has been reflected in past decisions which have been taken to curtail opportunities to remain following graduation (Mavroudi & Warren, 2013). There is, therefore, a desire to recruit international students, but on a short-term basis. However, at the same time, there is now greater competition for countries such as the UK – with long histories of incoming international student migration – from newer entrants to the market (Collins & Ho, 2014; Ma, 2014), and as Anglo-American curricula, often favoured by international students, have been adopted elsewhere (Brooks, 2018b).

This paper grapples with these difficult questions regarding how universities, and particularly those in the UK, attempt to remain relevant within a crowded international student marketplace. It draws on established geographies of care literature to show how performances of care are monopolised by universities and their staff in the recruitment of international degree-seeking students, for third parties involved in the recruitment process, and for each other. Popke (2006) writes that care is a form of ethics, and an attitude that influences how we relate to others, and, as this paper shows, this attempt to demonstrate ‘care’ and build rapport is an essential element of student recruitment and internationalisation. This paper will consider how caring has been commodified by the need to ensure international student enrolments which are often key performance indicators and at the centre of universities’ neoliberal agendas. It also questions how, in a highly marketized sector, where students are considered as consumers rather than learners (Molesworth et al., 2009), staff are able to balance these dual responsibilities of student welfare with a need for enrolment. It begins with a brief literature review outlining the neoliberalisation of the higher education system and associated greater international student recruitment, before reflecting on the changes it brought to relationship and dynamics of care between staff and students. This is followed by an analysis of caring through the framework of three encounters: with students, with recruiters, and with each other. It offers an original contribution by bringing together these two major areas of geographical research – the geographies of care, and the geographies of international student mobility. This widens our frame of reference and understanding of the international student experience in response to a plea from Madge et al (2015).

2 HIGHER EDUCATION, NEOLIBERALISATION AND CARE

Higher education in the UK – and throughout much of the West – underwent a series of radical neoliberal reforms in the 1980s and 1990s. In the UK Acts such as the Higher Education Act of 1988 and the Further and Higher Education Act of 1992 served to increase competition by introducing neoliberal market mechanisms and quasi-market regulation (Alexander & Kapletia, 2018; Naidoo, 2016), as well as creating a mass higher education system (Mayhew et al., 2004). This mass higher education system led to greater competition to recruit students, and a need for universities to market themselves in new ways. From this point onwards there was also a drive to create a more business-like approach to higher education, and so it is also aligned to the emergence of mission statements, strategic plans, greater efforts to harness brand identities, and measures of accountability such as league tables (Chapleo, 2011; Lynch, 2006; Sauntson & Morrish, 2011). Furthermore, subsequent policies in the UK, have focused on the cost (and therefore the perceived value) of degree

programmes, and have rarely referred to students as learners explicitly. Instead they highlight how degrees are private investments prioritising the consumer rights of students (Brooks, 2018a; Nixon et al., 2018). Yang (2020) writes that these ideas are often internalised strongly by international students.

These changes led to two critical developments which are relevant to this paper. First, it led to the notion of the student consumer and changed the relationship between staff and students. Second, it fostered a targeted recruitment of international students by universities brought about by differential fee regimes in the UK. Regarding the development of the student consumer, it is argued that the move to a more business-like approach to higher education alters the position of the student, with degrees reduced to what they can offer in terms of capital accumulation (Nixon et al., 2018; Nordensvärd, 2011). Molesworth et al (2009) write that whilst in the past students would have focused on being learners, instead their goal as consumers of higher education is to have a degree. They argue that higher education becomes a step towards finding employment, rather than an opportunity to engage in higher level learning or skills development. Recent work by Jayadeva et al (2021) demonstrates how these changes are apparent in other European contexts through the adoption of the Bologna Process and individual countries' national regulatory changes. Their research has shown that this streamlines degree structures, introducing greater regulation and targets which lead to a less flexible higher education system. This prioritises the goal of obtaining a degree over skills and personal development. However, it is important to recognise that the terminology of the student consumer is contested geographically (Brooks, 2021).

Second, as this adoption of a neoliberalised system of higher education gathered pace, and funding regimes changed, universities increasingly sought out new income and revenue streams. International students are particularly relevant in this regard as their recruitment and retention can be a lucrative source of income for universities (Robertson, 2013). In the UK context, they often pay significantly higher (largely unregulated) fees than their UK counterparts (Lange, 2013), and so higher education has been transformed into a key export industry. This is both the case in the UK and in other neoliberalised higher education systems such as the USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand (Naidoo, 2010; Zheng, 2014). This neoliberal positioning of higher education as an industry focused on profit has significant ethical and political ramifications. Yang (2020) argues that at best, it erodes the relationship between students and universities to that of a transaction between a consumer and services, at worst international students become 'cash cows' subsidising the education of others. This worst case scenario is often reflected in the aforementioned policies which focus on the short-term economic benefits of international students (Brooks, 2018a).

The implications of these ethical and political ramifications and their impact on student welfare is perhaps best illustrated by a body of work by Waters and Leung (2017, 2014, 2013b; Leung & Waters, 2013, 2017) analysing transnational higher education (TNE) initiatives in Hong Kong. Their work showed UK universities often had troubling disregard for student welfare despite being notionally responsible for these programmes hosted by various further and higher education providers in Hong Kong. They noted differential treatment of TNE students to students both in the UK and in the host countries, with pedagogy that was a transplantation of learning delivered elsewhere rather than engaging

with local contexts, and even a complete outsourcing of student recruitment to the institutions in Hong Kong. This suggests little oversight from the universities who had overall responsibility for these programmes.

To provide some balance to this narrative, Lin Sin (2013) suggested that students enrolled in similar initiatives in Malaysia did not have the same overtly negative experiences as their counterparts in Hong Kong or feel any inferiority by studying towards a British qualification in their home country. However, they did acknowledge that studying towards a UK degree in the UK provided greater social and cultural capital than a TNE programme. This contrasting perspective between the Hong Kong and Malaysian experience does suggest some geographical divergence in terms of how the ‘value’ of a higher education is perceived in different contexts. Although in both cases it was recognised that a TNE programme was not the preferred higher education pathway (Lin Sin et al., 2019). The outsourcing of higher education in this way has led Waters (2018) to question where discussions surrounding ethics, care and responsibility are taking place with regards to higher education, and if international students are being treated as neoliberal subjects this runs somewhat contrary to earlier calls for a more engaged pedagogy (Madge et al., 2009).

The pursuit of international student enrolments is also evidenced by the development of allied migration industries of international student recruitment agents which act as important facilitators of mobilities (Collins, 2008; Tuxen & Robertson, 2019). Some international student markets depend almost entirely upon agent recruitment, such as India and China (Beech, 2018, 2019). However, here, questions of ethical practices also arise. Recruitment agents are often treated with suspicion and distrust, and questions are often raised as to whether their purpose is student-centred or profit-oriented (Thieme, 2017). There is also evidence of corruption within the system, of demanding payments from students to speed up application processes (Caldwell & Hyams-Ssekasi, 2016), sending poor quality applicants, misrepresentation and dishonesty – some of which may be inadvertent and associated with high staff turnover at agencies (Huang et al., 2016). Universities have noted that careful monitoring of agents and their behaviours is essential to try to avoid such malpractice but, at the same time, their need for international student income streams is such that they rely on them to meet targets (Beech, 2018, 2019).

This focus on the neoliberal context of higher education and its marketisation risks losing sight of lived experience of international students or full appreciation of their personhood. Bamberger (2020) writes that international student migration is still framed as a “rational pursuit of economic advantage” (p.1369) and this silences a host of individual factors which are likely to be at play in their mobilities. Relatedly, Page and Chahboun (2019) note that we need to take care to recognise that the goals of higher education institutions and students are not necessarily one and the same. Whilst they may be treated as neoliberal subjects this does not mean that they view themselves as such. In fact, we know that this is simply not the case and that motivations for international student mobility are multiple, ranging from the pragmatic through to the imaginative and aspirational (cf. Findlay et al 2012; Raghuram 2013). Carling and Collins (2018) have so written:

Migration theory needs to account for the multiplex componentry of migration, the way it is situated in imaginative geographies, emotional

valances, social relations and obligations and politics and power relations, as well as in economic imperatives and the brute realities of displacement (p.911).

The focus on the neoliberal international student – focused on the considered, the rational and the efficient – is, at the very least, somewhat short-sighted and this ideology must be widened to consider other aspects of the student psyche and their position as emotional beings (Cheng, 2016; Reddy, 2019).

This paper will advance geographical narratives by considering alternative facets of the student experience, and recognise that international students are part of a “broad-based and variegated process of knowledge production that involves a wide range of actors” (Madge et al., 2015, p. 694). To do this I analyse how ‘caring’ is performed by universities in their recruitment practices, tapping into students’ emotions whilst also being used to further the neoliberal cause of the university. There is a wide body of literature which considers the geographies of care, but at face-value caring is a reciprocal arrangement which encompasses caring for, caring actions and caring about. The latter is most often associated with the emotional realm (Bowlby, 2012; Milligan & Wiles, 2010). Recent work by Middleton and Samanani (2021) has discussed how caring in research contexts can shape deeper understanding of the lived experience of research subjects.

Care and caring practices are fundamental to shaping sociocultural constructions of space. They are therefore inherently geographical processes appearing in different places and practices (Hanrahan & Smith, 2020), and – more widely – our emotions can have important impacts on the world around us. As Davidson and Milligan (2004) have expressed our emotions affect “our sense of time as well as space. Our sense of who and what we are is continually (re)shaped by how we *feel*” (p.524 emphasis in original). The channelling of care and emotions is likely to have important repercussions on student decision-making, particularly when we move beyond the idea of the neoliberal student (Cheng, 2016; Reddy, 2019; Waters et al., 2011).

The performances of care analysed in this paper are an indication of how ‘caring’ becomes part of the student recruitment process in the neoliberal university. Much has been written regarding how care is neoliberalised and commodified, often reflecting how care-work is now viewed through the lens of market relations (McDowell, 2004; Green & Lawson, 2011; Schwiter & Steiner, 2020). Furthermore, the boundaries between neoliberal, capitalist pursuits and care, more widely, have long been blurred through the establishment of neoliberalised care regimes. Work considering philanthrocapitalism shows how care and support works can enhance opportunities for others whilst perpetuating neoliberal frameworks (Mitchell & Sparke 2016; Webber et al 2021). Within the education sector care is construed in various ways. A recent contribution by Lewis and Pearce (2020), for example, discussed how care is associated increasingly with successful learning outcomes rather than personal relationship building between students and teachers in secondary education. While Deuchar and Dyson’s (2020) work has shown how neoliberal enterprise and care can co-exist. Their analysis of young men working in the Indian private education sector showed that these individuals constructed their experiences as not only ‘getting ahead’ but also as supporting and assisting others to make the same advances. However, there is little written in

terms of these dynamics within tertiary education. Work which does analyse care in higher education has considered how caring is almost a radical process, an attempt to do things differently within a neoliberal system (Cheng, 2016). This paper will query whether there is a space for care in student recruitment which extends beyond that of a performance in a marketized higher education system.

3 METHODOLOGY

This paper uses multiple methods to build an understanding of how universities enact performances of care during the international student recruitment process. First, observational and participant observation methods were used both at a series of five international student recruitment fairs and a predeparture event held in Hong Kong at the beginning of July 2017. July coincides with a critical period of time in the international student recruitment calendar as it is at this point that students receive their Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education. It is, therefore, at this juncture that offers made to students by universities are confirmed and accepted, but it is also a period risk and a timeframe when other universities have an opportunity to poach better students. International office staff are often able to make offers of university places on the spot to students at these events, and there was evidence of trading up or cashing in on ‘better’ opportunities on the basis of the results that the students had received. It is worth noting here, that Hong Kong was chosen partly because of the popularity of overseas education. Within Hong Kong there is considerable importance placed upon educational success and attainment, but only some 18% of school leavers are able to access domestic higher education opportunities which remains a first choice for students (Waters & Leung, 2017). Many remaining school leavers either opt to study internationally, if they can afford to do so, or to seek out alternative provision locally – such as the TNE programmes noted in the literature review – which can have negative longer term consequences (Leung & Waters, 2013; Waters & Leung, 2013a, 2013b, 2014).

It is worth noting that the fairs attended were arranged by a variety of different bodies. Some, such as the Hong Kong International Expo had over 100 exhibitors which included schools and sixth form colleges, and exhibitors were often international education agencies who could arrange study at a variety of higher education institutions (HEIs) and in a variety of different geographical locations. Others were on a similar scale but with a more focused geography, such as the British Council higher education fair which showcased UK university opportunities and were staffed by university staff (both academic and administrative), students and agents. The other three fairs attended were organised by international education agencies and were on a variety of scales with some offering study opportunities in several destinations, whilst others were focused on the UK, some were on a larger scale, with others being more boutique events with less than 20 exhibitors. Attending these fairs offered an opportunity to experience international student recruitment at its most visceral, and provided insights into the recruitment process which could not be experienced through interviews with students or staff. At each fair fieldnotes were taken which were subsequently transcribed, coded and analysed. Permission was sought from the organisers before attending, at times on an *ad hoc* basis, and if I was asked by attendees what I was doing I offered information on the research project.

In addition to this, interviews were conducted with 10 international student recruitment staff employed at UK universities between 2014 and 2015; each interview lasted between thirty minutes duration and an hour; all of the interviewees were assigned pseudonyms to maintain anonymity. The staff came from a range of universities throughout Scotland and England and, although few in number, could be considered representative of the diversity of the UK higher education system as a whole – interviewees included staff at post-1992 universities, new universities, specialist HEIs, Russell Group institutions and redbrick universities. Furthermore, a number had worked at more than one HEI and so could reflect on their broader experiences and at least five had over ten years' experience of employment in international student recruitment or admissions more generally. Their international student cohorts also varied – at one Russell Group university, for example, at the time over 66% of their students were international or EU-domiciled, whilst one of the specialist HEIs and a new university had much smaller international and EU-domiciled cohorts (less than 3% of their total student bodies).

The interviews provided rich insights into policy change and its subsequent impact on international student recruitment (both nationally and at a more localised scale). It is also worth noting that these staff were on the front-line of recruitment, with job security dependent on international student intake, and, crucially, it is often these international office staff who are responsible for driving and implementing internationalisation policies at their institutions. Despite this their experiences have been surprisingly absent from international student mobilities research which has tended to prioritise both the student perspective and policy change. This is with the exception of a few notable pieces of work which have focused on this area (Beech, 2018, 2019; Collins, 2008, 2012). This paper therefore is an attempt to redress this imbalance.

4 PERFORMANCES OF CARE: THREE ENCOUNTERS

The remainder of this paper is structured around three encounters during which distinct geographies of 'caring' are performed within the student recruitment process. The definition of a performance of care was chosen because, first, each encounter was a repetitive practice. Second, a performance is suggestive of a hidden or masked identity and at times these caring 'performances' did appear to be a way of concealing the underlying neoliberal goals of the universities. In each encounter it is apparent that showing care and building rapport was used to further neoliberal and marketized agendas; this – whilst ironic – is symbolic of how care is commodified more widely (c.f. McDowell, 2004). Clearly, there is scope for interpretation as to whether these are true caring practices or if building rapport such as discussed in the three encounters is simply a means to an end with regards to ensuring student enrolments. I argue that the boundaries between these dichotomies are blurred – true caring can exist in these spaces (Cheng, 2016; c.f. Reddy, 2019), but the commodification of higher education and the business-oriented focus of universities calls this into question. According to Bowlby (2012) caring is bound by power relationships and there is a need to reflect more deeply on how time and space affect caring exchanges and encounters – this paper attempts to do just this. The three encounters detailed consider, in turn, the importance of dedicated international student recruitment events, how universities attempt to foment bonds between themselves and third-

party recruiters, and finally how they can attempt to create narratives around institutional collegiality to encourage international student commitments and appear as welcoming and supportive institutions.

4.1 Caring for Students

Performing care for students was often aligned to creating a rapport with them and this was a narrative that ran throughout the recruitment interviews and the observations. One interviewee, Lois, articulated this exceptionally well by investigating, in detail, the different facets of her recruitment experience. At the time of her interview, she had been working for a year at a redbrick university and was responsible for recruitment from North and Central America. Lois talked about the variety of mechanisms that they used to establish a presence and promote their message to prospective students. This included high school and university visits, university fairs, agents, social media marketing and magazines – although she did not believe the latter was terribly effective. Above all, however, was the need to build relationships – or at the very least perceived relationships – with prospective students. To do this, Lois used her own positionality with them to create a sense of kinship with students who expressed an interest in studying at her university. Coming originally from New England in the USA and studying as a postgraduate student in Ireland, she used her own background to legitimise claims about university life.

Lois: One thing I always talk about, especially for US students is my own experience of being an American on campus... I have a genuinely, such a positive experience and I've found that the professors are very accessible and I even witness that with other students, you know how quick they are to sit down and have a coffee with them or to talk with them about things outside the classroom which I know students would appreciate...so it's very easy for me to talk about this I'm not creating a scenario I'm relating what I've already witnessed, so having that availability of professors indicates a good support system. I talk about the clubs and the activities, we have an American football team which I don't know if that necessarily makes students want to come but that familiarity that they can associate with...

Lois generates rapport, not only by creating notions of familiarity between herself and prospective students, but also in recounting academic life at the university and extra-curricular activities. Her references to American football are interesting as this is something which Beech (2019, 2018b) notes as being impactful on creating communities of students from the USA on campus through a somewhat unique and distinctive cultural connection which Lois taps into. Later in her interview she also commented that often students are interested in her experience of being “an American” living in the UK and she would offer insights into her own experience of studying away from home and “the transition process” to a live studying overseas. It is as if Lois' remit goes beyond that of recruitment through to

guidance counsellor and friend, for her this becomes an essential element of her practice and a way in which she secures commitment from prospective overseas students.

Existing literature has investigated the importance of mobilising these geographies of caring, but focuses on students who are already on campus. Cheng (2016) writes that “moral sentiments around care often [reveal] how people can do things differently and become more-than-capitalist neoliberal subjects” (p.922) and notes how students’ spatial practices go against ideals of neoliberal, strategic individualism, demonstrating empathy and care for others in similar positions to themselves. Likewise, Reddy’s (2019) work on caring citizens reveals the importance of relationship-building throughout the duration of the university degree, whereby caring becomes the most important aspect of their experience overseas. The caring here, is necessarily more superficial as it does not involve the prolonged relationship-building as discussed by Cheng (2016) and Reddy (2019). Caring in this case becomes a device to further neoliberal agendas, but through using her positionality Lois creates a narrative around an institution which cares more widely – the availability of professors being a case in point here.

Similar ideas are expressed in Ploner’s (2018) work on transitions to university and academic hospitality – his point being that students overall have very positive experiences of this process when they feel welcomed and engaged in university life. Personal contacts and communications are one example of this. Another was an evening predeparture event I attended in Hong Kong during July 2017 hosted by Coventry University. The event took place on one of three University branded trams in the city at the time. It offered applicants, who had accepted places, the opportunity to meet with international recruitment and some academic staff who were in Hong Kong promoting the University.

This was a critical period in the Hong Kong calendar for students who had just received their Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education and so there were several international student recruitment events happening in the city. Often these events were very busy. At one event organised by an education agency on the day that the results were released my fieldnotes reflected on an intense, somewhat fraught event:

the smaller space [in comparison to an event attended in the previous days] makes it feel much more intense. Students and parents are congregating in lines around particular universities...the crowds are so big that it makes it difficult to get through in these places (12 July 2017).

One member of staff who I spoke to briefly on the same day noted that despite the crowds they had not had much interest in their university. Based at a small institution that had been awarded the right to grant university degrees in the 2000s, they felt that most students were at the event “to trade up” on the basis of the grades they had received and so were unlikely to make commitments to less well-known institutions that day. This provides important wider context for the predeparture event.

The tram event was, by contrast an intimate occasion which attempted to cultivate a very different relationship with students. It focused on building personal relationships, chatting to students informally and answering questions they had. The students were known

by name and there was food, drinks and small goody bags for them to take home. The staff themselves were excited about the event, they had not run anything like this before and they were enthusiastic about the opportunities it presented. Before leaving they noted that agent fairs – which had been their focus so far during their stay – could be quiet, but they might spend an hour with each student discussing the options that Coventry could offer.

Relationship-building and these performances of care were therefore crucial to harnessing student enthusiasms about particular locations. As with Ploner's (2018) work, these are opportunities to engage students with university life even prior to their arrival in the UK. Showing care is used as a point of difference in comparison to other higher education providers.

4.2 Building Third-Party Relationships: Care as a Neoliberal Device

Universities also expend considerable time and energy ensuring that they develop and maintain robust relationships with their third-party recruiters. In terms of performing care, this encounter was a complex negotiation between the universities and the agencies, with conflicting power dynamics at play at different points in time. Third-party recruiters, such as education agents, were an important source of incoming students for many of the universities. An early article by Collins (2008) on this subject describes agents as 'bridges to learning', highlighting how they are necessary to aid journeys which would otherwise be difficult, metaphorically speaking. Simon, who worked at a Russell Group university noted, for example, that they worked with "somewhere around 240 to 250" education agents who recruited around a quarter of the international students that they welcomed to campus. Agents are therefore critical to international student recruitment and were present at the recruitment events in Hong Kong and discussed at length in the interviews.

It is worth noting that there were interesting agent dynamics at work in Hong Kong during the recruitment events. Some events were hosted by agencies, for example, with university staff often manning desks and speaking to prospective students, whilst at other events it became apparent that agents and university staff were manning desks together. This was not totally unexpected; agents can play an important role in terms of establishing rapport with prospective students (Beech, 2018). Indeed, one interviewee, Candace, who was based at a Post-1992 institution described them as "absolutely essential as our brand ambassadors" in locations such as India and China (see work by Tuxen and Robertson (2019) which details their ubiquity in the former). However, this intermingling of their presence with university staff, did make it difficult at times to discern what relationships were playing out in different locations. Rhoda, who worked at a post-1992 institution noted co-presence at events such as these was an important way in which they maintained regular contact with those working on their behalf and built relationships with them.

Rhoda: ...we attend their events and their interview sessions, we provide – depending on the type of agency and the relationship that we have for some of them we may do joint advertising campaigns to promote their events. As I say what really works best is a strong personal relationship because ultimately the counsellors are seeing the students and they have their own relationship initially with the student

and the parents and if they have a good relationship with the staff at [our university] who are providing good customer service then that has a big impact on the way they feel and what is kind of front of mind with them when they are counselling the students. So, it's a combination of making sure that they have information about all of the courses and what we have on offer, but then making sure that they have a good relationship with us and the service we provide to them is fast and reliable so that when they are counselling students they know that the service they get from us is going to be consistent so it's those two approaches.

Relationship-building was therefore critical, but Rhoda also frames her role as one of “customer service” revealing how ‘care’ in this regard is also part of wider neoliberal agenda. Other interviewees had similar reflections on their position when working with agents and ensuring they had the help and support that they needed. Judith, who also worked at a post-1992 university noted that agents would appreciate “speedy processing of applications” for example, and ensuring that they made their lives as easy as possible:

Judith: you're trying to get the agents what they need so that they are able to do their job. Either pre-empting what they might need by providing lots of...timely, relevant communications, you don't want to bombard them and if they don't have that information through the training that we give them or the information that we have provided then you do need to respond quickly when they are looking for that *ad hoc* information because that can be the difference between them sending or encouraging a student to accept an offer at your university or go to another university.

All of this was, of course, an attempt to ensure agents continued to send students to them in the future. In their detailed analysis of relationships between, what they term, various education brokers Tuxen and Robertson (2019) establish the difference between agents and counsellors. In this case, agents work on a commission basis from the receiving university and are often regarded with suspicion, counsellors receive a fee from the prospective students and so would characterise themselves as more reliable and working in the students' best interests. In both these cases, however, universities need to work hard to have relevance amongst these different parties, in the hope of receiving students, explaining their actions here.

Whilst ‘caring’ for agents in these ways was considered important for successful recruitment, there were other motivations for these engagements. It became clear, for example, that working together at events was not only to provide assistance, but also a way of monitoring agent behaviours and practices.

Rhoda: They often help, say we do a British Council exhibition we would ask agents to come and help us on the stand, to provide assistance if they get really busy. And that's a great training

opportunity but also a good quality control because then we can hear what they are saying to the students.

Discussions regarding agent training and monitoring were important and a prominent feature within the interviews. One interviewee did report, for instance, that agent malpractice which their university had been unaware of led to new monitoring practices. These issues appear to be common within higher education migration industries in a variety of locations. Thieme (2017) wrote of moves to try to professionalise agencies and give them greater credibility over other more unscrupulous workers in Nepal, for example, whilst other work has detailed the difficulties of introducing third parties into recruitment (Huang et al., 2016). There was also clearly an underlying sense of walking a tightrope between courting agents, and ‘playing the game’ rubbing alongside the need for risk avoidance either from undesirable agent practices, or agents sending students to alternative higher education providers. This indicates that there are a range of power dynamics at play within this element of the recruitment process and it was apparent here that these practices were very much emblematic of the neoliberal university, focused on ensuring incoming students and profitability.

4.3 Institutional Collegiality

The final aspect of caring considered in this paper, reflects on how universities, and umbrella groups, attempt to curate notions of, what I have termed, ‘institutional collegiality’ or care, in order to create a brand identity. There were a number of ways in which this worked in practice. Candace, noted that her university would often host joint events with another HEI to promote the location and what they could offer to prospective students, she offering reflections on why this was a useful strategy she said:

Candace: ...what we were trying to do there was really demonstrate that not only have we got the sense of community and the numbers – if you work together with another university in your city – but we also have the cultural opportunities for students to really feel like a home-from-home, and so by promoting events that we’ve done like that we think that it enhances our recruitment for the future.

Elsewhere in her interview she also pointed to the benefits of having another university in the city. Rather than creating competition, she felt it created greater interest and knowledge of the city, as well highlighting that it was a ‘student city’ which was culturally diverse and filled with different facilities and opportunities for students. It was mutually beneficial, therefore, to sell what it could offer to students as a joint venture, which together created the perception of a greater critical mass of students at the university. This can have the added benefit of branding the location with a student identity which can be useful when attracting students in the future (Malet Calvo, 2018; Malet Calvo et al., 2017).

Umbrella groups, such as the British Council, operate in a similar fashion to this – showcasing the opportunities that study destinations collectively can offer to prospective international students. This was evident during the field research in Hong Kong. One event was attended by Education in Ireland, for example, which describes itself as a “national brand...responsible for the promotion of Irish Higher Education Institutions overseas”

(Education in Ireland 2020: no pagination). It gave a collective voice to the Irish HEIs it was representing at the event, and this meant that it was able to sell a single coherent narrative of the Irish experience to prospective students. It is worth noting that the event at which they were present was on a very large scale. There were close to 100 exhibitors, many of which were agents who were offering prospective students multiple different higher education opportunities. It was therefore a very busy marketplace, and the collective nature of the Education in Ireland stand enabled them to stand out in the crowd more effectively.

The British Council events attended in July 2017 offered, likewise, insights into the higher education experience more broadly within the UK, as well as opportunities to learn more about individual universities. One of the British Council's roles is to create and a national brand for the UK higher education system and the opportunities it can offer to international students (Lomer et al., 2018). Consequently, these events were not only about universities recruiting individual students, but also about selling the collective identity of the British higher education system. In light of this, they included a range of seminars focusing on different aspects of a UK education and the opportunities it could bring – such as the career opportunities from a UK life and health sciences degree, careers in law and a presentation on teaching in UK universities. There were also seminars associated with the application process – considering the likes of writing a personal statement or clearing¹. Although these seminars were notionally generic, the speakers often came from universities who were present at the recruitment event, and so they became opportunities to 'sell' their offering to a wider audience.

Whilst the British Council fairs may have had a collective dimension to them, they were nonetheless an opportunity for universities to access new groups of students and recruit them for study. Other events, groups and collectives appeared to have a much more collegial focus, however. One example of this was the London Universities International Partnership (LUIP), a collective which was in existence at the time of the interviews and whose membership comprised smaller London universities. The goal was to offer them a collaborative platform for international recruitment which would enable them to compete more effectively in the global higher education marketplace. Nathan, who worked at a specialist university, noted that this was useful in terms of raising his university's profile, saying that just being in London did not mean that international student recruitment was necessarily easy.

Nathan: ...we are a small university, so raising our profile is sometimes challenging over and above just...raising the profile of London. The profile of a small university in London remains sometimes a challenge... we do network obviously, and we are part of the London Universities International Partnership.

¹ Clearing is the process used by universities in the UK and the UCAS (The University and Colleges Admissions Service) to fill course places that have not been taken (Study UK 2020). This applies to all undergraduate courses. For the majority of postgraduate taught and postgraduate research courses applications are sent directly to the university, in only a few incidences is this intermediary system used.

Sarah, whose university was also part of LUIP, was much more vocal on the benefits that being a part of the collective could bring. LUIP was an opportunity for much greater outreach and traction, and like Nathan, she noted that interest in smaller, less well-known universities was somewhat lacking making it difficult to recruit students. She noted that the public relations opportunities that LUIP could offer were much more substantial:

Sarah: [LUIP is] hugely beneficial because it has allowed us to reach groups and people that we never would have the opportunity to reach and also as a group we get a lot of PR – you know [our university] going and doing something in New York isn't particularly press-worthy, but a group of twenty London institutions going out – well first of all we are able to do things, you know we can have a policy discussion with university presidents and London VCs that we could never have if it was just me going over with my VC to the US and going, “hey president of NYU would you like to meet [with us]?” I don't think there would be much take up but if we go over as LUIP there's a lot of interest because of our collective nature.

For both of these universities, LUIP was an enabling force gave them much greater voice within the crowded marketplace of higher education opportunities in London. Sarah went on to say that they used LUIP as a way of selling their international credentials.

Sarah: Boris Johnson gave a speech...he then sort of said you know, study in London meet the world and I think that's another thing we use from the international side...we talk about how London is a place that welcomes international people, let alone students and so their experience here would hopefully be a positive one. So that's sort of how we use the platform and also there is definitely a positive message that goes along with us all collaborating because it shows that we are kind of working together rather than use vying for the students' buck you know? So when we go out as a group and we are working together to recruit students we have a clear mission and people see us standing altogether working together and they see us rather than just coming over to get students income as a group of people trying to pick quality students to educate...

Sarah's reflections here are interesting. Clearly, in her opinion, the LUIP becomes a vehicle to present a more collaborative system, potentially disrupting some of the ills of the marketized higher education agenda. For Sarah, it enables the messages of higher education study and recruitment to instead become ones of collaboration and collegiality in a diverse and internationalised environment. Yet, this is only half true as she follows up this proclamation by saying:

that might not necessarily be true but that's the impression that I think we give which I think is very powerful.

Whilst this appears as a collegial activity in fact this is an attempt to brand this location and to create an alternative brand identity for smaller London institutions. Successful city branding captures the essence of a location and goes hand-in-hand with the wider commodification of place (Kearns & Lewis, 2019; Ye & Björner, 2018). From the perspective of this collective, branding the lifestyle that they can offer to students successfully is likely to ensure loyalties from prospective students, and, given what we know about social networks and student choice, this is likely to have an ongoing iterative effect in the future (c.f. Beech, 2015). Whilst it would be overly simplistic to say that this is a form of business collusion, it is clear that universities do recognise the benefits of working together to raise their profiles and that this is partly a result of the neoliberal system of which they are a part.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has shown some of the different ways in which care is performed by universities through an analysis of how they build relationships with prospective students, with agents who are involved in the recruitment process, and the importance of using collegial performances to create notions of caring and team-working between institutions. These three dimensions pose interesting questions regarding international student recruitment and its associated performances of care. It is worth noting from the outset that the purpose of this paper is not to suggest that those involved in recruitment, or those who work with students in any capacity beyond this, do not care for them, but rather that the marketized nature of the higher education system transforms the relationship between staff and students. Whilst this transformation has been acknowledged in the student consumer literature (Molesworth et al., 2009) there is rather less insight into how this translates into other dimensions of the university-student relationship. The result of this is that an analysis of care and ethics in student recruitment has been decidedly absent from much institutional and governmental decision-making (Waters, 2018). Work by Gilmartin et al (2020) even points to how initiatives to grow international student numbers can ignore their precarities and leave them open to exploitation. This paper shows that the need to perform care seems to be particularly pronounced at heightened moments, such as the recruitment process, during which, caring is used as a mechanism to generate and sustain student interest. In sum, the paper's focus is on the conflict between this performance of care, and a genuine concern for student welfare, alongside the nature of the neoliberal university.

As the wider literatures on the geographies of care attest, there exists an uncomfortable relationship between care and neoliberalism. Care has become commodified as a result of the widespread neoliberal reforms of the 1980s and 1990s (Mcdowell, 2004) and repositioned within market relations (Green & Lawson, 2011). From an education perspective, Lewis and Pearce (2020) note that the neoliberal system has eroded caring within schools. In these contexts, they suggest that care is reduced to abstract or more generalised understanding of student performance, rather than individualised, person-centred care. Given the business-oriented model of higher education in the UK and in other neoliberalised systems it can be assumed that similar relationships exist elsewhere.

Throughout this paper I have referred to the care detailed in the encounters as a performance. This is for two critical purposes. The first is that the caring demonstrated in these encounters is reiterated with different groups of students and third parties. The second is that a performance suggests a hidden identity, and the care in the examples detailed above masks wider neoliberal agendas. Indeed, there is an irony here that care is used to further a neoliberal, marketized cause, something which Lawson (2007) notes is incompatible. Milligan and Wiles (2010) describe care as the provision of practical or emotional support. It is an embodied activity (Popke, 2006) which involves a blossoming relationship (Iacovone et al., 2020) between the carer and the cared for which is often bound by socio-economic and power relationships (Bowlby, 2012). These definitions also therefore question whether care is truly able to be offered in the context of the encounters analysed here as these are often fleeting moments, where caring and relationship-building is rapid and on a superficial level.

There are several protagonists and power relationships at play simultaneously in the encounters detailed in this paper. First, the prospective students and their families. Student voices are heard frequently in the existing international student literature and so this paper sought to move this narrative forwards by offering alternative geographical perspectives. They have, however, been present in the paper through an analysis of how they are treated by universities and their recruitment teams. Students in the context detailed here wield considerable power through their decision-making with universities working hard to encourage or secure enrolments. This is visible both in the relationship-building and positionalities used by Lois and in the pre-departure event. Whilst both of these performances of care had deeper neoliberal agendas, it is interesting how this vision of a caring university that prioritises student welfare is one which is used for recruitment. In doing so, this suggests that care – even neoliberalised care – offers an alternative university experience in a highly commercialised space. Second, there are complex, entangled power relationships at play between agencies and universities. Agents work on a commission basis and are often closely observed by universities, but at the same time university staff often have a presence working at agency events. There is clearly a need to build a close working relationship with them, both to ensure that agents will continue to send a ready supply of students, but also to observe agent practices. Finally, encounter three considers how universities often work together to raise their collective profiles, but there are also questions as to the wider motivations for such relationships. The nature of the neoliberalisation of the higher education sector in the UK and the need that this has created to recruit international students, means that for as long as these power dynamics continue it will be difficult to escape these narratives surrounding performances of care in recruitment. Only through wide-ranging reform of the higher education system, which prioritises learning and the experiential aspects of an education would this stand any chance of changing. As long as higher education is treated as a commodity, there is little incentive to rewrite these narratives.

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