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Border region studies: the structure of an ‘offbeat’ field of regional studies

Teemu Makkonen^{a,b}  and Allan M. Williams^a

ABSTRACT

The contemporary conditions of academic capitalism exert pressures on researchers to avoid ‘peripheral’ journals and ‘unfashionable’ topics. This paper sheds a light onto the structure of one such ‘offbeat’ field, namely ‘border region studies’, by discussing its geographical distribution, key themes, significance and impact. The review suggests that border region studies can be considered a significant and important ‘branch’ of regional studies, which accounts for a small but increasing proportion of regional studies research, particularly in Europe and North America. Four main distinct, but interconnected, research themes are discussed: cooperation, development, governance and mobility. Based on the review, potential directions for further research are proposed and the implications of valuing research based almost solely on journal rankings is scrutinized.

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KEYWORDS

Border region studies; cross-border cooperation; governance; integration; mobility; regional development; regional science; regional studies

INTRODUCTION

Under the conditions of academic capitalism (Slaughter & Leslie, 1999), and the increasing weight given to research on topics that are more likely to be accepted in ‘high-quality’ journals and to receive high numbers of citations, academics have come under new pressures about what, and where, they publish (Paasi, 2013). Publishing on ‘offbeat’ topics or in ‘peripheral journals’ is increasingly discouraged – or at least it is not encouraged – by research managers and those in charge of (annual) academic appraisal and evaluation in many countries. Additionally, in the face of the generally tightening financial situation in higher education, those departments that engage in research topics that lack substantial or broadly based impacts face the risk of reduced financial support, leading to closure or merger with other departments which are considered to have more mainstream research strategies.¹ In the context of these financial pressures and academic capitalism, this paper attempts to shed a light on one of the ‘offbeat’ fields of regional studies, namely ‘border region studies’. It discusses how the field is constituted in terms of its geographical distribution, key themes, and its significance and impact for the wider academic

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community engaged in regional studies and regional science. However, and most importantly, the implications of this study with respect to the drawbacks of the contemporary importance laid on valuing research based almost solely on general bibliometric indicators and journal rankings can be applied in a range of other (currently) less trendy research fields. Over-reliance on citations in 'high-quality journals' is also inherently likely to be an obstacle to innovative new research areas, while contributing to the uneven development of academic knowledge and – ultimately – to the integration of different fields of knowledge.

METHODOLOGICAL NOTES

The literature reviewed was gathered from the Scopus database of social sciences and humanities by using the word search 'border region', either in the title or in the abstract, in order to screen the research that utilizes the notion of border regions among its core concepts, or as an empirical setting. For comparative purposes, a similar procedure was employed with the word 'region' in order to provide an overall picture of the share of border region studies vis-à-vis regional studies.² The data were further limited to the following (counts of publications are expressed as *N*):

- Years from 1996 to 2013, due to the reduced availability of pre-1996 items in the Scopus database (Elsevier, 2016).
- Subject areas including: social sciences; arts and humanities; earth and planetary sciences (including general geographical journals with articles on both physical and human geography); economics, econometrics and finance; environmental science; business, management and accounting and; agricultural and biological sciences.

The exclusion of subjects such as health sciences, chemical engineering and biochemistry allowed the analysis to focus on those fields that are most closely associated with research on (territorial) border region studies. (The number of publications with 'border region' in the title or abstract in other subject areas was miniscule compared with the subject area fields investigated here.) The most prominent fields are in the social sciences followed by arts and humanities and the other subject areas as presented in Figure 1.

The data were analysed according to:

- Location – in terms of the world's major regions – of the reported home institutions of authors engaged with the topic.
- Most prolific institutions engaged with border region studies.
- Journals where border region studies are most frequently published.
- Most cited key publications within border region studies.
- Key themes – according to groupings of key words – within border region studies.

Scopus is 'the largest abstract and citation database of peer-reviewed literature' (Elsevier, 2016). Therefore, it was utilized here to gather the data, because it includes a wider range of peer-reviewed journals than, for example, the Web of Science, while still adhering to peer-reviewing in order to ensure a certain scientific quality compared with, for example, Google Scholar (Mongeon & Paul-Hus, 2016; Vieira & Gomes, 2009). The latter includes a wide array of working papers and other publications that usually lack rigorous external quality checks. There are, of course, some common limitations inherent to Scopus (that apply also to Web of Science). For example, the fact that English-language journals are overrepresented in the database to the detriment of other languages is a potential source of bias when discussing the geographical distribution of research (Mongeon & Paul-Hus, 2016).

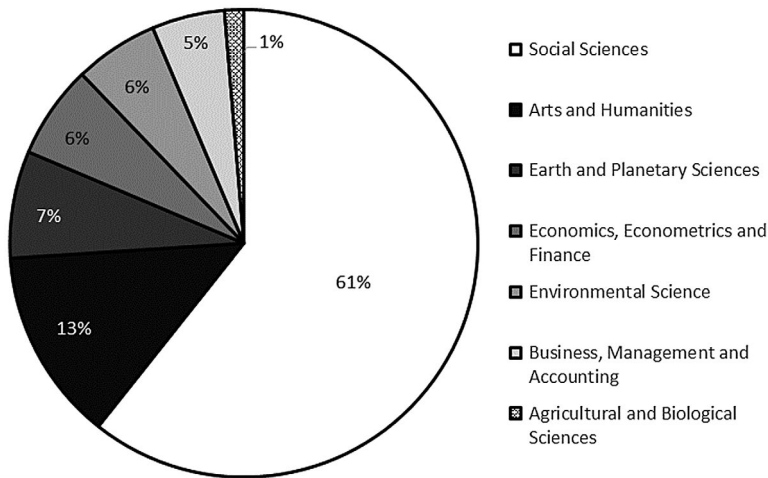


Figure 1. Breakdown of 'border region studies' into subject areas. Source: Scopus.

EMPIRICAL ILLUSTRATION

Border region studies in the context of regional studies

The share of border region studies among all regional studies publications in the period 1996–2013 has varied between 0.5% and 1.4% in any one year. Initially the figures seem rather small but, compared with other topics that have been investigated empirically in earlier reviews, it becomes evident that in this specific context the reported values are relatively high. For example, Fagerberg and Verspagen (2009) have reported significantly lower shares in the case of innovation studies, which they already considered to constitute an emerging scientific field in its own right amongst social science articles in the Web of Science.³ By extension, border region studies can be considered to constitute a significant 'branch' of regional studies. Furthermore, there is an upward trend in its share, with a significant boost in the last few years of the observation period. It seems that in academic circles the interest in (and the importance of) border regions has actually been increasing rather than decreasing. This trend has also been observed by van Houtum (2000), more than a decade earlier, for geographical research on borderlands in Europe. A timeline signifying the breadth and importance of border region studies within regional studies is presented in Figure 2.

Geographical distribution

Most of the research on border regions to date has concentrated on Europe and North America (Yang, 2006). This is also evidenced by the distribution of European and North American authors involved with border region studies: the vast majority work in institutions situated in Europe and North America. An overview of the geographical distribution of border region studies is presented in Figure 3.

These data confirm that the most prolific institutions and authors engaged in border region studies are all situated in Europe or North America. Unsurprisingly, the institutions most intensively involved in border region studies are situated in the border regions of their home countries. These institutes include universities (of Arizona, California, Texas and San Diego State University) in proximity to the USA's southern border, together with an institute (El Colegio de la Frontera Norte) in Mexico's northern border region. Within Europe, Finnish (University of Oulu, situated close to the Finnish–Swedish border), Dutch (Radboud University Nijmegen – home of the Nijmegen Centre for Border Research – at the Dutch–German border), and Danish (University

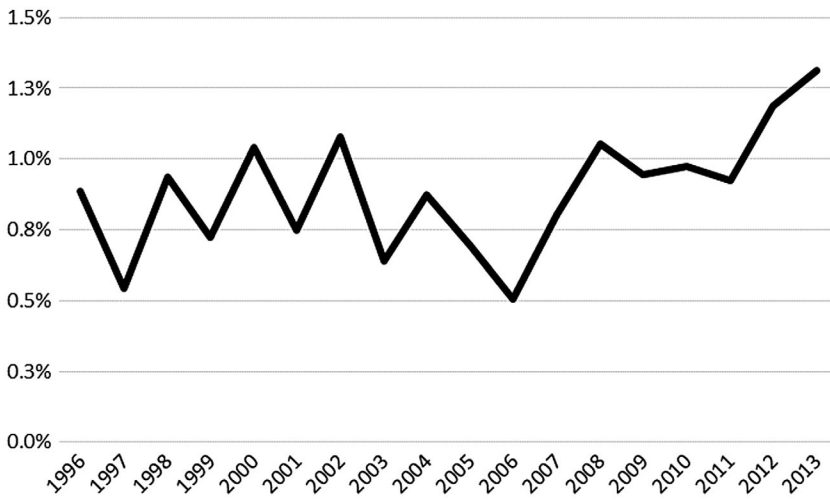


Figure 2. Share of 'border region studies' of all 'regional studies', 1996–2013. Papers were defined by inclusion of 'border region'/'region' in the title or abstract. Source: Scopus.

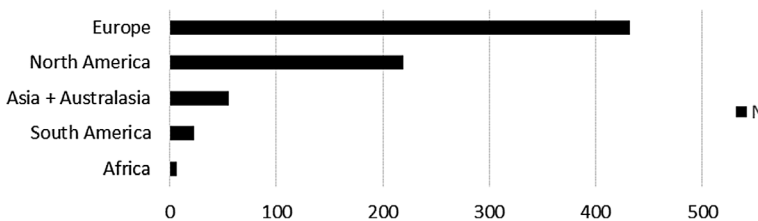


Figure 3. Territorial breakdown of 'border region studies' into the world's major regions (based on the authors' home institutions). Source: Scopus.

of Southern Denmark – home of the now closed Department of Border Region Studies – at the Danish–German border) institutions figure prominently, as well as a Northern Ireland-based institution (Queen's University Belfast – home of the Centre for International Borders Research). An overview of the most prolific institutions is presented in Table 1.

Journals

When considering the most common outlets of publications on border regions, three main journals emerge: *European Planning Studies*, *Journal of Borderland Studies* and *Geopolitics*. This was as expected due to the geographical distribution of border region studies that are strongly Europe and North America focused, the subject coverage of these journals and the main themes of border region studies (see below). Additionally, as expected many of the journals shown in Table 2 can be considered to be quite 'peripheral' (cf. Paasi, 2013) and are not included, for example, in the Web of Science database. Nevertheless, the list also includes some high-impact journals such as *European Urban and Regional Studies*, *Environment and Planning A* and *Regional Studies*. However, the figures reported here have to be carefully scrutinized, since they do not include all journals in this field. Additionally, for example, *Journal of Borderlands Studies* has only been included in the Scopus database since 2012.

Impact

The most common, but admittedly not all-encompassing, way of systematically measuring (at least some aspects of) the impact of published research is to analyse the citation counts for individual

Table 1. Most prolific institutions in the field of 'border region studies', 1996–2013 (based on the authors' home institutions)

Institution	Country	Number
University of Texas	USA	43
University of Arizona	USA	12
University of California	USA	11
Radboud University of Nijmegen	Netherlands	10
University of Oulu	Finland	8
University of Southern Denmark	Denmark	8
San Diego State University	USA	7
Queen's University Belfast	UK	7
Colegio Frontera Norte	Mexico	6

Source: Scopus.

Table 2. Journals that most commonly publish papers on 'border region studies', 1996–2013.

Journal	Publisher	Number
European Planning Studies	Routledge	13
Journal of Borderlands Studies	Taylor & Francis	11
Geopolitics	Routledge	9
Acta Geographica Sinica	Science Press	8
Osteuropa	C. H. Beck	8
Acta Universitatis Carolinae Geographica	Karolinum	7
European Urban and Regional Studies	SAGE	6
Podravina	Meridijani	6
Environment and Planning A	Pion	5
International Journal of Public Policy	Inderscience Publishers	5
Moravian Geographical Reports	Academy of Sciences – Czech Republic	5
Regional Development Dialogue	United Nations Centre for Regional Development	5
Regional Studies	Routledge	5

Source: Scopus.

publications. In this analysis, the citation counts of the most highly cited papers within border region studies are not only restricted to other papers with similar topics but include all citations. This provides a tentative and general understanding of which papers have been influential both within and outside the field of border region studies. As would be expected, an initial comparison of the citation counts of the highest cited papers within border regions studies are substantially lower than for all papers in regional studies. Amongst studies with the word 'region' in the title or abstract, within the subject areas included in this study, the first cross-border studies paper (Jessop & Sum, 2000) in the list is ranked at 166th. Research on border regions is, thus, not at the very top of the rankings of the research impact of regional studies. However, when comparing citation counts to other subfields within regional studies, border region studies have an impact that does bear comparison with some other 'more fashionable' sub-topics. If comparing the figures with, for example, regional innovation studies (search phrases: 'innovation' and 'region'), the most highly cited cross-border paper would be ranked at 10th in a combined list of regional studies on innovation and/or borders. Time is, of course, a key factor influencing all citation analyses, since older publications have had more time to accumulate citations. It is reasonable to argue that the papers published in the most recent years of our observation period have not had enough time to accumulate sufficient citations to be included in the list. Nevertheless, most of the highly cited papers are quite recent: half the papers listed below have been published after 2005, and the list includes only one paper published in the 1990s. This signals that rather than being a research field of the past, border region studies is an important focus in contemporary regional studies and regional science.

The most highly cited papers include such influential papers as (rank – number of citations):⁴

- Jessop and Sum's (2000) paper on an entrepreneurial city in an emerging cross-border region (first – 187).
- Perkmann's (2003, 2007) studies on defining border regions in the context of European Union (EU) policies and multilevel governance (second – 131 and sixth – 60 respectively).
- Blatter's (2003, 2004) work on and criticism of the transformation of political systems from hierarchies to networks (seventh – 50 and third – 83 respectively).
- Paasi's (2009) paper on the institutionalization of regions and border regions (fifth – 71).
- Coleman's (2007), Nevins's (2007) and Núñez and Heyman's (2007) studies on immigration at the Mexico–US border region (eighth – 45, 12th – 39 and 14th – 37 respectively).
- Hanson's (1996, 2001) work on the expansion of export manufacturing in Mexico and its impact on employment in US border cities (11th – 41 and 15th – 36 respectively).
- Johnson's (2009) paper on the potential emergence of coherent cross-border regions in central Europe (13th – 38).

In few cases among the most highly cited papers, border regions stand out only as an empirical setting, but not as an area of strong conceptualization:⁵

- Gray's (2000) paper on the EU's Common Agricultural Policy (fourth – 73).
- Loureiro and González's (2008) research on tourism firms and customer loyalty (ninth – 44).

Some interesting and useful conclusions can be drawn from the most highly cited works on border regions. Firstly, in Europe border regions have gained significance due to being vessels for the implementation of EU regional policies, which create opportunities for cross-border organizations to attract resources and funding. However, even within the EU, it is still too early to perceive cross-border regions as constituting new types of coherent territorial entities (Johnson, 2009; Perkmann, 2003, 2007). Secondly, an abundance of cross-border networks and institutions on cross-border cooperation are undermining the role of national gatekeepers. In Europe, this cross-border cooperation follows a more formalized 'spaces of places' logic, whereas in North America these interactions have evolved towards a more informal 'space of flows' collaboration (Blatter, 2004). Thirdly, international conflicts and economic crises have substantial multifaceted impacts on border regions, particularly via immigration policies (Coleman, 2007; Nevins, 2007). Fourthly, in cross-border settings the economy of one side of the border can be a major factor in determining employment growth patterns on the other (Hanson, 1996, 2001). Lastly, the most highly cited papers on border regions are well connected to the main themes of border region studies, which are discussed in greater detail below.

MAIN THEMES OF BORDER REGION STUDIES

A review of the keywords of publications on border regions does of course find some obvious terms such as 'border regions', 'Europe', 'Eurasia', 'cross-border relations', 'European Union' and 'United States'. However, four distinct, but interconnected, main themes also clearly emerged beyond these categories: (1) cooperation and integration; (2) regional (economic) development; (3) governance, policy and politics; and (4) mobility: migration, tourism and labour markets. Other clear, but less prominent, themes involved discussions about globalization versus regionalization, as well as on ethnicity and identity. The following discussion focuses on the main directions of the conceptual debates and empirical research in the four main themes. Given constraints on the length of this paper, only key references are presented rather than a comprehensive list of the reviewed literature.

Cooperation and integration

There are some clear key concepts and study subjects in the studies on cooperation and integration. First, in Europe Euroregions, as well as Interreg and other EU programmes, have been studied intensively. They have been discussed and analysed as ‘privileged laboratories’ on the changing nature of regions (García-Álvarez & Trillo-Santamaría, 2013) and as important sources of funding for local authorities in border regions (Rajčáková & Švecová, 2013). Additionally, the role of these programmes and initiatives in (intensified) cross-border cooperation, integration and the institutionalization of border regions (Paasi, 2009) has been elaborated through case studies and impact assessments (Medeiros, 2010; also Medeiros, 2015). Consequently, another common topic of border region studies vis-à-vis cooperation and integration in Europe has been the impacts of successive EU enlargements, and the process of EU integration, on employment, wages (Braakmann & Vogel, 2011) and trade (Lafourcade & Paluzie, 2011) in border regions. Relatedly, the impacts of different types (e.g., geographical, institutional, etc.) of proximity on integration, as well as the existence of barriers to cross-border cooperation, have been a focus of research (Hahn, 2013). This discussion has been accompanied by a number of studies that elaborate on the role of cross-border organizations and institutions as bridging or hindering factors in cross-border cooperation (Scott, 1998; Cots, Tàbara, McEvoy, Werners, & Roca, 2009; also van den Broek & Smulders, 2015).

However, given the centrality of universities in border regions as the hubs of border region studies, it is surprising that discussion of the potential role of universities as drivers of cross-border cooperation is rare (Hansen & Serin, 2007). Additionally, what is missing is a more systematic take on integration processes in border regions. To date, the literature has mainly concentrated on case studies or conceptual debates with few illustrative examples. Therefore, there is a need for more comparative qualitative and quantitative studies focusing on the drivers and barriers of cross-border integration processes.

Regional (economic) development

In the context of regional (economic) development, border regions are commonly – if not necessarily accurately, since there are a number of metropolitan urban border regions – considered to be peripheral, non-core regions. Therefore, considerable effort has been directed at studying how border regions could overcome the locational disadvantages stemming from the barriers constituted by national borders, and turn this into competitive advantage through trans-boundary relations and collaboration (Bański & Janicki, 2013; Su, 2013; also Oliveira, 2015). Although this discussion is not restricted to Europe, the main concerns of papers on Europe are the impacts of EU enlargements, and cohesion policies, on regional (economic) development in the border regions of the new member states and non-member countries (Knippschild & Wiechmann, 2012; Krätke, 2002). In line with the studies on cooperation and integration, this research has involved analyses of the role of Euroregions, Interreg and other EU programmes in the economic development of border regions (McCall & Williamson, 2000). Additionally, the importance of transportation and border-crossing infrastructure, i.e., accessibility (Lundquist & Winther, 2006), in the economic development of border regions has been highlighted (Nelles & Sutcliffe, 2013). Finally, economic aspects of regional development in border regions have commonly been discussed in terms of cross-border inter-firm linkages, networking (Dimitrov, Petrakos, Totev, & Tsiapa, 2003; Geenhuizen, Knaap, & Nijkamp, 1996) and export flows (Cizkowicz, Rzońca, & Umiński, 2013; Tykkyläinen & Lehtonen, 2008).

It is interesting that studies within this theme have included relatively little discussion of innovation. This is somewhat unexpected considering the weight given to innovation as one of the main drivers of regional economic development (Lundquist & Trippl, 2013). Moreover, it would be useful to undertake a comparative analysis of peripheral border regions vis-à-vis

metropolitan urban border regions. At the time of writing, the different types of border regions have not commonly been discussed together with the consequence that the implications of the majority of papers on the regional economic development of border regions are difficult to generalize outside their specific contexts.

Governance, policy and politics

The discussion in border region studies related to governance, policy and politics mainly concerns issues connected to border security and control, violence, crime, wars and conflicts particularly in North America and Asia (Clarke, 2008; Coleman, 2007). Additionally, topics common to border region studies conducted in Europe are also prominent within this theme. For example, there is considerable research on the evaluation and analyses of Euroregions, Interreg programmes, EU enlargement and cohesion policies in the light of governance perspectives. Europe is again highlighted as a ‘laboratory’, in this case for observing cross-border governance and the factors influencing the effectiveness of such processes (Deppisch, 2012; Johnson, 2009; Perkmann, 2007). Relatedly, cross-border policy networks have also been a common research topic (Blatter, 2004; Boatright, 2009). Another important sub-topic is the dialogue between the role of the national-state and the role of other emerging territorial entities, such as Euroregions, in cross-border interactions. This discussion has been elaborated through debates on the ‘success’ of localized cross-border regions and the controversy between the ‘end of the nation-state’ (Sparke, 1998) perspective versus the ‘nation-state over border regions’ (Perrier Bruslé, 2013) point of view in respect of cross-border cooperation.

However, the geographical level of analysis is somewhat surprising: generally, the studies on governance, policy and politics discuss the theme in context of geographically large entities such as Euroregions, which generally have poor correspondence with the functional areas of daily life. Working at this scale leads to neglect of the more mundane political networks and governance processes present in, for example, cross-border twin cities (Anishenko & Sergunin, 2012). Furthermore, compared with, for example, North America, issues related to border security have received less attention in Europe. However, due to the contemporary geopolitical climate and refugee crisis this increasingly important issue – not least for economic and humanitarian reasons – is bound to attract further attention in the literature on border regions within Europe.

Mobility: migration, labour markets and tourism

There has been considerable research, mainly of an empirical nature, on the generation of human mobility in response to cross-border differences in respect of wages, prices and the availability of jobs, goods and services. Research has particularly focused on the USA–Mexico border, and on the reconstitution of the economic and political meaning of borders in Central and Eastern Europe post-1989. The different forms of labour mobility have been extensively researched, ranging from daily commuting, through various forms of long stay commuting and short term migration, to ‘permanent’ migration (Williams, Baláz, & Bodnárová, 2001). In particular, the inherent economic gains – but also negative health consequences (Bain, 1998) and human rights impacts (Ogren, 2007) – of cross-border mobility have been discussed in a wide range of studies (Macours & Vakis, 2010). Researchers have also investigated how such labour mobility has significant impacts on wages and employment rates on both sides of the border (Brülhart, Carrère, & Trionfetti, 2012; Moritz, 2011). There are also a number of papers on consumption-led cross-border mobility in respects of retailing, driven mostly by price differentials but also by cultural differences and the availability of unfamiliar goods (Spierings & van der Velde, 2013). Additionally, researchers have shown particular interest in cross-border tourism, both the generation of cross-border flows which have been particularly marked in Europe post 1989 (Prokkola, 2010), and in the emergence of cross-border tourism development partnerships (Prokkola, 2008), including EU Interreg programmes (Nilsson, Eskilsson, & Ek, 2010).

Recently, an attempt has been made to link this research on mobility with the emerging literature on cross-border innovation (Weidenfeld, 2013), focusing on knowledge transfers. However, studies which combine research on cross-border consumption flows with the literatures on knowledge transfer and innovation have remained limited. Also, longitudinal studies of the cycles of temporary and permanent migration, and the use of remittances by cross-border migrants, are highlighted here as rarely discussed but very interesting topics for further inquiry.

CONCLUSIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Border region studies can be considered a significant and important 'branch' of regional studies, which accounts for a small but increasing proportion of regional studies research particularly in Europe and North America. The focus of border region studies has concentrated around four main topics, namely: (1) cooperation and integration; (2) regional (economic) development; (3) governance, policy and politics; and (4) mobility: migration, tourism and labour markets. Based on the review presented in this paper, potential directions for further studies include, but are not limited to, the following topics:

- The role of universities as drivers of cross-border cooperation.
- The facilitators and barriers of cross-border integration processes.
- Cross-border innovation as a driver of economic development.
- Peripheral border regions versus metropolitan urban border regions.
- Functional areas of daily life in the contexts of border regions.
- Refugees and border regions.
- Cross-border consumption flows and knowledge transfer.
- The cycles of migration and the use of remittances by cross-border migrants.

As the citation counts show, the impacts of border region studies extend beyond their area specific contexts, but, of course, the topic is of central importance for researchers embedded in border regions. This might be an obvious conclusion, but at the same time it is extremely important if universities are (expected) to make a contribution to their local economies. Within the university sector there seem to be partly conflicting pressures between making it global (i.e., scientific publications in world leading journals), while at the same time keeping it local (i.e., engagement with and projects benefitting the local economy). If, under the conditions of academic capitalism, researchers move on to more lucrative citation-heavy topics, this is likely to have detrimental implications for the links between universities and local economies in border regions.

A broader implication is the uneven production of knowledge, which – given the interrelationships between different fields – may hinder its overall growth. Additionally, certain topics might be 'hot' today but 'cold' tomorrow. The current managerialist approach to academic agendas risks narrowing intellectual developments and stifling innovation by privileging dominant and trendy topics at the expense of others. Therefore, it is important to rethink academic performance systems which, unintentionally penalize researchers for not making it into the very top of very generally defined research fields, such as social sciences or economics, because of the 'local' focus of their research. Instead, there is a strong argument that they should be rewarded for engagement with the local economy which, in border region contexts means with the cross-border economy. Finally, it has to be stressed that the implications of this study are not restricted just to border region studies. Similar drawbacks, resulting from academic capitalism, apply to a wide range of other (currently) less trendy research fields. This can have significant implications since it is difficult to know what type of knowledge in what type of field will have value in an uncertain future.

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NOTES

1. In this context, it can be noted that the Department of Border Region Studies, University of Southern Denmark, was abolished at the end of 2015, and its academic research staff were reallocated to other departments.
2. Admittedly, the selection of search terms might leave a number of related studies with similar concepts, such as ‘borderscapes’ (Buoli, 2014), outside the scope of this review. However, a delineation is always needed and here the choices for ‘border region’ and ‘region’ allow a feasible comparison to be made between border region studies and regional studies.
3. The figures are illustrative and not strictly comparable with those presented here. However, with the same database (Web of Science) and similar search procedures (Fagerberg & Verspagen, 2009), the corresponding figures for border region/region studies are between about 0.5% and 2.5% with erratic year-to-year shifts but with a definite long-term upward trend.
4. Citation counts describe the situation as of 11 November 2015.
5. Additionally, Zhang, Inbakaran, and Jackson (2006) have used the term ‘border regions’ to describe the urban fringe (ninth – 44).

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