

# **In what sense ‘distinctive’? The search for distinction amongst cross-border student migrants in the UK**

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## **Abstract**

This paper offers a geographical analysis of the concept of ‘distinction’ in relation to student mobility within the UK. The analysis in this paper is based primarily on interviews with Scottish students who have chosen to study in England, and English students who have done likewise in Scotland. The paper problematises the concept of ‘distinction’ in the stratified higher education system of the UK. The paper’s originality lies in showing how global forces affect these intra-state student flows and how ‘distinction’ as a driver of mobility is signified. The research offers a starting point in understanding the glocalisation of student mobility.

## **Keywords**

Distinction; differentiation of higher education; student mobility; glocalisation; ‘the good university’.

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## **Introduction**

Student flows between England and Scotland have remained relatively steady between 2002 and 2012, while student flows from Scotland to England show a significant decline (Tindal et al., 2014). This paper argues that the asymmetry is fascinating, but not surprising, given the high level of tuition

fees charged to Scottish students enrolled in English universities compared with the free provision offered to Scottish students enrolled in Scotland. It seeks to explore the question ‘How can cross-border student flows within the UK be best explained?’ The topic is important because it develops new ideas in relation to theorisation by geographers of student mobilities (Brooks and Waters, 2009; King et al., 2011; King and Raghuram, 2013; Raghuram, 2013).

Following Bourdieu (1979) and Bourdieu and Passeron (1990), a social theory interpretation of student migration between England and Scotland would lead most geographers to ask in what ways enrolling in a university in another part of the UK makes a student ‘distinctive’ from his/her non-migrating peers. Previous research has focused on the global reputations of different higher education systems (Waters, 2006), and the status of particular Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in producing international student flows (King et al., 2011; Findlay et al., 2012). By contrast, in this paper we examine students who have not moved across international boundaries but who are intra-state movers between two of the four nations of the UK (Scotland and England). We refer to these as cross-border flows and focus on this type of student mobility. For these students educational distinction is clearly not attached to gaining an international degree. The core sub-question that this paper addresses is therefore how does cross-border student mobility within a state bestow ‘distinction’? More explicitly, when students claim that distinction arises from attending a ‘good university’ what is the geographical significance of the student flows that result from this search for distinction? Our analysis seeks to gain a more sophisticated geographical understanding of the role of intra-state migration in the pursuit of distinction, something that we would argue others have not attempted in relation to nations (the UK being constitutionally made up of four nations) located within a single state. In addition, since cross-border student flows involve mobile students competing with international students in a globally differentiated higher education system, we ask how glocalisation might be understood in relation to student mobility.

The next section of this paper provides an overview of how the research literature has conceptualised distinction and the role of mobility in obtaining such distinction. This is followed by a description of our methodological approach and a discussion of the key findings of the study. Finally, the lessons

from the research are presented in terms of what an analysis of cross-border flows offers conceptually to the student migration literature. It is suggested that study of the interface of internal and international student flows extends our understanding of the glocalisation (Faulconbridge and Beaverstock, 2009) of mobility processes.

### **Beyond Bourdieu?**

For over thirty years, Bourdieu's work has been used as the foundation for understanding the role of education in the reproduction of social class advantage from generation to generation (Bourdieu, 1973, Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990). Bourdieu's thesis outlines the process by which children's future social class membership is largely determined by the social class of their parents. For Bourdieu, education (particularly higher education) is one of the central mechanisms through which class reproduction occurs (Bourdieu, 1973). Participation in higher education means that students come to embody both a formal education and also a set of shared lived values and attitudes – what Bourdieu refers to as habitus. It marks graduates as possessing something 'distinctive' from their peers who did not attend university.

Historically, Higher Education (HE) was the preserve of those who could afford university tuition fees and living costs. Widening participation in HE in Britain led to a greater proportion of school leavers from across different social groups enrolling in tertiary education (Reay, 2004). This led to the middle-classes seeking other ways to distinguish themselves in order to reproduce social advantage. One route to maintain distinction was by applying to what were perceived to be the very best universities, but this involved many students from middle class backgrounds leaving home and moving to older, elite universities (Jæger, 2011) while those from less fortunate backgrounds were more likely to stay at home and study locally (Holdsworth, 2009). The extension of these ideas in a globalising world was for cultural capital to be accumulated within an internationalising HE system through international student mobilities focussing on the most elite universities in a globally

differentiated education system (Brooks and Waters, 2009; Findlay et al, 2012, Jöns and Hoyler, 2013).

Geographers have been particularly interested in examining the link between higher education, distinction and international student mobility (King et al., 2011; Waters, 2012; Raghuram, 2013). King et al. (2011) demonstrated that secondary school pupils in the UK perceived the opportunity (and ability) to progress to study in HEIs abroad as a particular marker of distinction, while Brooks and Waters (2009) note that failure to secure a place at an 'elite' university within the UK was sometimes a stimulus to international movement. Parallel research confirmed similar findings for international students from other countries (King and Raghuram, 2013; Raghuram 2013, Collins and Ho, 2014). This trend has been interpreted as part of the social (re)production of the 'transnational capitalist class' (Sklair, 2001). Others have argued that student moves are just one of many international knowledge flows including movements of academics and global talent (Mavroudi and Warren, 2013) producing new knowledge hubs within the global economy.

Within academic discourse it is important to recognise that the 'middle class' encompasses a heterogeneous group of people with various social, cultural and economic capitals from which to draw. While some middle class students may study abroad, the vast majority do not (King et al., 2011). Not all middle class students have the economic capital to access international higher education, while others achieve distinction in other ways. This paper focusses on those in this latter group who choose to migrate within the UK to study, and do so by crossing the UK's internal borders between England and Scotland.

Given the increasingly divergent HE policies in the UK's four administrations (especially between England and the three devolved governments), and in particular the increased differential in tuition fees from 2012 onwards between Scotland and England, it is not surprising that cross-border student mobility has begun to attract attention from some researchers (Whittaker, 2014). There has been a decline in the number of Scottish-domiciled students enrolling in English HEIs, but research suggests that some students continue to engage in cross-border migration even though it might initially seem economically irrational (Tindal et al., 2014). Researchers account for the downward shift in numbers

of cross-border flows as part of a longer-term trend for students to stay at home for financial reasons (Wakeling and Jefferies, 2013). Other studies of cross-border flows (including Scottish domiciled students subsequently employed in England) have confirmed a positive association between the student mobility and subsequent mobility in the labour market (Faggian et al, 2007), thus adding support to the view that both the uneven nature of HE in the country and also the selective nature of student migration are important in the geographical redistribution of human capital within the UK (Abel and Deitz, 2012).

Although cross-border student flows within federal states such as Germany or the USA are rather different from migration with the political structure of the UK, interesting parallels can be drawn. In Germany, the re-unification of east and west in 1989 resulted in a fundamental restructuring of many political, social and economic aspects of the country that in turn resulted in significant changes in flows such as trade and finance. The changing situation in the HE sector also produced changes in student flows. The HE system in the two territories had been completely separate for the previous 24 years. The geographically uneven expansion in student numbers and the pattern of student flows between the *Länder* that were to follow the re-integration of the country reflected a desire by students to access certain types of German HEIs (Ertl, 2005). The uneven introduction of student fees resulted in lower applications to education institutions in *Länder* with fees, and in a loss of some of the academically-stronger students from locations with higher fees (Dwenger et al, 2012). The dominant result of restructuring has, however, been to reinforce selectivity effects by social group and by the background/income status of applicants in terms of who goes to university and where they study (Reimer and Pollok, 2010).

In the US, research on interstate student flows confirms that colleges and HEIs with a high quality reputation have been more able than others to attract students from other states (Mixon and Hsing, 1994; Basyla and Dotterweich, 2001). Yet there is also evidence that differential tuition fees explain some of the regional variation in inter-state mobility (Mak and Moncur, 2003) and that out-migration is reduced in states offering aid in paying student tuition fees (Orsuran and Heck, 2009). The dominant framework of analysis of interstate flows in the US remains the human capital model of

migration leading to a conclusion that interstate flows within the US result in a significant redistribution of human capital (Faggian and Franklin, 2014).

Interesting as the parallels are between the UK, US and Germany, as revealed by this literature, from the perspective of the current paper the most striking feature is that in the USA and Germany researchers have continued to focus on a human capital framework. It is therefore particularly valuable in this paper to examine concepts around cultural capital that are offered by the international student mobility literature (Waters, 2012). The paper argues that in addition to there maybe being an interconnection between internal and international student flows (illustrating the importance of geography *in* the globalization of higher education), there may also be a glocalisation effect evident in the way that these student flows focus on certain universities and specific types of places, representing the geography *of* globalization (Faulconbridge and Beaverstock, 2009) in relation to higher education. We therefore situate our UK research by asking how those who move interpret their cross-border flows in relation to the search for social and cultural distinction.

### **The changing context of higher education in the UK**

It seems pertinent to examine the specific context of HE in the UK, and specifically institutions and flows across England and Scotland. Data on students in the UK are kept by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA). HESA data show that the number of English-domiciled students enrolled in Scottish HEIs has remained remarkably stable over the last decade, with around 4,000 first-year students moving from England to Scotland each year (Tindal et al., 2014). The number of Scottish-domiciled students moving in the opposite direction is around half this level, but proportional to the Scottish student population they represent a higher out-migration rate. In the academic year 2012/13, the number of new first-year Scottish-domiciled students enrolled in HEIs in England dropped by 21% relative to the previous year (most probably reflecting the impact of the new tuition fee regime operating in England). The asymmetry in student flows between England and Scotland reflects a tension in the differentiated HE system situated alongside the increasingly divergent public policies in the two UK countries.

Given what is known within the international student mobility literature, it is perhaps not surprising to find that elite universities such as Cambridge and Oxford (Figure 1) emerge as key destinations for some Scottish-domiciled students choosing to study in England, but the map also shows that many other forces have shaped cross-border student flows. Going ‘beyond Bourdieu’ is necessary in order to explain the clustering of many Scottish students in universities in northern England as well as other features of this student migration geography. The higher number of Scottish students in English universities nearer the border might be explained by students who were unable to access a place to study on a particular course in a Scottish university then relocating to the next closest equivalent course in England (for example, students failing to be accepted for a place to study medicine in a Scottish university). In our analysis of cross-border flows later in this paper, we also discuss the possibility of Figure 1 revealing cosmopolitan distinction in relation to the large number of Scottish students enrolled in London colleges.

Figure 2 shows the pattern of flows of English-domiciled students to Scotland. Once again the uneven geographies of student mobility are very striking with Edinburgh University and to a lesser extent St Andrews emerging as dominant destinations.

Figure 1: Scottish-domiciled first-year students in English HEIs, 2012/13.

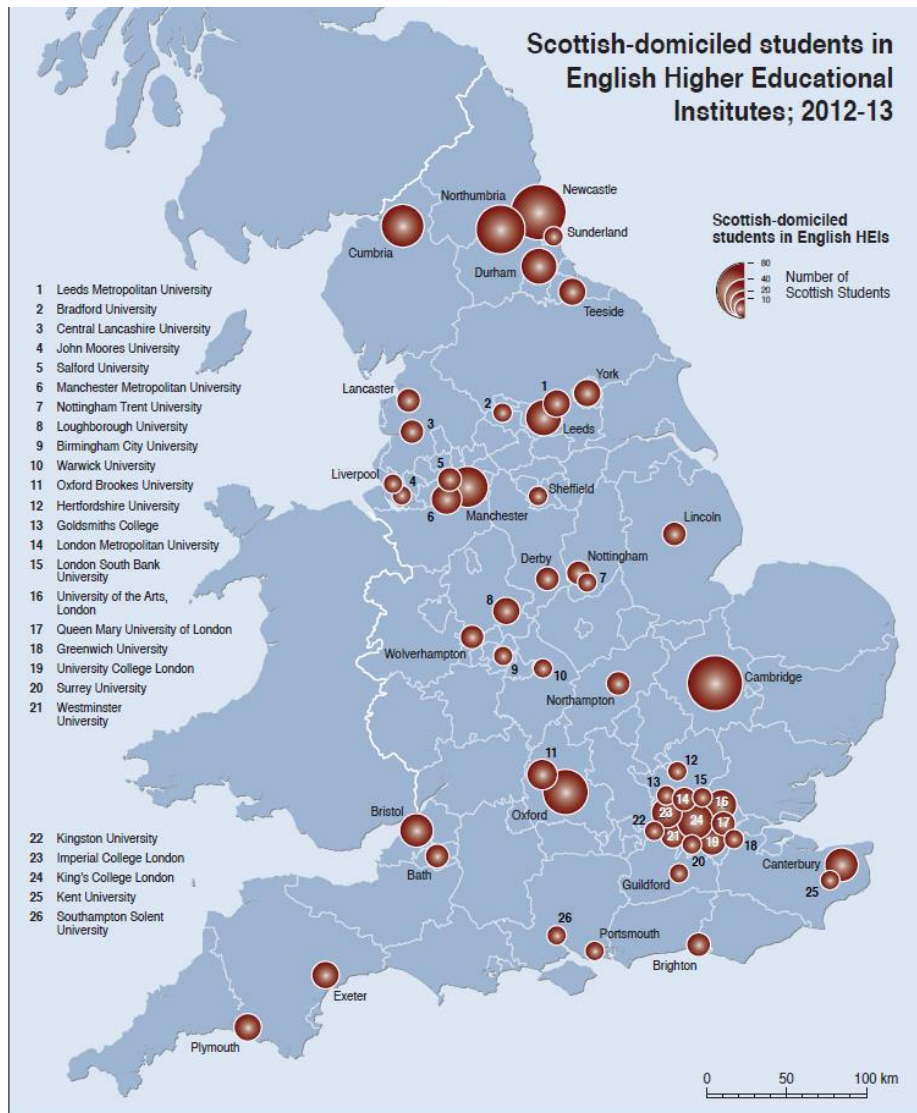
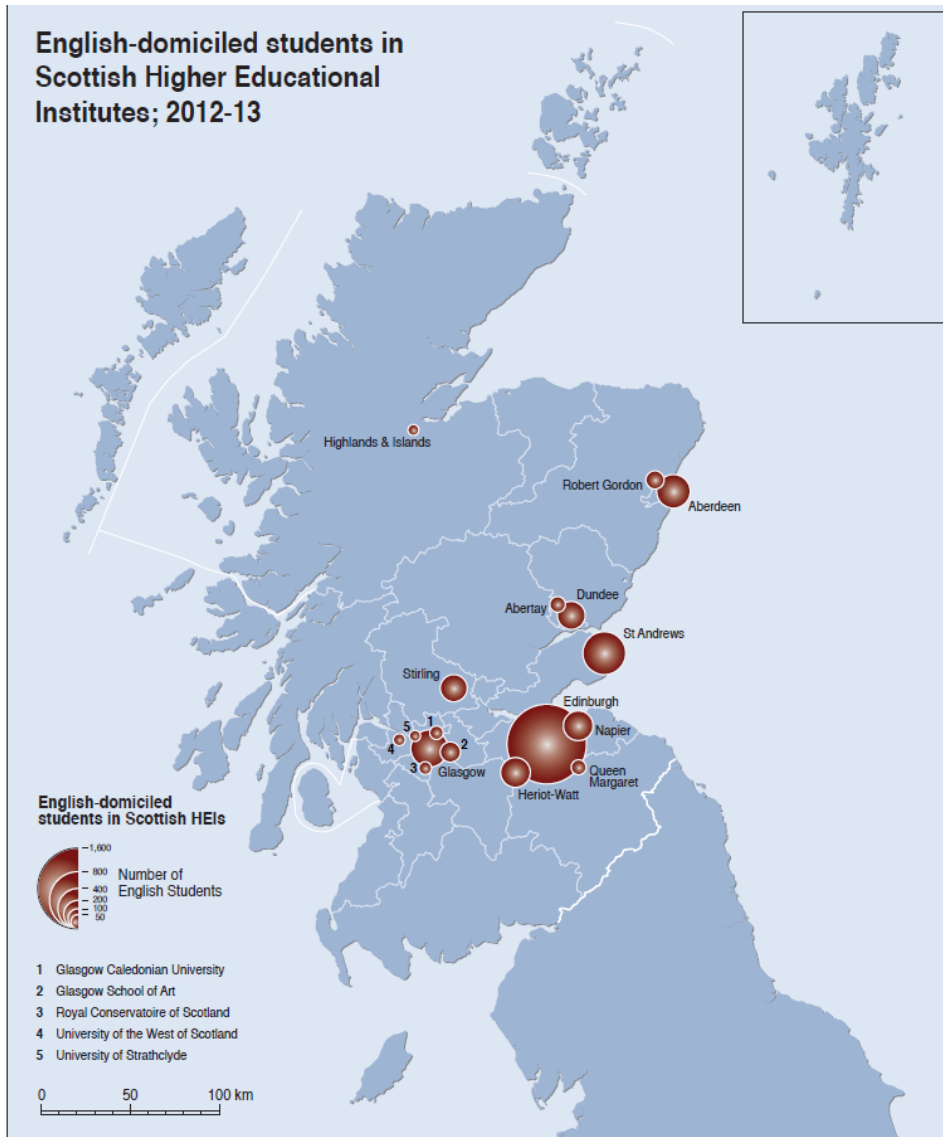




Figure 2: English-domiciled first-year students in Scottish HEIs, 2012/13.



Source: HESA data 2012/2013

Both England and Scotland have highly differentiated HE systems. By ‘differentiated’ we mean a stratified system which develops hierarchies and specialist niches. Raffe and Croxford (2014) suggested this hierarchy can be broadly correlated with the age of the university. Generally occupying the bottom strata of this hierarchy are the post-1992 institutions, colloquially called ‘plate glass universities’. These institutions typically attract local, working-class, mature, and part-time students

who often engage in vocational-based degrees (Gallacher, 2006). Within the middle strata is what is colloquially called the ‘red brick universities’. These are Victorian institutions which were built in the great industrial cities of the era to produce, for example, engineers and civil-servants. Occupying the highest echelons are the ‘ancients’. These are the oldest institutions in the UK and include some of the most research-intensive universities. While Scotland has a considerable higher education market, including some world-leading research universities, the majority of the most internationally esteemed HEI’s and most specialised institutions in the UK are located in England. This in turn may influence the student migration flows between Scotland and England.

Alongside the differentiated HE system, the Scottish and UK governments have taken different approaches to funding higher education. Raffe and Croxford (2014) provide a detailed account of the growing divergence. In 2004, the UK Government passed the Higher Education Act (2004) which raised tuition fees in England up to £3,000 (around US\$4,500) for UK students studying in England. In 2011, and with much public protest, this cap was raised to £9,000 (US\$13,500). This fee level applied to students starting university in the academic year 2012/13. A few years prior to this, the Scottish Government passed the Graduate Endowment Abolition (Scotland) Bill (2008) which abolished tuition fees for Scotland-domiciled students. However, students who enrolled in Scottish HEIs from other parts of the UK, but who did not meet residency requirements, would pay the equivalent fees as they would in English HEIs over the course of their degree. These divergent policies have had significant financial implications for students contemplating cross border moves. For example, the number and diversity of HEIs in England create a ‘pull’ for Scottish students to study in England; by doing so they forgo ‘free’ tuition in Scotland and opt into an English system which will charge them tuition fees.

In summary, while there has been considerable work in recent years on international student mobility (Waters, 2012), intra-state flows have received less attention than one might expect from geographical researchers, especially given the significant divergence of the HE sectors in Scotland and England. In what follows, we argue that the patterning of internal student flows within the UK provides a useful empirical lens for studying the country’s increasingly differentiated higher education market.

## Methods

To address the research questions posed in the introduction, the researchers used semi-structured interviews to elicit the views of Scottish-domiciled students who had chosen to migrate to England primarily for the purpose of study, and English-domiciled students who had done likewise by moving to Scotland. The term ‘domiciled’ refers to a student whose usual place of residence is in Scotland or England, respectively, for a period of at least 5 years prior to commencing study. This is the residency duration which would qualify British citizens to receive free tuition in Scottish HEIs .

Our selection of interviewees was guided by examining student mobility between the two nations as revealed by HESA data. This helped ensure participants were recruited to represent the diverse voices and narratives of the wider mobile student population. To be included for interview participants had to meet three criteria: first they had to be enrolled in a course of study in a HEI outside of the UK nation of their normal residence. Second, they had to migrate specifically for the purpose of study. Third, first and second year undergraduates were preferred in our selection in order to capture motivations for mobility in the context of tuition fee policy changes.

The criteria for inclusion have implications for how we theorise our findings. Firstly, many of the participants identified themselves, or would be identifiable, as having families that belong to the middle classes. Some 30% of our participants came from fee-paying secondary schools – a considerably higher share than the prevailing rate in the wider population (which is around 7% in England, Independent Schools Council, 2014 and 4.4% in Scotland, SCIS, 2015). Some 21 of our participants had at least one parent who was university educated, and 20 of the participants had at least one parent whose occupation would place them in groups 1 and 2 of The Office for National Statistics (ONS) National Statistics (NS)-socio-economic classification (the highest two groups within this classification). We therefore recognise that those who migrate from Scotland to England and vice versa reflect only a small share of the total UK student population and they are a self-selecting group. Students who migrate to enrol in HE are from a particular subsection of the wider student population

and are dominantly those who have access to sufficient capital to be able to make such choices. Thus, our findings are not intended to be extended to other constituencies, most notably to those who were unable to move because of financial or other constraints (Holdsworth, 2009; Holton, 2014).

The researchers utilised two approaches in recruiting. First, the researchers linked with their academic and other contacts in institutions across the UK to help identify potential participants. Second, potential interviewees were contacted through student societies to solicit their assistance in identifying and passing on information about the study to individuals who met the criteria outlined above. A total of 25 interviews were conducted in 2014 with students drawn from 11 different universities. There were 11 students from Scotland studying in England and 14 students from England studying in Scotland. 11 participants in the sample were men, and 14 were women. The youngest participant was 18 years old, with the majority of the sample being between 18 and 22 (reflecting the inclusion criteria which focused on 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> year undergraduate students). We intentionally recruited across a range of subjects and disciplines including: Engineering, Geography, Medicine, Music, Maths, and Public Policy. Some 7 of our interviewees had experiences of living outside their country of normal domicile prior to commencing study. Interviews typically lasted for 1 hour. The shortest interview lasted 24 minutes and the longest 76 minutes. The interviews aimed for meaning rather than representation. Although the sample is small the researchers successfully collected a broad range of views guided by the principle of interviewing widely across disciplines and institutions. The interview schedule was divided into 6 sections which covered the student's socio-economic background, their education and migration histories, their experiences and motivations for applying for their university choices, their perceptions of Scottish/English HEIs, their experiences studying in Scotland/England, and their plans for the future.

The data were analysed using a thematic analysis approach using the NVivo software. After reading and re-reading the transcripts three meta-themes were selected that captured how students felt their university choices marked them as 'distinctive'. Our purpose in the analysis is to examine how this distinction is 'signed' through the narratives and what this 'signal' represents. We then constructed tables illustrating the connection between the 'sign' and the 'signified'. An extract of this is presented

in Table 1 to illustrate the analytical perspective that was adopted. The same process was repeated across all three of the meta-themes but these are not presented as tables in the interests of parsimony. In the text that follows, all interviewees have been given pseudonyms to protect anonymity.

## **Results**

### *Differentiation of UK higher education and student mobility*

Our research confirms that students are very aware of the increasing differentiation of UK higher education as well as of the divergence of HE policies in England and Scotland. Those who were interviewed emphasised that while there were many HEIs from which to choose in the UK, only a small number of institutions matched their desires. So how did our interviews explain their decision to cross the border?

*'They [my parents] thought it was good that I got a place in a good university. The fact that it was in England didn't necessarily come up. It was more that it was based on the institution [...]. I think the institution can distinguish you but it doesn't matter if you're in Scotland - - if it's a Scottish or English degree'. (Victor, University of Oxford).*

*'I never thought of it actually being different. I used to think the United Kingdom is one country... but otherwise going to university [in Scotland] didn't occur to me [as being a different place]. I just assumed that Scotland and England really is just one country. It's only the distance' (Hannah, St. Andrews University).<sup>1</sup>*

As the quotations above indicate, most of those interviewed did not see the higher education system of the UK as primarily differentiated between England and Scotland, but with the key dualism in their minds being to do with institutional quality. This clearly reflects the privileged backgrounds of many our interviewees. For those in our study who had made the decision to move, the *'fact that it was in England didn't necessarily come up'* (Victor), and it was *'just assumed that Scotland and England*

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<sup>1</sup> These quotations clearly have resonance in the context of Scotland's 2014 referendum on independence. We intentionally wish to set this issue to one side in this paper as it falls outside the scope of this paper.

*really is just one country*' (Hannah). By contrast, the key signifier in their thinking about universities was the 'distinction' that would be achieved from attending a *'good university'* (Victor).

The quotes above reveal a facet of the interviewees' habitus (Bourdieu, 1977). This habitus included a set of attitudes in which studying in another part of the UK (both English students in Scotland and Scots enrolled in English HEIs) was seen not only as possible but also as desirable in order to maximise the pool of 'good university' choices. Some Scottish-domiciled interviewees even chastised their non-migrant peers for only considering the 'free' option of studying in Scotland. This critical position sets cross border students apart from the views of immobile and locally mobile students. As pointed out by Croxford and Raffe (2013), cross-border student flows between the nations of the UK are noticeable for the fact that the movers are disproportionately drawn from those from the upper middle classes. As such, our interviewees were able to consider the entire UK HE market in a way that many of their peers could not. Given the highly differentiated HE market in the UK, and the financial implications of choosing to migrate to another nation to study, we now interrogate the students' narratives to explore in what sense they felt their university choices offered 'distinction'.

#### *Distinction as institutional reputation*

Only a minority of students have the opportunity to attend universities whose reputation distinguishes them as 'elite' institutions (Pásztor, 2014; Jöns and Hoyler, 2013). Mobility to achieve such distinction is clearly evident in Figure 1. The Universities of Oxford and Cambridge were significant destinations for Scottish students migrating south while the Universities of Edinburgh, and to a lesser extent St Andrews, featured as dominant destinations for English students going to Scotland. Students attending such institutions were acutely aware they were enrolled in some of the most prestigious universities in the UK, and the world. As such, the interviews confirmed that for some students it was the status of the institution that was the source of distinction (Table 1). The student narratives confirmed the perception that an elite university is a *'good university'*, and thus contributed to distinction and to the (re)production of social difference.

The ‘good university’ for these students was represented in terms of the reputation of the institution. This was signified by how others in society would judge them by their HEI choices. Of particularly importance to the students that we interviewed was how potential employers would judge them based on the distinctiveness of the institution that they attended. Hamish commented specifically on how employers would judge him in relation to the institution’s reputation, believing that it would give him an edge in applying for jobs post-study. Choosing a ‘good university’ therefore was signified as endowing on the student the symbolic capital of having attended a world-class institution which would later lead to the reproduction of social difference, particularly in the employment market (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990, King et al, 2011). In summary, within our students’ narratives, access to higher education was in and of itself seen as an inadequate credential to achieve educational distinction in an era of mass higher education. Instead, they wanted their studies to provide added value in distinguishing them from their peers through the badge of a ‘special university’ (Hamish) with a societally-conferred reputation which would elevate their social status.

**Table 1: Distinction by status of the institution**

Sign: ‘good university’	Signifier	Signified
“...to me what was most important was how good the university was. I wanted a good quality degree that people would see and be like: ‘that is from a good uni. I’ve done well to get there’”. (Jane, St. Andrews).	‘good university’ ‘good quality degree’	<b>Societal</b> perception of the good university
“When I was applying I did see it in my mind that it was a special university, that it was a special place... and then maybe thinking further ahead, by the time I would come to apply for jobs I thought that Cambridge would stand me in good stead for applying. I guess that I thought that employers would see it as a good university as well. [Everyone knows] about the reputation that it has for being prestigious and a good place to study”. (Hamish, University of Cambridge).	‘It was a special university.’  ‘Employers would see it as a good university.’	<b>Employers</b> valuing the symbolic capital of the ‘good university’

The mediating effect of the institution’s symbolic capital between student and employer has been discussed extensively elsewhere in the international student mobility literature (Brooks and Waters,

2009; Findlay et al., 2012). It highlights the socio-cultural aspects of student mobility as a strategy for seeking distinction by ensuring that middle-class students enrol in ‘elite’ institutions – regardless of where that institution is located, and its short term financial implications. Convincing as this argument may be, taken on its own it is not enough to explain the distribution of students presented in Figure 1.

### *Distinction through specialist courses*

Distinction can also be garnered by accessing specialist degree courses. For the students whom we interviewed, a significant number chose their place of study not because of the status of the institution itself, but because the institutions offered specialist degrees. This ‘specialism’ manifested itself in two ways: by subject rank and subject rarity.

First is the institution’s ranking in particular subject areas. This was particularly true for those studying professional and vocational degrees (such as medicine and veterinary science) and helps account for the moderate number of students shown in Figure 1 who enrolled on high quality professional degrees in places such as Newcastle, Manchester and Leeds. The very competitive nature of access to the limited number of places, for example on medical courses, meant that distinction was seen to be achieved as a result of simply succeeding in being selected by a university for a place on those courses. Second, a minority of our participants considered their degree ‘specialist’ in the sense that their degree subject was offered only in a small number of institutions; they were niche. This meant that they migrated in order to achieve the ‘distinction’ of obtaining a particular specialist degree. The quotes of Natalie and Toby illustrate these two types of specialism.

*“I did look at the top 10 rankings of all the unis. to make my decision. [Except one] the rest of the ones that I applied to were in the top 10 [for medicine]. So if Leeds hadn’t been in the top 10, I wouldn’t have applied to Leeds”.* (Natalie, Leeds).

*“For this particular subject, material science, it’s not a very common topic, and they were one of the best in Britain for it, and most of the Scottish universities that I applied to didn’t offer material sciences specially - - as a specific course”.* (Toby, Imperial College London).



*I chose LSE because it was the only one that I applied to that actually taught social policy [at the undergraduate level]. That's what I wanted to study so I was prepared to part with my money to do that and it was where I wanted to study [...]. Had Cambridge offered me a place, - I would have still accepted LSE [...]. I wanted to study a specialist subject, so I had to go to a specialist university, and I'm prepared to pay for that on the basis that it is exactly what I wanted to do". (Donald, London School of Economics).*

These students sought distinction not through the prestige or reputation of the institution, but in relation to the specialism of their course. Our analysis of the data reveals at least two signifiers linked to the term 'specialism'. First, courses which are very competitive and in which an institution ranks highly in subject league tables conferred distinction. The second type of 'specialism' was conferred by the rarity of the course. Toby described how he had encountered a scientist working in an oil company with a degree in material sciences. It was after this he realised that material science was not a '*very common topic*' before going on to add that Scottish universities did not offer this degree at the undergraduate level. Donald goes further, claiming that there were only two institutions in the UK that offered social policy at the undergraduate level. Thus, he considered migration to England to be inevitable in order to study the specific degree he wanted at a 'specialist university'.

Messer and Wolter's (2007) research on Swiss students participating in European exchange programmes came to a similar conclusion noting that, for some, migrating for study is an attempt to boost human capital by being able to accrue specialist knowledge in a particular subject. Marginson (2006) takes this further, noting from the perspective of the institution that in a 'positional market', 'quality' is often centred on the high-prestige institutions, leaving intermediate institutions to find a niche in which to create their market value. This interpretation was mirrored by the interviewees who selected universities on this basis, noting the trade off in their thinking of the value of achieving a distinctive subject degree as opposed to migrating to gain the symbolic capital of a degree from an elite university (see Donald's comment above)

*Distinction as offering cosmopolitan credentials*

Figure 1 shows a significant concentration of Scottish-domiciled students studying in London-based institutions. Some students discussed the significance of their institution's location, revealing an attraction to affiliating with a global city because of its economic and cultural opportunities. Some Scottish students established a narrative that the move to London was part of a greater ambition to study and work in that city or elsewhere in the world after their studies. We interpret this as students using the location of their higher education as a route to establish a nascent cosmopolitan identity.

Distinction can be gained not only through the institutions themselves, but by their location. Students who discussed the advantages of London highlighted the social and economic opportunities that it offered, along with the (perceived) advantage of accessing those opportunities over other students who studied elsewhere.

*“So it was more the institution than studying in England itself. It was also... more that it was in London rather than in England. So it was the only English university that I applied for”.* (Toby, Imperial College, London).

*“Yeah – well, to be honest with you, it was definitely that thing of – I wanted to study in [the] London area, yeah. It's nothing to do with the quality. None of my choices were about quality – so to speak – because I think Royal Holloway is the same as Aberdeen in the ranking and the like [...]. For me it was more the social, kind of, gains that I could get – especially being in the London area. For instance in things like internships, more work experiences, things like that: obviously you get internships, especially in Edinburgh and Aberdeen – you have a lot of industrial placements, but London is very much unique in the sense of how many opportunities there is [sic]”.* (Alistair, Royal Holloway, London).

Toby stated that Imperial College was the only non-Scottish university that he applied for, and did so because it was in London. Alistair goes further by pointing out that his institution (Royal Holloway) was similar in rankings as another of his choices (Aberdeen), but that he chose London (and thus opting into a system in which he is liable for tuition fees) due to the access to economic opportunities

that existed there. This quote demonstrates that in Alistair's choice between two comparable universities, he decided that it was worth paying tuition fees because one of those institutions is in a particular geographic location with access to specific economic benefits outside of academia. He later describes London as *'unique'* in this way. This driver is also demonstrated in Donald's quote when he notes that nowhere else compares to London in terms of the economic advantages and opportunities that the city can offer him:

*"I think certainly from a careers and employment perspective, nowhere in Scotland quite compares to being in London, and probably in most places in England. I mean, most of the sorts of careers and stuff that I'm looking at, graduate schemes and employment and that sort of thing are all based in London [...]. I think that being a young person in London and having all the world's business and media and politics on your doorstep – that's really exciting and I can't see a reason to leave that. I could see why if you've been to a university not in London taking up employment here can be quite intimidating, but having been a student here it sort of prepares you for that in the best possible way".*

(Donald, London School of Economics).

Being physically based London was perceived by students to offer opportunities to raise economic and social capital in a way that was not possible in other parts of the UK. King et al. (2014) take this argument further by arguing that the 'lure of London' makes it distinctive to international students relative to all other English locations, thus opening the interesting prospect of researching glocalisation effects on student flows arising from the geography of globalisation in relation to global cities and their positioning in the differentiation of higher education. Work on international students found that the image of London dominated perceptions of study in England, with universities outside London being defined largely in terms of their proximity to the UK's leading global city (Beech 2014). Donald feels he is more suited to *'taking up employment'* in London because *'having been a student here it sort of prepares'* him in the *'best possible way'*. He therefore elevates himself relative to others who had not studied or lived in London – adding that London can be *'quite intimidating'*. The implication of this statement is that students not based in London are 'outsiders' that will struggle to cope if they choose to seek work in a global city in future. Thus, Donald uses his status as a

London-based student to mark himself as having developed traits that would help him in a future career in this global city.

While access to social and economic opportunities was important for the students we interviewed at London-based institutions, the analysis also revealed that studying in London was also perceived by students to confer on them the mantle of a cosmopolitan identity. Some Scottish students used studying in London as a catalyst for going on to study or work elsewhere in the world. As such, there is a relationship between the ‘local’ (in terms of remaining within the UK) and the global when choosing which university to study. As an example of this we return to Alistair whose voice we just examined above. He came from a small village in the very North of Scotland and for years desired to live and work in London. He saw higher education as the route to getting to this global city as soon as he possibly could. When discussing his future plans after graduating from Royal Holloway, he said:

*“I’m going to the Catholic University of Lyon which is in Lyon in France. I’m going to be going to an intensive French-language thing. And then after I’m not too sure... I’m applying to do African politics, but I’m applying to the Netherlands - I’m applying for a place in Leiden University, which is just outside Amsterdam. I’m also applying to the University of Copenhagen. Ha ha ha [He laughs and grins] – I’m giving the impression that I’m very international”.*

When asked why he wanted to study French and study outside of the UK he responded:

*“So I’m looking at Europe because I want my next little, you know, adventure, so to speak... and the reason I’m doing French is just because I want to do African politics and half of it speaks French”.*

(Alistair, Royal Holloway, London).

This use of studying as a means to live in desirable destinations is discussed briefly in King *et al.*’s (2011) work in which they argue that some students use higher education as an opportunity to experience cosmopolitanism and to develop cosmopolitan identities. This has also been noted in studies of international student mobility to cities in North America, Australia and Europe (Beck, 2004; Findlay *et al.*, 2012). What is particularly interesting about the current research is that it shows the power of global forces also active in shaping student migration patterns within the state.

Moreover, it is not only that internal student mobility is affected by the desire to access world class universities located within the state, but that studying in these locations can confer cosmopolitan status. This in turn produces a desire amongst some students to move to their 'local' global city where they compete with international students from across the globe for access to highly ranked institutions. Cross-border student flows within the UK are therefore shaped by 'glocalisation' in terms of students pro-actively positioning themselves as potentially 'world-class' or as 'transnational-elites-in-the-making' (Sklair, 2001; Brooks and Waters, 2009).

### **Discussion and conclusions: In what sense 'distinctive'?**

The complex policy environment shaping higher education makes examining interstate student migration within the UK particularly remarkable. Students who migrate for the purpose of study to other parts of the UK are often subject to very different conditions and fee liabilities. This is particularly true between England and Scotland given the divergence of their policies towards higher education. Aside from policies shaping higher education across the nations of the UK, HEIs have also positioned themselves as competitors in a globalised and increasingly commodified higher education market (Chowdry et al., 2013). This has meant that universities have attempted to develop niches to add to their market value (Marginson, 2006). This has led to a specific geography of student migration across the UK, with student migrants being concentrated in particular institutions, both in England and Scotland.

This paper while starting from Bourdieu's ideas of 'distinction', noted the limitations of explaining patterns of cross-border student mobility in an era of mass higher education as the simply part of the search to get a university place. The patterning of the flows suggested 'distinction' achieved through student migration was much more complex. . It was argued that Figure 1 offered some support to the idea that some cross-border student flows mirror the transnational search for distinction through enrolling in a university perceived to be 'world class' (Findlay et al., 2012). Yet, even this we would

argue is only a limited explanation of the complex nature of student flows between Scotland and England.

Other students in their interviews revealed that institutional status was not the dominant criteria, but rather the representation of being a 'good university' for a particular subject (either in terms of subject rankings or rarity). As such, students in this category perceive 'distinction' not in terms of institutional reputation, but in relation to the specialist knowledge that they could achieve by accessing highly competitive professional degrees (Messer and Wolter, 2007). Yet other student migrants claimed to have moved to London for its social and economic opportunities and as a stepping stone to other parts of the world, which may mean HEI choices are the first part of developing a cosmopolitan identity in the future (Beck, 2004). Student mobilities were therefore positioned in relation to ambitions for lifetime mobilities that were envisioned as benefitting from the experience of cosmopolitanism.

Of course these three processes do not explain all cross-border student flows. There is a risk however that in searching for further understanding of the details of the student flows that a much more important point is missed. This is the way in which the glocalisation of student mobility is evident in the research that we have reported. While student migration is geographically embedded within social class reproduction and the formation of an educated elite across the four nations of the UK (King et al., 2011; Waters, 2012), it is equally true that the paper points to the importance that global forces have in the geographical organisation of higher education and in the student flows (internal and international) that result from this. In particular the paper has argued that while the search for distinction is a global process entwined in the complexities associated with the internationalisation of higher education, the outworking of this is not limited to international student flows. It is just as important for student flows within a state, with 'local' (UK) students not only competing with international students for access to world class HEIs, but with other forms of distinction engaging in the glocalisation of intra-state student flows driven by the search for access to cosmopolitanism and opportunities to study in a global city.

Within the scope of a single research paper, it is of course impossible to interrogate all aspects of the geography alluded to above. We have intentionally set to one side the fascinating topic of how UK HEIs brand themselves, not only to international students, but also to students domiciled in the UK. The marketisation of higher education is a force that not only produces international flows but also cross-border flows of students between the UK's four nations. Researching this is an agenda for another paper. Equally the selection processes of universities in relation to UK applicants seeking to enrol in the 'good university' involves many social practices that merit wider study and which in themselves impact student performances and self-representations.

Despite the limitations which we recognise in our research, our contention is that this paper is significant in its contribution to research on new mobilities. It is not just that students moving within a state are part of a globally competitive education market that drives them to seek to mark themselves as 'distinctive' from their peers, but also through the meanings attached to studying in particular HEIs. It is not just that 'distinction' is more complex than enrolling in a world class university. It is that student mobility within a state is in itself a social practice performed in a globally differentiated education space. Analysis of student mobility is therefore an important exemplar both of the importance of geography *in* globazation and the geography *of* globalization in relation to higher education.

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